

The Fan of Noh Theatre: Object of Encounter

Diego Pellecchia (Royal Holloway University of London)

The Japanese Fan

The folding fan is probably one of the representative images that most commonly dwell in the gallery of picturesque metaphors of Japan. Whether in the hands of a beautiful *geisha* or a valiant *samurai*, the fan is one of those objects that the external gaze has understood as peculiar of Japanese culture and that more successfully made an impact on the construction of the myth of Japan. Through different interpretations and re-elaborations of its appearance and use, the fan has become, for the foreign observer, a stereotyped object, like the mandolin for the Italian or the *beret* for the French. However, in Japan the folding fan is still a rather common object and it constitutes an indispensable part the traditional outfit, a personal accessory that both men and women carry. Its functions are numerous and wide-ranging, and changed considerably through history, according to the evolution of its features. Unlike its more ancient cousin, the stiff, leaf-like fan (*uchiwa*), which has always been relegated to the accomplishment of practical tasks, such as ventilation or fly-whisking, the folding fan (*ōgi* or *sensu*) has developed a more sophisticated set of usages which frequently transcend its immediate material nature. While the *uchiwa* has Chinese origins – it was probably imported in Japan in the early 8th century – the birth of the *ōgi* is regarded as an original creation of the Japanese mind.¹ Nowadays, while the *uchiwa* is considered more as a household implement, the *ōgi* is an accessory that belongs to a person, not to a place. One of the theories regarding the origins of the folding fan sees the

¹ For further readings about the history and usages of the Japanese fan please consult J.Hutt. *Ōgi: A History of the Japanese Fan* (London: Dauphin, 1997) and U. A. Casal, ‘The Lore of the Japanese Fan’ *Monumenta Nipponica* 16 (1960): 54-117.

wooden tablet that *shintō* priests hold upright as its direct ancestor (Casal 73-74). ‘Fans indicated social status or aesthetic sensitivity; they were (and continue to be) an essential part of the formal Japanese costume, and they are valued both as votive offerings and as art objects’ (Bethe & Brazell 71).

This paper will focus on one of the contexts in which the famous Japanese implement shows its most significant and sophisticated usages: Noh theatre. Even though the way the folding fan is used in Noh is rather unconventional, in this particular circumstance the fan best expresses its symbolic and evocative potential. I will explore how, in the context of a Noh performance, the fan transforms itself into an object of interaction: a means of communication between the actor and the audience. Since its origins, the fan has been used as an object through which relationships are established, a medium to enter in contact with other entities, a catalyst of energies: in other words, the fan has been a charged and powerful object of engagement. The folding fan is, then, not simply an ornament, as the Western observer might have received it at first, but something close to a precious tool, made to be touched and manipulated, or something with which to physically interact. In a more corporeal vision of it, the fan can be seen as an extension of one’s body, a feature that becomes more visible when it is used for one of its most basic employments: pointing at things. As U. A. Casal notes, ‘A closed folding-fan is best adapted to respectfully point at things; while one may also do so with a “relaxed” hand, the stiff index is vulgar’ (95). The fan becomes a neutral means to engage in communication: what is pointing, if not the most basic means of interaction? From the most primal intention to the most sophisticated one, pointing is the most essential way to address one’s reality. As the child points his finger to acknowledge his world, the sorcerer points the magic stick to transform it. The fan is thus a multipurpose object, but also a multilayered one: it

accomplishes practical tasks and, at the same time, it is imbued with other meanings. The Japanese folding fan is what Roland Barthes would probably call a *sign-function*, something that has ‘a substance of expression whose essence is not to signify [...] an object of *everyday* use, used by society in a *derivative* way, to signify something’ (41; my italics). How is the process of investing the fan of ‘other meanings’ carried out in the case of Noh theatre? The Noh fan of is an implement which, besides being a refined artefact, is immediately associated with the peculiar movements of the actor: what is the invisible force that attracts the attention of the actor on the fan? In my training experience as a Noh practitioner with Udaka Michishige of the Kongoh School and the International Noh Institute in Kyoto, Japan, I have the opportunity to closely study the way Noh actors manipulate the fan and I am able to collect observations about the fan both from the spectator’s and the performer’s point of view. Drawing from this experience, in this paper I will try and suggest a critical perspective on the use of the fan in Noh, demonstrating how its multipurpose qualities are also present in the Noh context and exploring the underlying principle that touches on different aspects of Noh acting style, which allows to establish a communication between the performer and the audience through the poetic use of the fan.

The Fan of Noh Theatre

In Japan the fan has been – and to some extent still is – an everyday life item, a traditional but rather ordinary accessory. If not as common as it might have been before Japan’s adoption of Western fashion, the folding fan is still used and carried as part of the dress. In Noh, the most ancient of Japanese living theatre traditions, the folding fan, along with the white split-toe *tabi* socks, form the basic accessories that any practitioner, from the novice

to the master-actor, will wear and carry. In the Noh classes I attend in Kyoto with Udaka Michishige, I often notice how now it is a widely accepted custom for amateur practitioners not to change their Western-style clothes into the traditional *kimono* and *hakama* (split skirt) for their normal practice. Dressed in trousers and a jumper, the *tabi* and the fan are the unchanged signs that connect the modern times practice to the ancient world that Noh belongs to. In the immovability of the chest, forming a whole block with neck and hips, in the negated facial identity, converted in an expressionless face, the actor's hands and feet are the only sensorial extremities through which the signs of his human presence are still visible.

All the members of the cast involved in a performance normally carry a fan. While musicians, members of the chorus, and stage assistants carry a rather common and sober fan (*shizume-ōgi*), the actors use a special, richly decorated one (*chūkei*). As the former is never opened and is seldom manipulated when used by non-actors, the latter – different in shape and decoration – constitutes the fulcrum of the actor's actions.² Whatever its appearance or purpose, when brought on stage and set in a performative context, the verge of Barthes's *sign-function* between *everyday* use and *derivative* use starts to blur. After their entrance, once sitting at their place, the members of the chorus will place the fan in front of their knees only to lift it carefully with both hands when singing. From a practical point of view, the fan helps the singers of the chorus to set their arms in the shape of an 'O' a pose that influences the way the chant is delivered. The stage assistants sitting on the back of the stage will place the fan at their sides, ready to move quickly in case of

² The Noh fan and its patterns have been more technically analyzed by K. Komparu (1983) in *The Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives* (New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983) and M. Bethe and K. Brazell in *Dance in the Nō Theater Dance Analysis*. Vol. 1 of *Dance in the Nō Theater*. 3 Vols. East Asian Papers 29 (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986).

emergency. Whatever its function or position might be, the fan is always manipulated with great care: the ordinary object has now entered the world of the extra-ordinary.

The fan of the main actor (*shite*) is the one in which this transfiguration most manifest. Noh theatre is famous for the minimalism of its scenography. In this centuries-old traditional art, the visuals are not determined by the choice of a director or a set designer, but prescribed by precise indications about stage properties, costumes, and masks which are part of each stylistic school's patrimony. The *shite*, who normally acts both as director and as a producer, will generate his personal interpretation of the play in terms of movement, music, text and set design, according to the tradition. In several cases, the tradition itself allows a choice of codified variations, so that a *shite* actor is able to perform the same play more than once in his life, albeit always introducing different elements, or at least changing the members of the cast. When the *shite* reaches a particularly high level of mastery and a respectable position in the professional community, it is even possible for the actor to introduce personal variations that could be considered as 'interpretations' of a moment in the play.

One of the peculiarities of Noh theatre is the modular structure that allows the members involved in a performance to train separately on texts that belong to a fixed canon, only to meet on stage for a unique performative event. This particular system aims at maintaining a high degree of freshness and impromptu on stage: the performance is not a mere reproduction of something that has been extensively rehearsed and perfected in detail, but the result of the encounter of those who will take part in it. Each performer, musician, stage assistant, and member of the chorus, will confront his own vision – if not interpretation – of the play, which in turn is the result of years of meticulous training.

When one dedicates his or her life only to the mastery of the art, only following the oral, individual instruction of a master, and not relating to a body of knowledge identical for every performer, the sensitivity of the performers heightens to the point that the slightest change in the interpretation of the text is felt as deeply significant. The one-to-one training that all Noh performers and musicians undertake entails not only a high sensitivity to one's own art, but also the openness which is necessary, once the cast meets on stage, to accept different interpretations of the same piece and to fluidly interact and integrate with them. It is now clear how the performance itself is a continuous dialogue between all its components. As a result, a Noh performance is successful when its partakers are able to mutually listen and communicate in the weaving of the thick waft of engagements of performers and audience.

Likewise, the stage props (*tsukurimono*) are often produced especially for one single performance, and later dismantled. Etymologically, the word *tsukurimono* (lit. decoration) suggests something which is created, manufactured, fabricated (the verb *tsukuru*, 'to make'). In the world of Noh, nothing is replicated: both audience and performers are engaged in an event that will remain unique in their memories. However, Noh theatre's set design does not aim to achieve the reproduction of a lifelike environment: spare elements that constitute the scenery are usually reduced in size and have more a metonymical or synecdochal function rather than a realistic one. A thin bamboo frame will suggest a boat; a small box-like structure could stand for a hut or a grave. Moreover, the majority of these stage props – such as the bell for *Dōjō-ji*, the brine pails for *Matsukaze* or the *torii* (gate of a Shinto shrine) for *Nonomiya* – are typical of a specific play and never used otherwise. Stage properties are not necessarily present in every play: in various cases, a play is staged without the use of scenography: the narration and depiction of the story is

left to chant and dance and, of course, to the imagination of the spectator. Especially in these cases, the paucity of the set-design, only inhabited by the unchanging pine-tree painted on the backdrop of the stage (*kagami-ita*), contrasts with the sumptuousness of the costumes, moving landscapes that recount the story of the character through their colours and patterns.

As part of the costume, the fan is also decorated with allusive motifs and illustrations, and it is chosen according to the nature of character that will appear on stage. The sun setting in the waves; scenes of Chinese court life; flowers on coloured background. In the sobriety of the set design, in the minimalism of the action, the fan of the main actor is the real core of the play and the centre of the attention of the audience. The *chūkei*, the fan of the main actor (*shite*) is the one in which the transfiguration of Barthes's *sign-function* is most manifest. The *fan* can become a sword, a cup, a pillow; at the same time, in a more abstract sense, the fan can be resentment, longing or bliss; it can be an instant on earth or eternity in the universe: vivid images and pure abstractions equally materialize in the fan. In the exceptional event of a Noh performance, in which secular and supernatural meet, the fan is not alluding anymore: it *is*. In addition to that, in the hands of the *shite* the fan is the sorcerer's magic stick: not only does it transform itself, it also transforms reality. Through his waving, scooping and pointing, the fan materializes the invisible: the moon disappearing in the clouds, the wind rippling the sea in a pine bay, a horde of ghost warriors in hell. Although the fan has a repertoire of canonical movements, new utilizations of the fan allow us to see how it can be vested with contemporary signifiers: for instance, in the recent 'contemporary Noh play' *The Diver*, by Noda Hideki and Colin Teevan, the fan still retains its allusive power, even if it is adapted to more contemporary usages, from

mobile phone to champagne glasses.³ In this case, the content might have changed, yet the underlying principle governing the use of the Noh fan remains the same. In my view, the tradition is respected and maintained alive when contemporary elements are incorporated into traditional patterns.

The Empty Fan

The *shite* of Noh theatre uses the fan according to set movements called *kata*: these are fixed modules which are combined in longer sequences that constitute more complex dances. *Kata* can yield various degrees of realism, from a stylized gesture commonly used to express grief (*shiori*) to more abstract movements which gain more meaning or connotation only when combined with the text chanted by the actors or the chorus. It is this degree of abstraction that allows these latter movements to be multifunctional: they will acquire a meaning depending on the reading of the spectator in the context of the play. According to Giangiorgio Pasqualotto, these movements are ‘beautiful because of their purity: because of their forgetfulness of any empirical determination, because of their distance from any realistic suggestion, because of their emptiness of mimetic intentions’ (131; my translation). The most frequent among these non-realistic movements is to take four steps forward, opening the arms, then go back to the basic stance stepping back twice (*shikake hiraki*). This *kata* is the most common of the repertoire and the most engaging one at the same time: the actor points at something, establishes a contact, and then acknowledges it. In training, masters rarely provide explanations of the movements that they are teaching, since the knowledge of Noh is assimilated through exposure and imitation, rather than through analysis and intellectualization. The learning process is by no

³ Hideki Noda and Colin Teevan, *The Diver*, dir. Hideki Noda, Soho Theatre, London, 12 Jul. 2008.

means rational from the trainee's viewpoint: there is no further re-elaboration of what is learnt just because it is learnt with a minimum filter of explanations or translations, both from the master and from the student. At first, teaching is not understood, rather, it is memorized. All of which constitutes a thought system, on which individual conjectures might be based, that has to be forgotten or at least restrained in its interpretative power. This does not mean, for example, that a movement that has been taught is devoid of meaning, but that the meaning is not taught contextually with the gesture. It will be up to the student, as it is to the master, to discover or to create the meaning of the gesture. Hence Noh theatre discloses its multifaceted and ever-changing nature.

I would like to extend this concept outside the teaching environment and to transpose it to the performance, where the communication I described before takes place between actor and audience. The movements of Noh, including those performed with the fan, are not part of a system of symbols. Noh is not a language that can be accurately translated or decoded once its grammar is mastered. 'Unlike the *mudra* hand language used in Indian traditional dance and theatre, *kata* in *nō* are largely without specific symbolic meaning' (Emmert 27). In Noh, the abstract movement is transmitted as pure *signifier*: its synchrony with a potential *signified* is a variable datum, and exclusively depends on one's personal vision of it. The *signifier* (movement, dance, play) possesses a degree of abstraction that allows it to evade a fixed synchrony to a given *signified*, as the same gesture engages different interpretations from those who watch it. Devoid of a defined code, the audience is naturally engaged in the construction of the images that the actor is suggesting. This engagement is thus triggered by a lack of information, and it is precisely into this blank space that the audience is introduced. In *The Implied Reader*, reader-

response critic Wolfgang Iser looks at vacancies in the literary text as ‘blanks that allow the reader to bring a story to life, to assign meaning, and by making his decision he implicitly acknowledges the inexhaustibility of the text’ (280). According to Iser’s analysis, the asynchrony between text and reader generates what he calls ‘structures of indeterminacy,’ negative instances ‘which relate less to the text itself than to the conditions established between text and reader during the reading process. This kind of indeterminacy functions as propellant – it conditions the reader’s ‘formulation’ of the text’ (*The Act*, 183). The same perspective fits well with the vision of Noh theatre not as a one-way storytelling process, but as an event that unavoidably entails constant interplay between actors and audience. If, as Anne Ubersfeld has suggested, ‘the act of filling the gap is the very source of theatrical pleasure’ (129), the fan is one of the most powerful tools through which the Noh actor displays a vast range of semiotic absences, invitations for the audience to participate in the production of the theatrical text. The fan is not only an accessory completing the costume of a character: it is also used in an abstract way, to symbolize objects or concepts that are not concretely present on stage. During the dance, the *shite* detaches the fan from its physical bond to the character on stage and expands its function to the metaphoric universe belonging to the character.

The Fan of the Actor, the Fan of the Character

By displaying empty frames, the fan, here acting as transmitter and receiver, is charged with meaning in two ways: by the character’s constellation of emotions and by the audience’s attention and intention. In the special balance between abstraction and concreteness that constitutes Noh theatre, the fan stands on the verge between metaphor and materiality as it moves according to a force that is at once that of the actor and of the

character: in the fan, the two identities converge and reveal themselves. Is it the heart of the character or that of the actor that is unfolding in front of the spectators? When a Noh play begins the fan of the *shite* is closed, and the act of opening it usually takes place at a special moment in the play, such as the *kuse* dance,⁴ where the conceptual core of the play is performed; likewise, at the very end of the play the fan is closed again, before the cast exits the stage.

Among the images that Udaka Michishige has offered me in order to help me visualize this intense movement, one has particularly struck me for its poetical resonances. Udaka-sensei speaks of how, at the end of the representation, all the emotions, the passions, the torments and the desires that were summoned on stage will be closed again in the fan, as the *shite* makes his way off the *hashigakari* bridge. This comment not only describes well the emotional intensity of this gesture, but also – expanding the symbolic significance of the fan – it connects the character’s emotions with those of the actor, showing how the theatrical and quotidian aspects of performance constantly intertwine in Noh theatre. The word that indicates the main character, *shite*, maintains this critical verge, as it defines both the actor and the character (e.g. the person taking the leading role in a performance is called *shite*; at the same time the ghost of Taira no Kiyotsune is the *shite* of the play *Kiyotsune*).

In the short excerpts of Noh plays which are performed in recitals, the actors dance and sing without costumes, simply wearing *montsuki*⁵ and *hakama*, and in several pieces the dance – in this case only a portion of a full play – does not formally begin before the fan is opened. When the character is not strongly portrayed by the mask and the costume,

⁴ The *kuse* is one of the core sections of a Noh play (see Komparu 284).

⁵ Formal black kimono decorated with family crests (*mon*).

the fan takes the role of transfiguring the actor or at least to blur the distinction between him or her and the character. The act of opening the fan is not a mechanical preparation for the dance, but a symbolically and emotionally charged moment of passage between the ordinary presence of the actor and the extra-ordinary presence of the character.⁶

The concentration of such a great dramatic power in the fan is not something that belongs exclusively to the so-called 'Japanese sensibility': Noh disposes empty signs, kinetic ideograms devoid of any contextual meaning, thus accessible for those who are capable of filling in its empty frames. Among the Western practitioners who have encountered Noh theatre, two Frenchmen have been captured by the catalytic power of the fan of Noh theatre. During a tour of Japan in 1960, Jean-Luis Barrault attended a Noh performance for the second time (the first was at the Théâtre des Nations in 1957). Struck by the interior, poetic charge that the fan was able to express, Barrault wrote:

The *shite*, strikingly immobile, has opened wide his fan. His inner life is there offered to all: his soul unfolded. While the Chorus chants the torments of his character in unison, he makes his fan undulate and tremble. We have the impression that these emanations from the soul literally come from the object itself. The soul quivers. Our eyes are riveted on the fan. The actor's power of concentration is such that, from a distance, he can direct our attention upon this determined point. There is no lighting, yet it seems that the entire stage is plunged into darkness and only the fan is luminous. (Barrault qtd in Pronko 95)

Some years before Barrault, Paul Claudel had the chance to see Noh performed live during his stay in Tokyo as French ambassador between 1922 and 1928. In his eyes, the fan was

the human foliage at the fringe of his arm; it imitates like a wing all the paces of the thought that beats, that seeks for the ground or that glides up and twirls in the sky. [...] When the reed-cutter of the homonymous Noh play [*Ashikari*], finds again his

⁶ These gestures are also performed differently in terms of quickness: to this respect, I find several parallelisms between these movements and the opening and closing of the *age-maku*, the colored curtain that separates the *hashigakari* bridge and the mirror room. The opening and closing of the fan is not only symbolically reminiscent of the unveiling and hiding of the character, but is also performed with different speed and intensity according to the type of character which is entering, both physically and metaphorically, the stage.

long-lost wife, their emotion is not uncovered but in a quiver of their fans that, only for an instant, confounds their breaths. (Claudel qtd in Savarese 185-186; my translation).

The touching descriptions of Barrault and Claudel show how the fan has been understood as a ‘universal’ means of expression, which goes beyond the specificity of a culturally connotated object. As a matter of fact, these poetic comments, as well as Udakasei’s interpretation of the closing fan, are particularly striking because of the way the fan is depicted as an ambiguous entity which is associated in turn with both the character and the actor. It appears that the fan dwells in an undefined area between the world of the *performance* and the world of the *performer*. Perhaps the fan belongs neither to the actor, nor to the character, but instead constitutes a third dimension, an intersection between these two portions, a space in which the audience is engaged in a productive dialogue, a brush that both actors and spectators use to paint the character on the blank canvas of the empty stage.

References

- Barthes, Roland. *Elements of Semiology*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bethe, Monica and Karen Brazell. *Dance Analysis*. Vol. 1 of *Dance in the Nō Theater*. 3 Vols. East Asian Papers 29. Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986.
- Casal, U. A. 'The Lore of the Japanese Fan'. *Monumenta Nipponica*. 16.1/2 (1960): 54-117.
- Emmert, Richard. 'Expanding Nō's Horizons: Considerations for a New Nō perspective'. *Nō and Kyōgen in the Contemporary World*. Ed. James Brandon. Honolulu: U of Hawai'i P, 1997.
- Hutt, Julia and Hélène Alexander. *Ōgi: A History of the Japanese Fan*. London: Dauphin, 1997.
- Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading*. London: Routledge, 1978.
- . *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974.
- Komparu, Kunio. *Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives*. New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1983.
- Pasqualotto, Giangiorgio. *L' estetica del vuoto*. Venezia: Marsilio, 1992.
- Pronko, Leonard. *Theater East and West: Perspectives Toward a Total Theatre*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1967.
- Savarese, Nicola, ed. *Il teatro al di là del mare*. Roma: Studio Forma, 1980.
- Shikibu, Murasaki. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Royall Tyler London: Penguin, 2003.
- The Diver*. By Hideki Noda and Colin Teevan. Dir. Hideki Noda. Perf. Harry Gostelgow, Kathryn Hunter, Hideki Noda, Glyn Pritchard. Soho Theatre, London. 12 Jul. 2008.
- Ubersfeld, Anne. 'The Pleasure of the Spectator'. *Modern Drama*. 25 (1982): 127-139.