

Rebecca Ogamo Teele

Tomoe



Rebecca Ogamo Teele as Tomoe

One of the most important aspects of Noh theatre as we know it today is the emphasis that is placed on the transmission of tradition. The processes of teaching and learning each role, and each Noh performance, are attempts by both masters and students to approach, or re-create, an ideal. For members of *shite-kata* schools, the performers who traditionally take the main masked role and make up the chorus, plays are performed and roles perfected through a variety of forms. Examples of these forms are *su-utai*, the text sung/chanted in concert style; *shimai*, a short dance excerpt to the accompaniment of a small number of chorus members; *maibayashi*, a longer dance excerpt, often half of the Noh, accompanied by the ensemble of drums and flute and a chorus; a fully costumed Noh. Through continuous repetition and training in the play from different viewpoints, an understanding of the main role is reached and the tradition of performance is passed on. The performance of a Noh is the public revelation of a particular moment along the path of discovery of character for all involved, as embodied by the *shite*, the main performer.

I would like to describe one instance of the chronology of the creation, or revelation, of character focusing on my experience of the

Noh *Tomoe* that I performed in 1978. I had performed a full Noh for the first time two years before, embarking on the first serious step towards becoming a Noh professional. It was understood that I would continue performing, learning plays chosen by my teacher in the order he considered appropriate.

Mastery of a Noh begins with observation and continues through understanding all of the elements of the performance. Because the process of transmission is one that is shared, my chronology of discovery is also part of the chronology of my teachers. I will begin my chronology with seeing *Tomoe* as an audience member, dipping into the stream of transmission where my *sensei* or teacher - master-actor Udaka Michishige of the Kongoh School of Noh - first performed it, and follow with my training and performance experiences.

TOMOE, A WOMAN WARRIOR

I first saw *Tomoe* in September of 1976 when Udaka-sensei performed it in the Kongoh School's Young Actors' Series. Noh plays are ranked according to the complexity of the main character, sophistication of the text, the physical difficulty of the play and possible performance variations, and are performed progressively by actors during their careers. *Tomoe* is considered to be comparatively straightforward and uncomplicated, but interesting because it includes the use of the halberd and it is often among the early plays an actor performs. It follows one of the conventional structures of Noh. In the first half a priest on pilgrimage meets a local person, a village woman, who is in fact the spirit of *Tomoe*, who gives him specific details about the place, and in the second half reveals her true form. Of the sixteen plays in the *shura-mono*, or warrior Noh category, it is the only one that features a woman. *Tomoe* is based on Book 9, Chapter IV, *The Death of Yoshinaka*, in the *Tale of the Heike*, the chronicle of the rise of the Heike clan and its eventual defeat by the rival Genji, in the period from 1156-1185. *Tomoe*, sister of the warrior Kanehira,

was not only one of the mistresses of the warrior Kiso no Yoshinaka but also, along with her brother, one of his military officers. She accompanied him through the rise of his fortunes and was one of seven retainers following him to his defeat. In the Noh the *shite* is the spirit of *Tomoe* who appears to a priest on pilgrimage from the Kiso region and acts out for him Yoshinaka's final retreat, and her attack against the enemy in a bid to give Yoshinaka time to commit ritual suicide.

THE MASK AND THE NOH

In *Tomoe* the *shite* in the Kongoh School usually uses the *Ko-Omote*, the young woman's mask, which is innocent and child-like, or the *Magojiro*, the woman's mask associated particularly with the Kongoh School, that evokes a more mature, even sensuous, interpretation or presentation of character. The *Zo-Onna* mask usually used for the roles of goddesses or bodhisattvas is also listed as a possibility in the school's codification set out in the Edo period. *Magojiro* was the mask that was chosen for Udaka-sensei to use in his first performance of the play and my impression of *Tomoe* in that performance was more that of a tender woman than of a passionate warrior. Udaka-sensei has performed *Tomoe* three times since then, in two performances he produced himself and in one by another producer. He used the *Magojiro* in the second performance and *Ko-Omote* in the following performances.

Many interviews with master actors describe hours spent in contemplation of the features of a mask, and the deliberate selection of masks, but it is important to realise that this kind of contemplation, deliberation and choice is not open to most actors. The choice of mask and costume for a role is most commonly made by the head of the school, or by the performer's direct master if the master has a collection of masks and costumes. In most cases the actor first meets the mask - the face of the character to be played - on the day of the performance. The

mask made available may be a reflection of the actor's preparation or the level or type of performance expected by the head of the school, as well as being the mask type associated with the Noh.

Viewed backstage before the actor goes out on stage, the mask already has the potential to express the role, though whether it does or not depends on the actor's preparation, or his/her ability to give himself/herself up to, or join with, the mask. The late Kongoh Iwao, the *iemoto* or hereditary head of the Kongoh School, had a kind of transparency, and as a result sometimes incandescence appeared to emanate from the mask itself, which seemed to take over the role completely. Especially towards the end of his career when he was appearing on stage, even though he was quite ill and weak, the life-force which the mask seemed to project was extraordinary. It seemed that the man himself, the vessel for this energy, must become exhausted, unless the mask somehow gave him the strength to perform.

I saw the *iemoto* perform *Tomoe* in January 1978 in a large hall in Kobe as part of *Goryu-Noh*, a performance of Noh by each of the five schools of *shite-kata*. Though a hall is not the most appropriate space for experiencing Noh, his presence filled the space with an immediacy that was extraordinary. Looking at a chronology of his performances, *Tomoe* is a role that he is recorded as having taken only seventeen times in a career spanning sixty-five years. However, his vision of the role, and of his approach to Noh, continues in his disciples.

THE TRAINING PROCESS

Noh performers are continually training: adding Noh plays to their repertory, becoming familiar with all the roles and all aspects and interpretations of a role. Master actors are continuing their own training process as they teach their students. The

presentation of a role in Noh is the composite effort of the *shite*, the *ji-utai* or chorus, and the *hayashi-kata*, or musicians. Because of the importance of the ensemble music to Noh, Noh actors train in the drums and flute with the same professionals with whom they will appear on stage in the future. Each musician teaches his insights into the Noh from the vantage point of his specialisation.

Throughout my training in the various aspects of *Tomoe*, I was constantly reminded by the corrections and moulding of my teachers that, although the images I created and maintained would be of prime importance to the performance, in the end the preparation for a role and the creation of character all start with the breath. It is the breath that prepares the actor to speak, chant, or move; the chorus to control the development of the pacing of the chanted narrative; and the musicians to further create dramatic tension and coloration.

UTAI CHANT

My first training in *Tomoe* was in 1976 when Udaka-sensei taught the text to students as part of his own preparation for his performance that autumn. As with all texts I study, my first personal preparation for learning *Tomoe* was to read as much background material, or primary texts, as I could find. Udaka-sensei introduced the play as *utai*, or chant, with the roles of *shite*, *waki*, supporting performer, and the dynamics of the development of the play by the *ji-utai*, chorus, taught with the *utai-bon*, or libretto, which includes both the text and the basic musical scoring. Udaka-sensei demonstrated the *kurai*, the level of dignity or sensibility appropriate for the play and each role, as he taught the chant. The melodic *yowagin* chant style and the dynamic *tsuyogin* style are both used in *Tomoe* and must not be too weak on the one hand, or too strident on

the other. The rhythm, and the drum cues and conventions of the Noh performance were incorporated orally at the same time, but not written down.

While the *shite* must be the main interpreter of the role, and eventually move on the stage as the character, the narrative voice of the chorus is of equal importance, not only providing the descriptive background for the action of the *shite*, but also often speaking for the character. In a recital in January of 1977 I was a member of the *ji-utai* in a *su-utai* performance and concentrated on the interpretation of the descriptive passages. The *shodo*, or first passage by the chorus after initial exchanges between the *shite* and *waki*, is considered to set the tone for the narrative and action of the Noh which follow. In *Tomoe* after the meeting between the priest from Kiso and the village woman, the chorus first speaks for the *shite*, explaining that Yoshinaka is now enshrined at a spot by Lake Biwa where he died. The chorus urges the priest to fulfil his karmic ties by praying there; then describes the desolation of the spot through the moonlit scene where the sound of the tolling of evening temple bells echoes in the lake-shore waves, and finally the fading of the woman's form in the shadows. It was extremely difficult to maintain the sense of simplicity and mystery needed to foreshadow the later appearance of Tomoe herself, and a step towards understanding the attachment that binds her spirit to the place. In February 1978, *Tomoe* was again included on a recital program as *su-utai* and I took the part of the *shite*.

KO-TSUZUMI, THE SHOULDER DRUM

I had begun studying the secondary drum of the Noh ensemble, the *ko-tsuzumi*, or hour-glass shaped shoulder drum, in 1975 as part of learning how to interpret most effectively in *utai* the nuances of Noh rhythm as embel-

lished and enhanced by the ensemble. I received a *tezuke*, a *Tomoe utai-bon* into which my teacher had copied the scoring of drum patterns, and learned the *ko-tsuzumi* part for *Tomoe*. In a drum recital in 1977 I performed the second half of the Noh, accompanying Udaka-sensei and another actor. In that part of the play *Tomoe* is described as she appears in warrior's garb and re-enacts for the priest the flight of Yoshinaka and his few retainers, *Tomoe's* dispatch of enemy soldiers in combat, and her compliance with Yoshinaka's wish that she return to his home in Kiso, rather than join him in death as she would prefer to do, because she is a faithful retainer.

My drum teacher spent a great deal of time on particular drum calls, especially at transition points, repeating them again and again for me to imitate. The musicians articulate the emotions of the character through the drum calls, and the correct use of the breath and *ma*, or pause or timing, are what create the correct nuances. My teacher explained what he felt was the sense of despair, poignancy, or valour which each call was meant to invoke as part of the characterisation of *Tomoe*. I found that the timing, pitch, and duration of a single drum call could not only evoke or colour the emotional impact of the text, but more importantly, would become the catalyst for action on stage. Later my drum teacher told me that, after the performance, his father, who was at the recital but was listening rather than watching, had asked who had performed *Tomoe*, because he did not recognise the voice. I had, for the first time as an ensemble member, been able to go beyond my own identity on stage, and beyond the task of keeping the correct time and rhythm by rote, to actually performing the role and becoming the character of *Tomoe*.

MOVEMENT

In April 1978 I began to train for my full performance of *Tomoe*, scheduled as part of

a recital in November of that year. I received from Udaka-sensei a *katazuke*, or hand-copied scoring of the choreography in an *utai-bon* of *Tomoe*. This was a copy of the text that he had received from his own teacher, Kongoh Iwao, the *iemoto*, or hereditary head, of the school. All the details of movement/blocking were there and after I had memorised the text I was taught to create a seamless succession of images throughout the play.

Tachi-geiko, or standing training, is the process through which the movement, text, and music are brought together. While other training may be done in street clothes, *tachi-geiko* is always done in kimono and hakama. I found my regular meditation practice was vital in increasing my awareness and concentration to prepare for this. I also found it necessary to train physically not only by repetition of all the movements, but also by running, to increase my stamina. I also had to develop the strength in my arms and hands to hold and use the halberd skilfully. The Kongoh School is known for very dynamic *kata*, mime or dance movement, and unlike the tradition in other schools, the performer in *Tomoe* must hold the halberd until the point when *Tomoe* discards it, having routed the enemy.

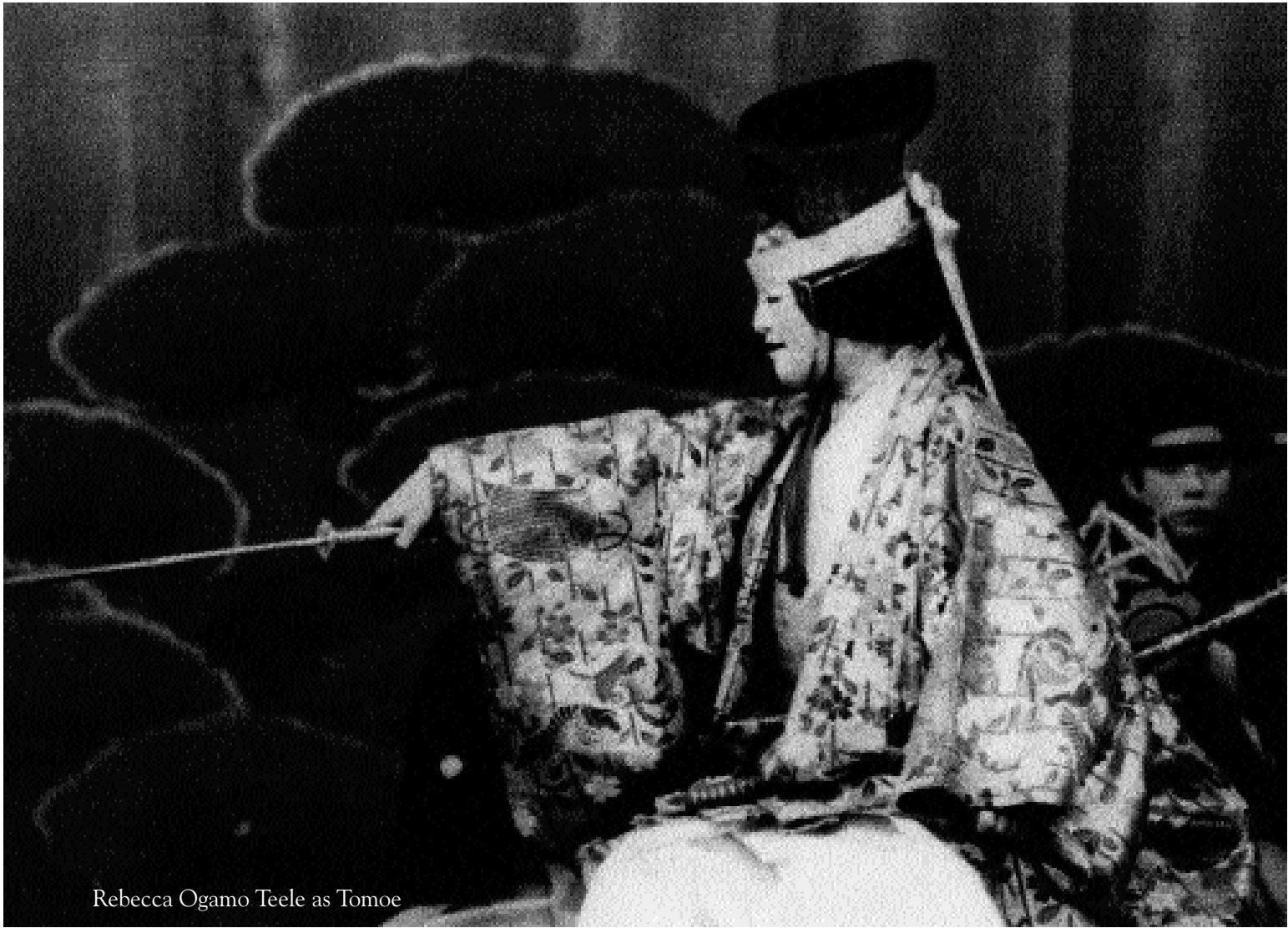
Shimai, the descriptive dance/mime sections of Noh, are not necessarily learned at the same time as the *utai*. A student is usually learning completely different pieces in chant, movement and drums, perfecting techniques in aspects of each which complement each other, and which will also, at some future point, come together in performance. In the course of my preparation for *Tomoe* I learned the *kata*, or choreography, sometimes performed as a *shimai*, the scene where *Tomoe* draws the enemy towards her by appearing afraid, then slashes out with her halberd until the enemy fall or scatter like blossoms in a whirlwind. Udaka-sensei

demonstrated both the chant and the movements of the role again and again, and I followed as faithfully as possible. Through embodying the role - learning vocal quality, correct posture and timing of movement - an image and understanding of the character began to emerge. Sometimes the blade of the halberd seemed to cut through a veil in time to reveal the faintly seen shadow of the warrior from the past.

FINE TUNING

Udaka-sensei often gave precise advice about images and emotions relating not only to the character of *Tomoe*, but also *Yoshinaka*. He also emphasised the need to create a rich inner world of images. He recommended always observing and storing away scenes of particular beauty or impact for future use on stage. The actual settings of Noh plays are extant in many areas of Japan, and most actors visit the location of a play they are to perform in order to get a personal sense of the place. The experience of skiing cross-country over the rice fields near the shore of Lake Biwa in a landscape blanketed in white, latticed with black strips at the fields' edges, but with treacherous sunken spots, and coming to a stand of pine trees close to shore, became one I could incorporate. I visited the shrine at *Yoshinaka*'s grave and the monument to *Tomoe* near the lake, spending enough time to experience a shift in time to the past.

As the martial art of *naginata*, or halberd, fighting is still practised, especially by women, I joined a class for a short time both to learn techniques (which I discovered were quite different from the choreographed fighting) and to absorb something of the spirit of the practitioners. The woman who taught the class was in her eighties, small, fierce and very fast, with a fluid grace as she demonstrated movements, ending with a laugh that sparked and sparkled.



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THE PERFORMANCE

For amateurs (my status at the time of my preparation for *Tomoe*) in particular, and for young performers, the *moushi-awase*, or rehearsal of the Noh with all members of the production present, is done in full costume. For the first time I saw the mask I would use, a *Ko-Omote*, or young woman's mask, as well as the costume. (By chance the mask was one carved by the master carver I had studied with before being introduced to Udaka-sensei. I had changed teachers because I had realised that it was important for me to somehow combine the study of Noh and mask carving as I was able to do with Udaka-sensei.) The *moushi-awase* was overseen by the *iemoto* and by Udaka-sensei, who made suggestions about movement, voice, and the co-ordination of elements of

the Noh, discussing these with the ensemble and *ji-gashira*, or chorus leader. In a performance of seasoned professionals the discussion of the interpretations of the Noh, both according to school traditions and according to the sensibility of the individual performers can become heated. A performance sometimes becomes a contest of wills when disagreements remain that have not been resolved during the discussion in rehearsal.

On the day of the performance, too, the *iemoto* was present and assisted with costuming and preparations back stage. At the start of a performance, the *hayashi-kata*, the ensemble members, greet the fully costumed *shite* backstage in the *kagami-no-mai*, or greenroom, and see for the first time the incarnation of the role: the touchstone by which all will perform their own parts. The *koken*, the stage attendants, who are led

by a senior actor, make adjustments and see that the *shite* comes as close as possible to the ideal of the role. I contemplated my reflection, the image of Tomoe created through a layering of costumes, and as my attention went to a fold in the robe I wore in the first half, or a detail of the lacquered *nashiuchi-eboshi* hat, the cords tying it under my chin, or the line of collars against my neck in the second half, I saw the *iemoto* make minute adjustments there. In the moments before the curtain is raised at the word *omaku* by the *shite*, I felt the tempo set by the ensemble beckoning me on into the distillation of memory that is the attachment that brings the spirit of Tomoe back to the shore of Lake Biwa. My eyes, and yet the eyes of another, seemed to look clearly through the mask, and as the curtain rose, down a bridge to the past brought to life in the present again. In my performance of Tomoe I may have been able to discover and reveal only a small part of the essence of the woman warrior, but I found the path of the warrior in myself which I continue to explore.

The *shite* is like the single blossom chosen by the host to adorn the alcove in a tea ceremony, the symbol of the mood he wishes to evoke as well as a symbol of transience. But just as a blossom cannot exist without its leaves, stem, or roots, the role the *shite* plays is dependent on the existence of the shared creation of the character, and the Noh, by all members of the ensemble. Each new *shite* role brings understanding and a growth of *riken-no-ken*, which is what Zeami explains as the ability to see one's self objectively in performance, a kind of objectivity and awareness that is essential for using the mask in Noh.

NOTE:

To my knowledge there are three published translations into English of *Tomoe*:

A.L. Sadler, *Japanese Plays, Noh - Kyogen - Kabuki*, Angus and Robertson Ltd, 1934;

Japanese Classics Translation Committee, *Japanese Noh Drama*, Vol III, The Nippon Gakujutsu Shinkokai, 1960;

Chifumi Shimazaki, *Warrior Ghost Plays from the Japanese Noh Theater*, Cornell East Asia Series, 1993.

REBECCA OGAMO TEELE (USA/Japan) was born in Michigan. She began training in Noh performance and mask carving with Kongoh School Master Actor Udaka Michishige in 1972. Having received certification as a licensed instructor in 1980, in 1997 she became the first foreign woman to be accepted as a member of the National Noh Association. She is Associate Director of the Kyoto-based International Noh Institute founded by Udaka. She is active in continuing and passing on the traditions of Noh and mask carving and is currently involved in the production of the original Noh *Genshigumo* (The Atomic Cloud).