

シンガポール日本商工会議所

MCI (P) NO.042/02/2019

Japanese Chamber of Commerce & Industry, Singapore

Website: <http://www.jcci.org.sg>



# An Evening of Noh – Presentation and Dialogue by Intercultural Theatre Institute (Singapore) 6 March 2019, Malay Heritage Centre



ITI students presenting Noh play *Momijigari Oni-Zoroe*

月報1月号にて既報の通り、シンガポール日本商工会議所基金「2018年度基金」からは、21の寄付案件と2名の学生への寄付金・奨学金授与が決められました。その中から、今回はIntercultural Theatre Institute (Singapore) についてご紹介します。

また、現在JCCI基金から奨学金を得て就学中である留学生2名(2019年7月帰国予定)にもインタビューを行いました。

One of Japan's many traditions is the ancient performing art of Noh. Believed to have its beginnings in Sangaku, a form of popular entertainment comprising of songs, puppetry, dance and acrobatics, it found its place in Japan's royal courts by way of China during the Nara period (8th century A.D.). As the art form evolved and became more widely popular, Sangaku became Sarugaku, which was popular between the Heian and Kamakura periods (8th - 14th century A.D.). As the form came to include more specifically Japanese history, literature, song and dance, it developed into the Noh that we know today.

Noh is credited significantly to the father-and-son duo of performer-playwrights Kan-ami and Zeami. Kan-ami founded the Kanze school (the largest of the five prominent Noh schools active today), while Zeami was responsible for many of the plays that form part of the repertoire and are still performed today. Noh is recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

So, what does this traditional performing art form have to do with actor-students from Singapore, Malaysia, India, the Philippines, Australia, China, Taiwan and South Korea?

At Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI), a specialised, independent actor-training school in Singapore, immersion in a number of traditional Asian performing art forms is a key part of the three-year full-time programme. Founded in 2000, ITI runs a distinctive programme based on a rigorous intercultural learning methodology, which aims to develop students' skills in performance and original theatre-making. Students are selected from

among the best talents across Asia and beyond, creating an environment where students encounter a broad spectrum of cultures and languages.

While ITI trains actors for the contemporary stage, the co-founders - acclaimed Singaporean theatre practitioners, the late Kuo Pao Kun and current director, T. Sasitharan (a.k.a. Sasi) - have passionately believed in the richness of Asia's traditional art forms in lending context and an acting vocabulary for the actors of today and tomorrow.

That is why, once every two years, master Noh performers and teachers from the renowned Kanze Kyukohkai, Kanze Yoshimasa and Kuwata Takashi, spend between eight and 10 weeks training ITI students in the fundamental elements of Noh.

For ITI's students from Singapore and around the world, Noh training gives them insights into a world theatre heritage and exposure to a different cultural perspective. The aim is to instil in them the aesthetic discipline and skills of Noh theatre, enhancing their own contemporary theatre practice.

Apart from Noh, the other traditional art forms taught at ITI are Kutiyattam, one of the oldest dance-drama forms originating from Kerala, India; Beijing Opera from China; and Wayang Wong, a courtly dance-drama from Java, Indonesia.



ITI students performing a scene from Noh play *Kantan*

"I think ITI is a school that can exist with these specialties because it is in Singapore," says Kanze sensei. "By coming here, my awareness towards different cultures has also improved. I highly recommend it. I always look forward to coming back because it's also very impactful for me, and every generation of performers comes with great dedication. From the time I first came here 17 years ago, more things have since developed, and the distance between here and Japan has shortened."



ITI students performing *shimai* (short dance sections) from Noh play *Shari*

ITI's master teacher in the form, Kanze Yoshimasa, hails from a renowned lineage, and is a descendent of Kan-ami and Zeami. An active *shite-kata* actor in Noh, he is the oldest son of Master Kanze Yoshiyuki, the fourth head of Kanze Kyukohkai, a branch family of the umbrella Kanze school. Trained by his father, he made his professional debut at the age of three. Aside from continuing the tradition, Kanze Yoshimasa has also founded Know Noh Company, is a member of the Japan Nogaku Association, and is certified vocationally as *shite* master of the Kanze school.

At ITI, Kanze sensei is joined by Kuwata Takashi, also an actor and teacher at Kanze Kyukohkai. Trained as a live-in disciple under Master Kanze Yoshiyuki, he is an active performer in Japan and overseas.

For many of the students who had not encountered the art form, it was a challenging journey learning the principles of Noh as well as the culture and language that inform the art form. Every afternoon, classes were taught in Japanese, with the assistance of a translator, A. Yagnya.

Reflecting on her experience translating for the Noh term, Yagnya says, "In theory, I understood that the gestures and forms used in Noh are to express emotions in a contained manner. But it is entirely different to hear from the master teachers themselves on how these theories are applied in performance, in Japanese, and to be able to translate them into English. It was mind-blowing. I felt like I was peeking from behind the curtains into the deep, deep world of Noh."



ITI students presenting a scene from Noh play *Momijigari Oni-Zoroe*

At the end of the immersive training with the master teachers, the students presented a showing of *shimai* (short dance sections), as well as selected scenes from Noh plays *Kantan* and *Momijigari Oni-Zoroe*, to an invited audience.

The presentation evening is in some ways a departure from a Noh performance. In strict, classical Noh training, actors' roles are fixed and actors can only perform in the part they are trained in. As such, *shite* (main character) actors only perform those roles in different plays; the same applies to actors who train for *shite-tsure* (companion), *waki* (secondary character) or *ai-kyogen* (intermediary character) roles. This also extends to the *hayashi* ensemble, where musicians of one instrument do not play other instruments.

As such, Noh schools in Japan are role-specific in their training. However, for ITI's training purposes, to allow the actor-students to understand Noh in a comprehensive manner, students are taught all roles of a play to allow them to experience the approach required for the different characters.

Kanze sensei also treated ITI's guests with a solo performance of an excerpt from Noh play *Atsumori*, which tells of Taira no Atsumori, a young samurai killed in battle. Kanze sensei performed the scene where Atsumori's ghost reveals his true identity to the remorseful warrior who killed him. His performance was supported by Kuwata sensei and Nakamori Kennosuke.



Noh master teacher Kanze Yoshimasa performing a scene from Noh play *Atsumori*, accompanied by Kuwata Takashi and Nakamori Kennosuke

The evening concluded with a dialogue session between the master teachers and the audience, facilitated by ITI director Sasi. Audience members from Singapore, Japan and other countries posed questions ranging from current Noh performance practices in Japan to key takeaways from Noh for contemporary performers.

The Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Singapore kindly supported this year's term and presentation for the second time. Guests from JCCI Singapore were also invited to attend the presentation.

The nine weeks of immersive learning have certainly made a lasting impact on the students. R. Ramith, a Year 2 student from India, reflects on the Noh term from his perspective as an experienced Kutiyattam performer, "The greatest challenge for me was the fact that I am a Kutiyattam performer, where the form demands elaborate and intense forms of expression. But in Noh, we are required to convey emotions in a subtle way, though with similar grandeur. The last few months were like a roller coaster across many centuries. But I now realise how valuable a journey it has been. It was a journey of meeting the self. I have discovered how one can create a whole new world through emptiness. I have discovered how an art form can influence one at a personal level. It is beyond words."

We look forward to welcoming our master teachers back for the next Noh term in 2021 for another period of learning and exchange with new cohorts of students.