

Individuality Asserted

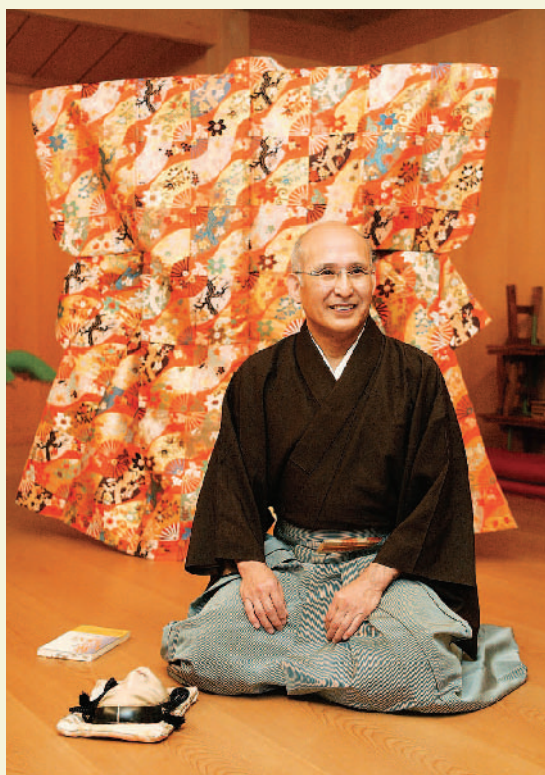
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# One and One Only

F e a t u r e d   G u e s t

Kanze School Noh Actor  
Head of the Ryokusen-kai Performance Troupe  
Designated by the Japanese Government as an Important Intangible Cultural Asset

## Reijiro Tsumura



R e i j i r o

## Struck by the Power of Noh Itself

**I understand that your first contact with noh came after you had entered Hitotsubashi University.**

I entered Hitotsubashi in 1960, the year Japan signed the revised security treaty with the US. In the fall of that year I saw students in the Hitotsubashi Kanze Noh Club perform at the University Cultural Festival. That was my first contact with it.

Although I really liked kabuki and went to the Kabukiza Theatre every month after entering college, it never occurred to me to become a kabuki actor. But with noh, I watched people who were in no way famous and not that much older than me putting on a fascinating stage performance. I guess I was struck by the power of noh itself as an art form. As soon as I saw it, I wanted to try performing it myself.

**So you joined the Hitotsubashi Kanze Noh Club. What sort of things did the club members do?**

We did what they still do today: work at acquiring actual performance skills. I guess that makes it a kind of

athletic club! (Laughs) It wasn't the sort of group that pursued an academic study of noh. You can tell that from the club's name. At many other universities, similar groups might call themselves the "Such-and-Such University Noh Research Group" or something, but at Hitotsubashi, since before the War, they've always emphasized the particular performance techniques of the different noh "schools" or guilds, whether it be Kanze, Hosho or whatever. That's also the case at the University of Tokyo and Keio University. They call their groups the University of Tokyo Kanze Noh Club and the Mita Kanze Noh Club. It may be that these universities are showing a kind of spiritual reaction against academicism.

**And that's where you met Kimiko Tsumura, whose family name you ultimately carried on?**

Yes, Kimiko Tsumura was a pioneer female noh actor who happened to live near Kunitachi (where Hitotsubashi University is located), so became the teacher of the Hitotsubashi Kanze Noh Club, starting way back in the early 1950s. So anyone who entered the club became Tsumura-sensei's student by default.

But in my case, when I was a senior and preparing to play the main role (called "shite" ) in a noh play for the first time, I moved into Tsumura-sensei's home to receive

# I Want to Convey the Fascination of Noh to the World and to Future Generations

T s u m u r a

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intensive training. It was like living in a boarding house. That's what did me in - I was never able to escape! (Laughs)

### Turning Professional Against Everyone's Advice

**So by that time you were hoping to become a live-in apprentice with the aim of becoming a professional noh actor, weren't you? Isn't that a little unusual in the noh world, where actors are born into acting families?**

Today about half of all noh actors are from ordinary families that have no inherited connection with noh. Kimiko Tsumura herself was born into a merchant family. I think in that respect noh is a little different from kabuki. **Had anyone ever entered the professional noh world from Hitotsubashi before?**

No, I was the first to do that, but two others have done it since, so there are now three professional noh actors who got their start at Hitotsubashi. And there are also several semi-professional actors who continue their involvement with noh while working other jobs.

**Did you ever think about continuing noh that way, as a kind of hobby?**

Yes, of course. In fact, throughout the summer vacation of my senior year I was looking for a job. I hoped to find something in a big corporation that wouldn't work me too hard. (Laughs)

But then I thought I should just go ahead and do what I love so that I wouldn't have any regrets. You see, from elementary school to high school, I had been a member of art clubs, and I did oil painting in high school. Actually, I won some national awards for my paintings in high school, so I wanted to attend Tokyo University of Fine

Arts and Music. But my parents and teachers were all against that idea, so I wound up going to Hitotsubashi instead. (Laughs) After giving in, I couldn't get over the fact I had abandoned my craft. I threw away my brushes and never painted another picture while I was in college. So I wasn't inclined to give in again so easily.

**So there were people who advised you against going professional?**

Everyone I talked to told me not to do it! My parents, my friends, my seminar teacher - everyone! But after all, asking people for advice is really just a formality that gives you an opportunity to confirm things for yourself. If you let yourself be talked out of something because of the advice of others, it means you weren't seriously committed to it in the first place.

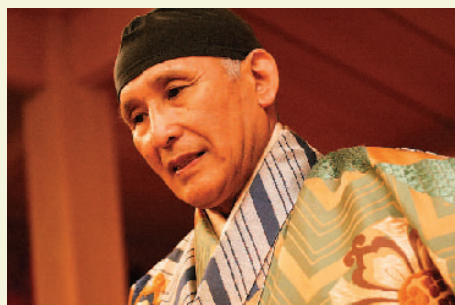
**Sometimes people become even more excited about doing something when people tell them not to! (Laughs)**

But one concern I had was age. I was 22 at the time, and Tsumura-sensei was 61. Both of these ages were pushing the limits for successful training. If you want to be a professional noh actor, you have to have the basic training internalized by your mid-20s. And teachers lose the ability to demonstrate performance techniques as they get into their 70s and their bodies become less responsive.

### Feeling through the Body, Expressing through the Body

**Did you have to make sacrifices to become a noh actor?**

I'm a member of the Beatles generation, but I didn't start listening to the Beatles until I was in my 30s. I never heard them in real time. And that's because in my 20s I was too busy studying to be a noh actor to pay







Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra performed in the Modern Noh style



attention to anything else. It was like having a heavy stone on top of my head - like the stone you use to make pickles. So I went through the 1960s without really knowing about the music, movies, or art that was going on at the time. You could say I spent my youth in darkness. I sacrificed my beautiful, shining youth to noh! (Laughs)

**Was the fact that you graduated from Hitotsubashi helpful?**

Not at all. In fact, it actually got in my way. These days it's usual for even hereditary noh actors to attend college, but back then it was a different story. When people found out I had a college education, they tended to think I was stuck up and gave me the cold shoulder. But what they sensed as haughtiness was in fact just me being unsure of myself and a little tense.

**And yet you returned to Hitotsubashi to do a Master's degree in social sciences.**

Not just graduate school. I also studied for the Buddhist priesthood during that time. Ostensibly I studied Buddhism as part of my noh studies, but actually that was just an excuse. I felt suffocated by my noh training and needed something more.

**Excuse or not, is there any connection between training as a Buddhist priest and training as a noh actor?**

Buddhism was part of the fabric of life in medieval Japan, when noh was born. So many noh plays are rooted in a Buddhist view of life and death. When performing such plays, one must have more than an intellectual understanding of Buddhism. One must be aligned with it, in sympathy with it. Otherwise you only dance on the surface.

That spiritual or philosophical aspect must be mastered by oneself. That's why I went back to Hitotsubashi for graduate school - to study philosophy.

My teacher Kimiko Tsumura taught me very specific things during my lessons - things like how high or low I should lift or lower my leg, how fast my pace should be, that sort of thing. She never talked about abstract concepts, and that's how it should be during actual training. It doesn't help at all to have your teacher talking about facing the cosmic void and firmly bestriding the earth, or some such thing.

## Caught between Continuing the Art and Carrying on the Family Name

**You were licensed as a Kanze School noh actor at age 28. But apparently there were many twists and turns along the way.**

There were many times when I wanted to quit. Sometimes I was so frustrated I actually left home with the intention of never coming back. (Laughs)

**So you were a runaway! (Laughs) But why?**

Well, the first time, I was into my second year as an apprentice. Tsumura-sensei proposed doing a newly written noh play, and I was expected to help. Doing a new play is a lot of work. Of course, doing classical plays is hard enough, but at least a proper system is already in place. But with a new work, you have to start by creating the components that make up the system. Then you have to discuss whether each component is satisfactory or not, and decide how to put those components together. That was very hard on me. I was there because I wanted to do classical noh, and I felt it was an imposition for me to have to deal with new material. I left sulking.

Another time I left home without so much as a second thought was when I was 26 and they asked me to be Tsumura-sensei's successor and take her family name. Again, I was there to do noh, and I didn't think that that had anything to do with family ties. I strongly resisted becoming her successor, and I think one reason was because of the influence of Hitotsubashi. I had thoroughly absorbed the concepts of individualism and free choice, and I had no desire to take on the burden of a traditional family lineage.

**But the fact that they asked you must have meant that they recognized you as her artistic heir.**

Oh, no. Of all the apprentices Tsumura-sensei trained, I was the least advanced. I had many great predecessors. And since she was a pioneer female noh actor, it seemed best to me for her to choose a female successor. It was beyond my ability to carry on her family line, and it wasn't in my personality to do so either. I had no desire to

do it, and I couldn't understand why nobody understood that. So again, I left because I wanted to escape from a stressful situation. But in the end I came back and went through with it.

**Why did you come back?**

I thought that she had probably already asked all my predecessors, and they had all refused. I guess I reconciled myself to the fact that it's the last apprentice who gets left holding the bag.

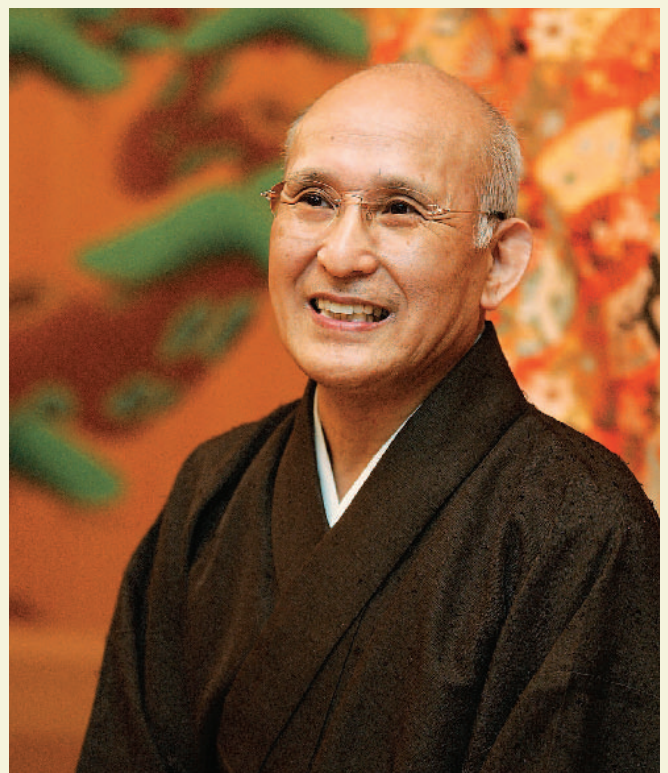
**And even that wasn't the last time you ran away, is it?**

No. I did it again just before I received my license. I thought, if I'm still in my 20s, I can start over and do something else. I could have become a Buddhist priest, after all. So I thought, if I'm going to quit, this is my last chance. I agonized over my decision until the last possible minute. (Laughs).

## After Saying "Never Again," the Challenge of New Noh

**You say that your experience with doing newly written noh was bad enough to make you leave home. And yet there are many new noh plays mentioned in your performance profile.**

Well, there are only about two of those pieces that I





Shojo (The Topsy Fairy) performed in Spain

actually wanted to do myself. Almost all of the rest of them I did under external pressure. (Laughs) When I was young, I was completely devoted to the classical repertoire, but when I reached my 40s I thought it would be good at least to stage the plays that my teacher had done. So I put together a performance of the play *Honan (The Persecution of Buddhism)* which deals with the banishment of the Buddhist priest Nichiren to Ito. That play was first presented in 1985. Then in 1988 we took up the challenge of *Kaguya Hime (The Moon Princess)*, and *Fumigara Komachi (Komachi's Love Letters)*, which were also written by Tsumura-sensei. But because the latter plays are difficult for me to do as a man, I asked my friend, the author Nozomu Hayashi, to touch up the texts a bit.

#### What's your connection with Nozomu Hayashi?

He just happened to live across the street from me, and our families got together from the time I was in my 20s. I think he was teaching at Keio Girls Senior High School. We both had too much free time! (Laughs) We practiced noh together, went to see Kurokawa noh, things like that.

**You also got to know Hideki Noda, the playwright and director of *Yume no Yumin-sha*, about that time, didn't you?**

Yes, we first met when he asked me to give him some

advice about noh-style movement for a play he was working on based on Ango Sakaguchi's *Sakura no Mori no Mankai no Shita (In a Grove of Cherries in Full Bloom)*. It was all rather unusual because the introduction came through a lighting technician who worked on our productions of *The Moon Princess* and *Komachi's Love Letters* at Sogetsu Hall and passed my name on to Noda as someone who would be willing to work with him.

Although Noda's work and noh are both theatrical arts, they were such different worlds that Noda was apparently concerned that any noh actor he approached would soon get angry and stop working with him. But for me, the gap between us was fascinating and just made me want to delve deeper into it.

I guess word must have gotten around because I started getting lots of inquiries about doing new noh after that. Eventually, we even started to add plays based on Western sources, like Kuniyoshi Ueda's adaptation of *Othello* and T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.

## Without the Urge to Create, Tradition Cannot Continue

**Your many performances overseas - in France, Bahrain, Singapore, Britain, China, Germany, Belgium and Spain - certainly command attention.**

In a way, that, too, is an extension of my club activities in college. I guess I really like clubs! (Laughs) In addition to the Kanze Noh Club, I was a member of the Pacific Club at Hitotsubashi. That club was started in the Meiji Period (1868-1912) and is dedicated to overseas study. In my junior year (and this was at a time when the exchange rate was still 360 yen to the dollar), I went on a study trip to several universities in Southeast Asia over a period of 45 days, where I discussed educational issues with students from various countries.

We were an official delegation from our university and issued a public, typed report in English. I think that early experience made me more open to the idea of performing noh abroad. It was a kind of inoculation vis-à-vis

the outside world, and I'm really glad now that I had it when I was young.

**Why do you place such an emphasis on overseas performances?**

That's simple: I want to introduce traditional Japanese culture to people in other countries.

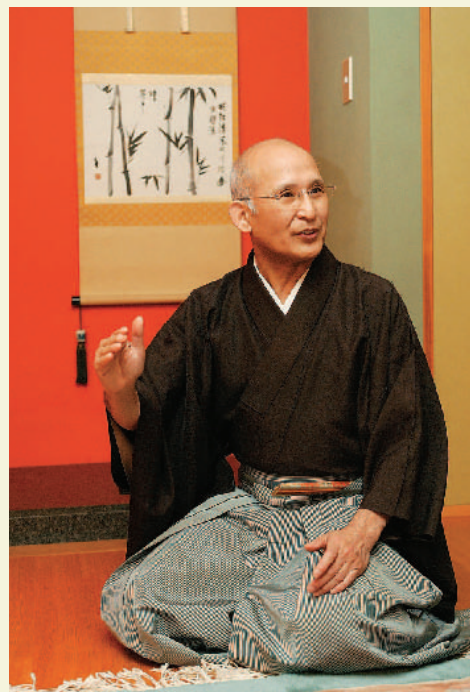
**There aren't that many people even in Japan who enjoy noh performances. Isn't it hard to convey the fascination of noh to audiences overseas?**

The world of noh is a specialized, small world, but conversely that means it can be understood no matter where in the world you go. Because it's specialized and small, I think it's easy to understand. In Japan, the classical Japanese language tires most people out - audiences find it difficult to catch the words and follow the storyline. But overseas, the language isn't an issue, leaving people more open to the musical and spiritual aspects of the art. At least, that's how it seems to me.

Of course, if specialness is its only appeal, it will have only limited impact. Audiences will simply view it as an example of Japanese culture without feeling that they have anything in common with it. So what we try to do is present not only the classical repertoire, but also new plays that deal with subject matter familiar to overseas audiences. Doing this is a way of indicating that we in the noh world are open to the world at large. I believe that by making a noh play out of something like *Othello*, for example, we clarify both the expressive techniques of noh and Japanese traditional culture in general.

**With regard to conveying, would you agree that one important task of a noh actor is to inherit the tradition from preceding generations and pass it on to succeeding ones?**

My approach to life has been deeply influenced by my seminar professor at Hitotsubashi, Yuji Muramatsu. He used to say that two things are particularly important: to always strive to do things well and to create your own way. I think by continuing to strive to do things well and by creating your own way, what you're actually doing is carrying on tradition. I believe that without the urge to create, no tradition can continue for long.



A scroll received from Tsumura's seminar professor, Yuji Muramatsu still adorns the alcove in Tsumura's training studio.

**Profile: Reijiro Tsumura**

**B**orn in Fukuoka Prefecture in 1942, Tsumura is a professional noh actor of the Kanze school and head of the Ryokusenkaï Performance Troupe. He has also been designated as an Important Intangible Cultural Asset by the Japanese Government. He holds Bachelor of Economics and Master of Social Sciences degrees from Hitotsubashi University.

While in college, he joined the Hitotsubashi Kanze Noh Club and began his noh training under the tutelage of Kimiko Tsumura (a pioneer of noh performance by women), receiving his professional license as a Kanze noh actor in 1970. In 1971, at the age of 29, he gave his first performance of the play *Dojoji*, which is traditionally considered an important milestone in an actor's development as a mature performer. With the death of Kimiko Tsumura in 1974, he became head of the Ryokusenkaï Performance Troupe, which presents noh programs six times a year. From 1973 he participated in the National Arts Festival sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs for eleven years straight. Since 1979 he has held annual outdoor torchlight performances of noh in Koganei, Tokyo. Since 1987 he has performed in many countries, including France, Britain and Spain. He has been particularly active in the British theatrical world, presenting adaptations of Shakespeare's *Othello* and T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* performed in noh style. He is also active in contemporary theater circles in Japan, providing guidance related to noh performance practice to director Hideki Noda for the latter's productions of such plays as *In a Grove of Cherries in Full Bloom* and *Ako Roshi (The 47 Loyal Samurai)*. Among Tsumura's publications is the book, *Noh ga Wakaru Hyaku Kiiwaado (One Hundred Key Words for Understanding Noh)*, published by Shogakukan.