

Noh Stage in the Forest (Mori Butai)

This performing arts center is known as Mori Butai, “the forest stage.” It was built in 1996 as a venue for Toyoma Noh, Tome’s local style of Noh theater performed by amateur actors. The internationally renowned architect Kuma Kengo designed the complex, including the Noh stage and surrounding buildings. In addition to drawing attention to the wooded surroundings, it was also designed to emphasize the space—a kind of void—between actor and audience. The complex was awarded a prize for design excellence by the Architectural Institute of Japan in 1997.

Noh was developed in the fourteenth century, and at that time, it was solely performed outdoors. However, many present-day Noh theaters are housed within large buildings, and only the stage’s roof and other design elements offer symbolic hints at the art form’s open-air origins. Kuma purposely reversed this trend by positioning the stage at the edge of a centuries-old forest. The natural setting allows for a range of theatrical experiences that

vary with the changing seasons. In spring, petals from a giant weeping cherry tree scatter before the performers; in summer, the cries of cicadas blend with the sound of the Noh chants; and in autumn, the harvest moon shines over torchlit nighttime performances.

Kuma incorporated innovative design elements while respecting traditional Noh stage architecture. The pillars are made from Aomori *hiba* cypress, and the roof is covered with slate that was quarried in the Toyoma area. The large *mizugame* ceramic jars beneath the stage are usually hidden, but here they are fully exposed to the audience. They serve both as resonance devices to amplify the sound of the actors' stamping feet and as visually striking elements of the architectural composition. Crushed black stones replace the typical white gravel that surrounds the Noh stage, and this evokes the darkness of the forest floor.

On the backboard of the stage, a painting by the artist Senju Hiroshi depicts an ancient pine tree, composed so that its branches appear to

stretch into the forest itself. On a side wall, bamboo plants rendered in cobalt blue symbolize youth and freshness. Open-air terraced seating to the side and a glassed-in, tatami-floored viewing hall in front of the stage add modern elements to the complex.

The hall is open for public viewing when there are no performances, and many people visit to appreciate the architecture or to use the venue for weddings or cosplay photoshoots (applications required). An exhibition room on the first floor displays Noh-related materials, including costumes and masks. In addition to supporting the Toyoma Noh community-theater tradition, Mori Butai also stages professional Noh productions by visiting performers.