

Double Nora

A Japanese Intercultural Performance

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ABSTRACT

The intercultural theatre performance was quite popular in Europe in the 1970s and 80s. Although the concept of interculturalism has become controversial since and seems threadbare today, it is still commonly practiced, especially in non-Western countries. My production, *Double Nora*, a modern *noh* play based on Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, may appear intercultural, but the intercultural style was not the end for me. It was only a means to express my own view on *A Doll's House*, for which the traditional Japanese theater, *noh*, seemed to me to be most suitable for collaboration with the modern theater. In this production Nora was played by two actors, *noh* actor and a modern actress. Hence it was titled *Double Nora*. Both are always together on stage; when one is performing, the other is behind and watching the scene. *Double Nora* was first performed at Umewaka Noh Playhouse in Tokyo in 2005, and invited to the Ibsen Festival in Oslo the following year.

KEYWORDS

A Doll's House, Nora, *noh*, Intercultural, Norway, acting, tradition

After I published a one-volume translation of Ibsen's eleven modern plays in 1997, a Japanese theatre producer, Mr. Toshiyuki Natori, proposed that I should direct all of them in series, one play a year, with a professional theater company under his production. I immediately accepted his proposal and started directing Ibsen's modern plays in September 1999. In the middle of the series, Mr. Natori was invited to bring his Ibsen production to Norway, so he and I decided to make an intercultural Ibsen production, which was a collaboration between modern theater and the traditional *noh* theater in Japan. I chose *A Doll's House* for this production, for I thought that the central meaning of *A Doll's House*, namely the double identity of the heroine Nora, could be more vividly demonstrated in the intercultural style than in a usual modern theater style. Therefore, I employed two actors, a *noh* actor and a modern female actor, to play Nora together and titled the play *Double Nora*. Since a *noh* play is mostly an all-male production, the main character, called *shite*, wears a female mask when playing a female role. Thus, the *noh* actor playing Nora, though quite elderly, wears a young female mask. Both actors of Nora are always together, and they alternate between a prominent position in the center and a position at the back. Helmer, Nora's husband, is also played by a *noh* actor, while Doctor Rank and the bank employee, Krogstad, are played by the same modern male actor. *Noh* actors perform in the *noh* style and modern actors in the modern style. Thus, the performing form of *Double Nora* should be called intra-cultural, comprising modern and *noh* theater, as well as intercultural, comprising *noh* and Ibsen.

As is well-known, intercultural theatre performance has been seen throughout the history of theatre, but its particularly notable style emerged in Europe in the 1970s and 80s, and became popular in the following period. At the same time, directors of intercultural performances in the West, such as Peter Brook or Ariane Mnouchkine, were severely criticized by non-Western scholars because of their apparent tendency toward Eurocentrism. Thus, the concept of interculturalism has become controversial and seems threadbare today.

This does not mean, however, that intercultural theatre performance is disappearing from the world stage. On the contrary, it is quite commonly

practiced, especially in non-Western countries, and research on interculturalism has come under the broad discipline of cultural studies in general. As Ric Knowles maps in his introductory book, *Theatre & Interculturalism* (2010), new disciplines such as gender studies, racial studies, and diasporic studies are regarded as closely related to interculturalism. Thus, intercultural performances of Shakespeare or Greek tragedies by Japanese directors, such as Yukio Ninagawa or Tadashi Suzuki, illustrate not only a mix of modern and traditional styles of acting, scenery, and costume but also aspects of modern and old society in Japan.

It was not my intention, however, to follow their paths in *Double Nora*. The intercultural style was not the end for me. It was only a means to express my own view on *A Doll's House*, for which the traditional theater, *noh*, seemed to me to be most suitable for collaboration.

Nora is a conventional woman and at the same time quite modern and progressive. The conventional woman is bound to the past, and the modern woman to the future. The main character in Ibsen's modern plays is in a conflict between the past and the future. He or she wishes to reject the past, but the present is bound to the past as well as the future. Therefore, he or she almost always fails in completing his or her ideal. *A Doll's House* might be the sole exception; Ibsen seems to be rather optimistic about Nora's future. Norway at the time was striving to be a modern nation-state, following the advanced countries in Europe. However, the future is based on the past, both for Nora and Norway. This situation is quite similar to the relationship between traditional theater and modern theater in Japan. The latter was created under the influence of modern Western theater, and the old tradition of *noh* theater was totally ignored in the development of modern Japanese theater. However, this is regrettable as *noh* theater could have significantly contributed to modern theater.

Noh theatre was established as an artistic theatre form in the 14th century by Kan'ami and Ze'ami, father and son, and has been regularly performed until today in a highly distinctive style. *Noh* actors and musicians usually confine themselves only to *noh* performances, which are shown in several

noh playhouses in Tokyo or Kyoto practically every day. *Double Nora* is a rare case in which *noh* actors and musicians appear on stage with modern actors.

In fact, I have no practical experience of *noh*, although I have seen *noh* performances quite often since my student days. Therefore, I first asked my colleague, Professor Kuniyoshi Ueda, for help in writing the script of *Double Nora*. Professor Ueda is a Shakespearean scholar and an amateur or almost semi-professional, *noh* actor. He has written and directed the so-called Shakespeare *noh*, that is, the performance of Shakespeare in the *noh* style. He was willing to help me and finished the first version of the script in a month. His script, however, followed the conventional plot form of traditional *noh* play: a female ghost appears to a travelling priest and tells him about her agony in the present state caused by what she did in the world, and then the priest soothes her from the agony. Thus, Ueda's script had the following plot: the dead Nora appears in this world to see a Japanese priest, who is travelling in Norway, and tells him about her life with her husband, Torvald Helmer, which ended up in an unhappy separation. Subsequently, the priest helps Nora to reconcile with Helmer, wishing him a happy life hereafter.

My original idea was, as stated above, not to make a new *noh* play but to show a new interpretation of *A Doll's House*, which could be demonstrated only with the collaboration of *noh* and modern theater. Therefore, I asked Ueda to make the plot as faithful as possible to Ibsen's original, though of course it had to be shortened to a certain degree. Ueda revised his script, but it was still not satisfactory to me. Therefore, I rewrote Ueda's script according to my idea, primarily basing it on the original plot and dialogues. To make a performing version of it, I asked Mr. Reijiro Tsumura, who would play the *noh* Nora, to check whether the dialogues are suitable for the *noh* chanting style. For example, my version starts with Helmer calling out Nora's name, "Nora, Nora, you bought so many Christmas presents?" However, Tsumura said that it would be difficult for a *noh* actor to call out her name this way in the very first line of the play. Therefore, the line was revised and the call "Nora, Nora" was removed. The characters were limited to four: namely, Nora, Helmer, Krogstad, and Rank. The children and the Nurse were omitted, and Mrs. Linde was excluded as well. Thus, some Ibsen

enthusiasts complained about the omission of Mrs. Linde when they saw the performance, insisting the importance of Mrs. Linde as a foil to Nora and suggesting that she was the motivation for her final action. I understood their complaints, but I wanted to intensify the double identity of Nora as simply as possible, which is in accord with the dramaturgy of *noh* theater. I wished that while *Double Nora* would be performed side by side in both modern and *noh* theatre style, without modifying either of them in principle, the framework of the entire performance would be in *noh* style.

Double Nora was first performed at a *noh* playhouse, Umewaka Noh Playhouse, in Tokyo in 2005. The *noh* playhouse was outdoors in pre-modern times, though the stage was covered by a roof as shown in the image below. From the mid-19th century onward, both the stage and the auditorium, that is, the whole playhouse, has been inside a building.

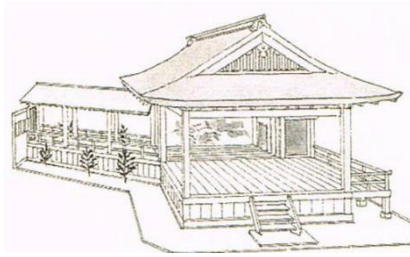


Fig. 1 An image of an ordinary *noh* stage in the old days.

Therefore, the *noh* stage is now indoors, but there is still a roof as a vestige of the time when all *noh* stages were outdoors. The main stage is six-by-six meters with a pillar in each corner supporting a roof. Extending diagonally from the back left corner is the *hashigakari* (bridge), a corridor with hand-rails. Such a stage, especially the main stage, is required for any *noh* performance. When a *noh* play is performed abroad, a stage of the same size is built on the ordinary stage.

A *noh* play always starts with the musicians coming onto the stage from the bridge to the right and the chorus from the rear door to the left, which

was the case for *Double Nora* as well. There are three musicians: a flutist, a small hand-drum player, and a large hand-drum player. In some cases, another drum player joins, but not in this production. The chorus usually comprises eight actors, but in *Double Nora*, there were only four for financial reasons.

A flute tune marks the start of the performance. The curtain at the end of the bridge is lifted and Nora appears. The *noh* Nora comes onto the stage first, followed by the modern Nora, because the conventional aspect dominates in *Nora* in the beginning of the play. When they reach the main stage, the modern Nora retreats to the back of the stage and watches the *noh* Nora's performance in the first scene of the play; Nora conversing with Helmer, her husband, played by a *noh* actor as well.

After the first scene between Nora and Helmer, the modern Nora replaces the *noh* actor; the modern Nora takes off the cover coat of the *noh*



Fig. 2 Modern Nora (Yu Mizuno) and Krogstad (Hiroshi Murakami), with *noh* Nora (Reijiro Tsumura) behind.

actor and puts it on herself. The *noh* Nora withdraws to the back and watches the scene of modern theatre between the modern Nora and Krogstad. Dr. Rank is played by the same actor who plays Krogstad in a different costume. The modern female actor dances the tarantella.

In the final scene that involves a discussion between Helmer and Nora, the *noh* Nora and the modern Nora are standing close to each other and exchange words with Helmer alternately. In the end, both go together again through the bridge and disappear. However, this time the modern Nora walks in front and the *noh* Nora follows her. Helmer says his last line and disappears. Subsequently, the musicians and the chorus go off the stage. There is no curtain call.



Fig. 3 Modern Nora and *noh* Nora in the final scene

One of the unique aspects of *noh* theatre is the chorus, which is called *jiutai* in Japanese. *Jiutai* literally means “the chanting of the earth.” Therefore, the chorus is essentially the ground on which the whole drama is based. It

explains and supports the background, psychology, or movements of the main character, *shite*. Sometimes, the chorus chants the main character's lines on behalf of him. In my production, the chorus' chanting was often employed in order to repeat important lines. For example, when Krogstad accuses Nora of forgery and Nora makes an excuse for her act, he says, "The law takes no account of motives." Nora replies, "Then they must be very bad laws" (*The Oxford Ibsen 229*), and the chorus continues to repeat these lines again and again in a low voice. I interpreted these lines as suggesting the central theme of the play, that is, the opposite values of men's law and women's law, which Ibsen distinguished in his preliminary note for *A Doll's House*, "A Note on the Modern Tragedy." It is the chorus' patterned chanting in a low tone that conveys the inner meaning more effectively than the modern actors' psychologically realistic acting.



Fig. 4 Modern Nora (Yu Mizuno) dances with noh music in front of Helmer (Noboru Yasuda).

Nevertheless, Ibsen's *A Doll's House* cannot possibly be presented on the stage entirely as a traditional *noh* play. Modern acting is necessary in some parts. The tarantella dance, for example, cannot be done in the *noh* style as meaningfully and effectively as in the modern style.

Moreover, it would be very difficult for a *noh* actor to show the sudden inner transformation of Nora in the final scene. Nora suddenly changes from a gay and talkative woman to a serious and reticent woman.

In the final scene, the modern Nora shows her definite decision by taking a prominent position on the stage. She walks in front, followed by the *noh* Nora, when they disappear at the end, reversing the order in which they entered the stage at the beginning of the play. However, you may wonder why both Noras disappear together. Some critics consider this ending as a sort of expectation of reconciliation or simply a compromise. In truth, this way of disappearing together is the only possible ending, if we want to keep the *noh* convention as the framework of the performance. At the end of a traditional *noh* performance, the main actor, *shite*, must disappear through the bridge, while the supporting actor, *waki*, remains on stage. However, following the *noh* convention, I realized that this ending would in fact reveal a possible hidden meaning in the last scene of *A Doll's House*.

Traditions are inherited from the past and embellished a great deal. Progressives look to the future, which is totally unknown. The *noh* Nora, therefore, is gorgeously dressed, and the modern Nora is costumed totally in black. In the final scene, the modern Nora takes off both the *noh* Nora's outer costume and her own shawl. However, the truth is that there would be no future without the past, and no past without the future. The past and the future intersect at the present. Therefore, in *Double Nora* both the past and the future, the *noh* Nora and the modern Nora, the white and the black, walk off stage together through the bridge in the end. The modern Nora leads the *noh* Nora, the future directs the past.

Many *noh* performers, both actors and musicians, are trained for a long time to acquire the ability to present fixed forms and patterns of acting in exact ways before they are permitted to perform as professionals. Therefore, the *noh* actors and musicians in my production did not need a long rehearsal

time. They got together only a few times to decide which forms and patterns they would employ for certain lines or actions. Of course, the actors had to memorize their lines since the script was newly created, but it was amazing how easily they memorized it. The music for *Double Nora* is also comprised of various patterns of notes taken from classical *noh* plays, which all professional *noh* performers, both actors and musicians, are quite familiar with. Therefore, the musicians came together only once before the opening night and were able to play with actors in perfect ensemble on stage.

The modern actors, on the other hand, needed a month for rehearsals, even though their scenes were not long. They had to find the right method for their actions on the *noh* stage of a particular form. No shoes are allowed on the *noh* stage, for example, and everyone must wear cotton socks in order not to spoil the polished floor of Japanese cypress. Modern actors are used to analyze the background and psychology of the characters they play, but their acting method does not seem effective when they are with *noh* actors, who appear much stable and confident in themselves on stage. *Noh* actors always walk in *suriashi*, a special pattern of moving feet. They express characters simply and precisely, or abstractly, in contrast to the realistic expression of modern actors. The conventional moving forms and patterns of *noh* actors, if well-trained, give stronger impressions than the psychologically representational movements of modern actors. It has been long considered that Ibsen's realistic plays require us to analyze deeply the character's mind and feelings, and find the underlying relationship between the characters. The experience of collaboration with *noh* theatre, however, suggested a different way of acting for modern actors in terms of Ibsen's plays that could be called an abstract way for a modern play.

For example, the modern female actor of Nora found it difficult to just stand on stage and do nothing. In a modern play, even while just standing, a character is watching something or thinking something. Therefore, when I asked the modern Nora to just stand beside the *noh* Nora, watching nothing or thinking nothing but just being there, she did not know what to do. She argued that even simply standing would mean something on stage. She was right in the case of an ordinary modern performance, but not so in *noh*. The

noh actor can be just standing, seeing nothing, which creates simplicity and intensity. I told the modern Nora to follow the *noh* actor in this respect. Another difficulty the modern Nora faced was to find the right way to speak to the *noh* actor. The *noh* actor was making speeches in a distinct rhythm and tempo; otherwise their performance would not be *noh*. The modern Nora had to make her rhythm and tempo suitable when speaking with the *noh* actor. Of course, she could not speak in the *noh* style since she was not trained in it, and it certainly would sound funny if she imitated the *noh* actor's rhythm in an amateurish way. Thus, she and I had to find the right way to make her realistic speech compatible with the *noh* speech. Fortunately, the modern Nora did not have to converse with the *noh* Nora since both were the same person. It was Helmer, Nora's husband, who the modern Nora had a dialogue with, and Mr. Noboru Yasuda, who played Helmer, was a *noh* actor belonging to the *waki noh* school. A *waki* is confined to play a supporting role (*waki* means "side") in any *noh* play, in contrast to the *shite*, who always plays the main role or the chorus. Mr. Reijiro Tsumura, who played the *noh* Nora is a *shite noh* actor. The *shite* and the *waki* speak in their own ways, which are slightly different in tone and rhythm, and the *waki*'s way of speaking is a bit more natural and dialogue-like than the *shite*'s. This helped the modern Nora to converse with Helmer.

Therefore, this intra/intercultural performance of *Double Nora*, a *noh* play based on *A Doll's House*, showed not only a new interpretation of Ibsen's play but also a possible new method of performing a modern play. It was this aspect that foreign theater scholars and critics were interested in when *Double Nora* was performed on tour in Norway and several other countries in Europe. In Japan, however, it was not received as enthusiastically as it was abroad. I assume that Japanese audiences who were familiar with the traditional *noh* performance felt a sense of incongruity due to the mixed methods of *Double Nora*. Foreign theater scholars, however, were indeed most interested in its mixed methods. Erika Fischer-Lichte in her study "Interweaving Theatre Cultures in Ibsen Productions" (2008), for instance, described *Double Nora* as an example of her theory of interweaving cultural performance.

However, after the production of *Double Nora*, I felt that the collaboration between modern and *noh* acting styles should include dialogues between a modern actor and a *shite noh* actor. Almost half of a *shite*'s lines in an ordinary *noh* play are chanted in a distinctly melodious tone, which is totally different from the tone of a natural conversation. Without any dialogue between a modern and a *shite noh* actor, it cannot be called a genuine collaboration of modern and *noh* theater. I dealt with this in my next intra/intercultural performance of modern and *noh* theater, *The Resurrection Day*, based on Ibsen's last play, *When We Dead Awaken*, in 2007. It would, however, require another paper to analyze my experience of the production of *The Resurrection Day*.

NOTE

1. I presented a paper, titled “Two Intercultural Performances: *Double Nora* and *Resurrection Day*”, at the International Ibsen Conference held in Tromsø, Norway, in June 2012. The paper was printed in the journal, *NORDLIT*, No, 34, 2015: Ibsen and World Drama(s), ed. Lisbeth P. Waerp, Uit-Norges arktiske universitet. The present paper partly overlaps this paper in *NORDLIT*.

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