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On *Ataka*: Interview with Udaka Michishige and Sugi Ichikazu

Shite actor Udaka Michishige and nō flute player Sugi Ichikazu

Interviewed by Diego Pellecchia and Rebecca Teele Ogamo on 26 February 2016

Udaka Michishige (Kongō school shite actor) performed *Ataka* in 2014 as part of the Seiran-nō-no-kai series. Sugi Ichikazu (Morita school nō flute player) performed on that occasion as well. In this interview these two mature performers discussed the *kogaki* (performance variants, usually introducing elements of complexity, or some unique aspect regarding costuming or setting) featured at the time of that performance. They also discussed the difference between performance requirements or expectations of an *iemoto*, (the head of a nō performers' school), such as the head of the Kongō school who is mentioned by Udaka.

Diego Pellecchia: Udaka Michishige, on 14 September 2014 you performed *Ataka* as part of the Seiran nō, your independently produced performance series. I believe this was not your first time to perform this play.

Udaka Michishige: That's right, it was my second time. On that occasion, I performed with a combination of *kogaki*: *kaitsuke kaitate ennen takinagashi*. These are in fact three separate variants: *kaitsuke kaitate* refers to the use of the conch-shell, typical of *yamabushi* (mountain priests). *Ennen* refers to the *ennen no mai*, a variant of the *otoko mai* dance performed by the shite in the latter part of the play. Finally, *takinagashi* is a variant of the melody played by the flute, suggesting the flow of a stream turning into a waterfall. This music also influences the dancer's movements, so *ennen* and *takinagashi* are usually performed as a set.

DP: It sounds rather complicated. I hope we will be able to break this down in our conversation. Before we get into further details, I have a question: is *Ataka* considered a *hiraki mono*, one of those milestone plays marking the progress in the career of an actor?

UM: It certainly is considered a special play. First, it features many actors appearing on stage at the same time, which is unusual by nō standards. In addition, *ennen takinagashi* is a variant that younger actors are not allowed to perform. Even the *iemoto* must perform the standard version of *Ataka* before staging the *ennen takinagashi* variant.

DP: Sugi-sensei, are there similar restrictions also among musicians?

Sugi Ichikazu: Yes. In particular, *kogaki* such as the *ennen takinagashi* version of *Ataka* can be played only after one has performed in the standard version. *Kogaki* variants require experience, indeed.

UM: *Ataka* really is treated like a higher-ranking play. In particular, shite actors handle the narrative parts such as the *kanjinchō* section with great care.¹

SI: In the Kanze school the *kanjinchō* section is considered a *kogaki*.²

UM: Really? In the Kongō school we do not consider it a *kogaki*: it is part of the standard staging.

DP: Are there special variants of *Ataka* other than the ones you performed?

UM: The *mondō no narai* is a very special *kogaki*. Waki and shite sit and face each other, then Togashi begins to question Benkei about yamabushi symbolism, trying to catch Benkei make a mistake. The exchange escalates until Togashi gives up, overwhelmed by Benkei's knowledge of yamabushi practices. This scene is much more detailed than the *mondō* section usually performed in *Ataka*. I think that this was inspired by a real Buddhist *mondō*.³

DP: I think this *mondō* is also given prominence in the kabuki version of the play. *Ataka* seems like a very special play both for actors and musicians. At what age does a shite actor usually perform it for the first time?

UM: The iemoto and his heirs are a case apart, as they start performing such plays at a very early age. As for me, I think I did it for the first time in my 30s. At that time, I did not have a clear idea of how to perform my part. I just did it the way I learned it. But when I performed it again in 2014, I did put effort into trying to understand who this famous character, Musashibō Benkei, was. How should I portray him? What kind of role does Benkei have in this play? Is he a heroic figure? Is he just a strongman? Or is he a sensitive man? Is he Yoshitsune's loyal guard, ready to give his all for his lord? I thought it was important not only to focus on the character as an individual, but to consider Benkei's role within the larger context of the play. In this case, thinking about his relationship with Yoshitsune is key to a good interpretation. Having said that, other actors may just decide to go with a straightforward, energetic portrayal of Benkei, without considering this psychological interpretation. One may also perform so the audience will understand how difficult it is to perform. There are many ways to look at it.

DP: Since all the characters appearing in *Ataka* are human beings alive in the present time, the play is performed without the use of masks. How does this convention impact on its portrayal on stage?

UM: Nō actors are not supposed to use the face as an expressive means, so when I perform *hitamen* [without a mask] I try hard to maintain a neutral facial expression. Even so, my face is there, on display for the audience. Even if we do not deliberately use facial expressions, some expressions naturally emerge, especially when we sing; that is unavoidable. Nō masks, or the puppet heads of bunraku are carved in a way that allows the audience to imagine various kinds of expressions on them. However, this is hard to achieve when instead the audience sees the real face of an actor. I think

1 *Kanjinchō* refers to the reading of the subscription list by Benkei. This passage has become one of the hallmarks of *Ataka*, to the extent that it later gave the name to the kabuki version of the play. (See Katherine Saltzman-Li's article in this issue of *Mime Journal*).

2 Sugi Ichikazu is referring to the solo reading of the subscription list (*kanjinchō*). Anciently the *kanjinchō* section was sung by Benkei together with his followers, and the solo reading by Benkei was considered a special version of the play. Although today all schools perform the reading as a solo part by Benkei, the Kanze school still appends *kanjinchō* after the title of the play *Ataka*, indicating the *kogaki*. Other schools, such as the Kongō school, do not indicate it.

3 *Mondō* are Buddhist dialogues, often performed with the purpose of transmitting a teaching.

it is hard for the audience to accept that the human face they see in front of them is supposed to be Benkei's. I wonder whose face would be suitable for Benkei—perhaps a face close to his portrayals in woodblock prints—with thick eyebrows and a fierce expression, would be credible.

DP: Sugi-sensei, *nō* musicians sit at the back of the stage facing the audience, hence their faces are constantly on display. When I watch a *nō* performance, my gaze often drifts to the musicians' faces. Do musicians make efforts to keep a neutral expression during a performance?

SI: To be honest, when we play powerful musical passages, because of the effort and concentration, it is hard to keep a neutral face: expressions unavoidably appear on our faces. We do not really make efforts to hide those, but instead let them appear naturally.

UM: However, from the point of view of shite actors, if the musicians have strong expressions, they will draw the attention of the audience. They would stand out too much.

SI: But isn't that one of the beauties of *nō* after all? It has several interesting features, and can be appreciated from different angles.

UM: That is true.

DP: It seems to me that there is an interesting overlap of "reality" and "realism" on the *nō* stage. Udaka-sensei, did you research the character of Benkei in preparation for this staging of *Ataka*?

UM: I did research stories and legends related to Benkei. Of course, his figure became popular because of his role as Yoshitsune's bodyguard. However, I found Benkei's life as a warrior-monk on Mount Hiei performing Buddhist austerities while practicing martial arts very interesting. As a monk serving at Enryaku-ji, Benkei must have also performed *ennen* dances, from which the *kogaki ennen no mai* takes its name. *Ennen* was an auspicious dance that monks would perform as part of Buddhist rituals. This tradition is still preserved by some communities. Movements involve leaps and stamps similar to those we *nō* actors perform in the *ennen no mai*.

DP: How about the music that accompanies this dance in *Ataka*?

SI: That would be the *ennen takinagashi* part—actually we musicians call this variant *takinagashi ennen* emphasizing the musical part over the dance part—which affects various moments of the dance, in particular when the shite moves from the stage to the *hashigakari* bridge, and back on stage.

UM: In that section, Benkei observes the water flowing from the *metsuke* pillar downstage right, then moves to the *hashigakari*, observing the stream turning into a big waterfall. The flute is an essential part for a successful execution of this scene.

DP: Sugi-sensei, what is special about the execution of this passage?

SI: First of all, it is necessary to visualize the waterfall. When I play this part, I focus entirely on the image of water. In this section of the music the flute plays in a register called *banshiki*, which is associated with the element water.⁴

DP: Does the shite feel influenced by that music?

⁴ This register is also used in dances in other plays, such as *Hagoromo* or *Tōru*, strongly connoted by the image of water.

UM: Of course. I felt a sense of purity from the water sound of *banshiki*. It is also interesting to notice the position of the flute player, who sits in the upstage left corner, close to the chorus.

SI: Of the three musicians playing in the usual ensemble, he is the only one sitting on a diagonal line, facing the *metsuke* pillar downstage right instead of facing front. The flute player is in a position to oversee all action taking place on stage. The flute is the only melodic instrument of the ensemble and is responsible for creating the mood of the play.

DP: Is the image of flowing water also important for the shite?

UM: Certainly. It is something I have worked on during the many performances of *Ataka* I participated in as a chorus member. Because of that experience I have created an image of flowing water that I am able to visualize whenever I need to. However, this is not something that I thought about when I performed the play as shite, but is something I developed during long hours of training. Training allows me to rationalize various aspects of the character. I try various approaches until I am satisfied with the result. Once I find my ideal way, I have one chance to try it out during the *mōshiwase*, (the final rehearsal before a performance). This concludes the exploration phase: on the day of the performance I am somewhere beyond research and intellectualization.

DP: I see. Then, what do you actually think about in performance?

UM: I don't think about anything! I just move according to the natural flow of the performance. I don't make rational decisions.

SI: It is said that performers reach a mental state of *mu* [nothingness]. In fact, I do happen to think about many things when I am on stage. However, there are many moments in which I can just sit there with a clear mind.

DP: People who do not know much about *nō* may think it is abstract and non-theatrical.

UM: It is important to allow the audience to use their imagination, guessing the feelings of the characters. Perhaps it is important to explain various interpretations to the audience at the beginning of the performance. For example, how the relationship between Benkei and Togashi changes from great tension to gratitude. This is something we perceive strongly on stage, and the audience, too, can experience it.

SI: Certainly, in plays such as *Ataka*, in which the dance is actually being performed by characters in the story—in this case the *ennen no mai* from the yamabushi tradition—it is easier to understand the dance than in plays with dances such as *jo no mai*, which are more abstract and removed from the context.

DP: Are there plays in which the narrative brings up a particular music or instrument that is being played on stage, therefore creating a connection between story and performance means?

UM: The most obvious case would be that of the young warrior Atsumori, who received a flute from his father.

DP: That is true. However, in the play *Atsumori* there is no scene in which a character plays the flute. I think that, in cases like this, *nō* creates associations of images rather than logical sequences. Even if there is no scene in the play in which Atsumori plays his flute, because his character is represented by the flute, it makes sense to consider the flute that is actually being played on stage as evocative of Atsumori's own flute.

SI: The flute player plays short sections called *ashirai* which are performed at special points to create a mood. When we play these, we think about how to play *ashirai* in order to characterize the shite. Flute players study these *ashirai* after having mastered all the dances. They are the most interpretative and expressive parts of a performance.

DP: Do performers talk together about the content of a play, its characters, and ways to interpret it?

SI: We do not really talk about these things all that much.

UM: In the past, performers used to discuss more about the plays, and about their interpretation. They deeply pondered on their artistic choices. I feel that for many performers today *nō* has become a mechanical job, not an artistic endeavor. Having said that, I think that we actors should not perform too often as shite. Once a month would be a good pace.

DP: Udaka-sensei, your next endeavor will be *Sagi* (“The Heron”), another *hiraki* play, in which a heron dances in front of the emperor.

UM: In the past it used to be a play reserved for the *iemoto*, and only recently have other actors been allowed to perform it. The story of the white heron flying into the Emperor’s garden, only to submit to the Emperor’s will and allow itself to be captured, is rather unrealistic, and yet the play is charmingly genuine. The highlight of the play is a dance called *midare*.⁵ Speaking of realism, I remember that when the previous *iemoto* performed *Sagi*, he went to the countryside to observe how herons walk. I was still an apprentice under him, so I could watch him closely while he practiced. That was very realistic: he really looked like a bird. His intention was to let the audience see a real heron walking in shallow waters, on the theatre stage.

DP: How about the music that accompanies these movements?

SI: In the Morita school we play a note, *hishigi*, suggesting a feeling of gratitude. Certainly, it is important to picture the delicate heron in our minds in order to perform well. If the music is too heavy the heron will not be able to fly!

(Translated and edited by Diego Pellecchia, with Rebecca Teele Ogamo)

⁵ This dance is performed only in two plays: in the *kogaki* of the play *Shōjō* called *midare*, and in *Sagi*.