

2-23-2021

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Recommended Citation

Pellecchia, Diego and Teele Ogamo, Rebecca (2021) "On Mochizuki: Interview With Mikata Shizuka and Udaka Tatsushige," *Mime Journal*: Vol. 27, Article 9. DOI: 10.5642/mimejournal.20212701.09
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/mimejournal/vol27/iss1/9>

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On *Mochizuki*: Interview with Mikata Shizuka and Udaka Tatsushige

Mikata Shizuka and Udaka Tatsushige

Interviewed by Diego Pellecchia and Rebecca Teele Ogamo on 16 December 2015

Udaka Tatsushige (Kongō school shite actor) performed *Mochizuki* in 2015 as the first play of his self-produced series of performances *Tatsushige no kai*. In 2014 Mikata Shizuka (Kanze school shite actor) performed the play for the second time in his self-produced series, Théâtre Nou, with a performance variant called *koshiki*, featuring an all-white costume and wig for the *shishi mai* (lion dance) section. *Hiraki mono* are particularly challenging plays that nō actors perform at set stages of their career, as milestones of their progress. These plays belong to a “secret tradition” which is passed on from teacher to student, symbolically opening (*hiraku*) a new phase in the life of the actor who performs them.

Diego Pellecchia: In this issue of *Mime Journal* we have discussed the notion of *hiraki mono*, or special plays performed to signal an actor’s artistic advancement. I understand that in certain schools *Mochizuki* is treated as a *hiraki mono*.

Udaka Tatsushige: Certainly, in order to perform this play, one needs to ask for permission to the *iemoto* [the head of a stylistic school of nō].

Mikata Shizuka: Yes, in our school, too, permission is necessary. However, since the Kanze school is large, depending on the situation, the actor may request permission from another elder actor instead of the *iemoto*. In any case, *Mochizuki* is a play that we treat with high regard.

DP: Does this care apply even after the first time you perform it?

MS: Yes, especially if one performs it in the *koshiki* performance variant, in which the shite uses a white costume and wig. I think this is because the play contains the *shishi*, or lion dance, so is it considered a *narai mono*, a kind of play treated with special regard, requiring expertise and permission from an elder actor in order to be performed. For this reason, *Mochizuki* is appropriate for a *hiraki* event.

DP: What exactly is a *hiraki* event?

MS: One has to consider the historical context of the Edo period, during which the *iemoto* system was established, and the canon of nō plays became formalized. Various rules concerning ranking emerged during the Edo period, including the ranking of actors, expressed in the order in which chorus chanters sit on stage, or in how the dressing rooms are subdivided among shite, waki, musicians, and *kyogen* actors.

DP: That historical point of view is very interesting, but what is the role of *hiraki* plays in the world of *nō* today?

MS: Shall I answer first? Udaka-san has been quiet so far.

UT: Please, answer first. I enjoy hearing what you have to say.

DP: These compliments also seems to reflect the ranking system you were talking about before! (all laugh). [Mikata Shizuka is older than Udaka Tatsushige]

MS: First of all, it is important to perform challenging plays as *hiraki* in order to be able to teach them to one's students. Plays chosen as *hiraki* are particularly demanding and, compared with other pieces, they are less frequently performed. So, it is important to acquire and preserve knowledge of their performance details for future generations. Also, even if it is true that these plays are milestones on the professional career of an actor, I don't perform *hiraki* to get a badge of honor to wear on my sleeve. One will, hopefully, get a chance to perform these plays again later in life. The first time can't be perfect.

As for *Mochizuki*, I didn't choose to perform it. I was requested to dance it by TTR [a group of *nō* musicians from Osaka] for one of their events.¹ I think that I was about thirty years old, and at that time I thought I was too young to perform it. I didn't enjoy the performance very much. Kongō school actors perform *Mochizuki* for the first time earlier in their career, right?

UT: Yes. But we perform *Dōjōji* as a *hiraki* at a later stage than you do in the Kanze school.² Personally, I thought I would do *Mochizuki* later, perhaps after I turned forty. I wanted to do *Shakkyō* ("The Stone Bridge"), with the *sange no shiki* performance variant first. This version features three *shishi* lions: a white one and two red ones—in Japan white and red is an auspicious combination of colors, suitable for a *hiraki* event. I wanted to ask Kongō Tatsunori, son of the current Kongō iemoto, to take the role of the white lion (*shite*) while and my younger brother and I would have performed as the red lions (*tsure*).

However, the iemoto pointed out that it would be strange not to take the *shite* role in my first self-sponsored performance. So, he suggested that I do *Mochizuki* instead.

DP: Mikata-sensei, why did you not want to perform *Mochizuki*?

MS: I was a bit reluctant to do it because it is performed as *hitamen*, without a mask—and I'm shy! [laughs]. Also, the main theme of *Mochizuki* is loyalty (*chūgi*), an important concept in the world of *nō*, though I don't know how much it applies to today's reality. Still, it may be interesting to perform it in front of contemporary audiences. Oftentimes *genzai* plays with a *kokata* role such as *Mochizuki* or *Ataka* are performed with family members: these plays are metaphors of loyalty and of the transmission of knowledge. They portray the condition and relationships of a family, mixing the narrative of the play with the life of the actors.

DP: What have you learnt from performing *Mochizuki*?

1 The two "T's" in TTR represent the first initial of two of the founding members while "R" represents "Revolution".

2 The play *Dōjōji* is famous for the stage property representing the bell hanging from the ceiling, and later dropping on the actor, who changes his costume inside it, turning into a monstrous snake.

MS: I could reflect on the notion of “loyalty,” and feel the “Japanese warrior spirit,” which is part of the ethical tradition of Japan. In particular, how Tomofusa, the protagonist of the play, changes when he encounters Mochizuki after living in disguise as a commoner. Warrior blood runs through his veins once more. I think that the *a parte* section in which he decides to kill Mochizuki is very theatrical.

DP: Udaka-sensei, you performed *Mochizuki* recently, what are your thoughts about this topic?

UT: Maybe my approach was not deep enough. I could feel the difficulty of a demanding play like this. I had performed the *shishi* lion dance before in *Shakkyō*, but the difficulty here is that the shite performs a *shishi* dance inside a room. It is not the shite entering the stage as a lion and performing the dance. It is the shite performing a character who in turn performs a dance. The objective of the lion dance is not to excite the enemy but to put him to sleep. Metaphorically, this is what performing this *hiraki* means. A young actor should use all of his power to perform in an energetic way. However, with experience, he or she should be able to control it, and transmit to the audience what cannot be shown through movement alone. The *shishi* of *Mochizuki* is like this. Since it was my first time taking this role, I found it very challenging.

DP: I see how this is a much more sophisticated kind of *shishi* than that of *Shakkyō*.

MS: The *shishi* of *Shakkyō* is a supernatural character, close to a deity. The one in *Mochizuki*, instead, is a person acting in a room. It is very different, similar to a play within a play. It is important to create the tension for the audience to enjoy the *shishi mai*, with the killing of Tomoharu as its climax. That is one of the interesting points of *genzai nō*.

DP: How did you prepare for the performance of *Mochizuki*? Does *genzai nō* as theatrical *nō* require a special identification of the performer with the character? For example, did you visit Moriyama in Shiga prefecture to immerse yourself in the atmosphere of the play?

MS: I have been exposed to the play in different ways since I was little. I have performed the *kokata* of *Mochizuki* and I have sung it several times as a chorus member. The two times I performed *Mochizuki* as shite, I did not think of “becoming” Tomofusa. I focused more on the main theme, loyalty, in the abstract. I focused on “a warrior like Tomofusa”—a role type—rather than on Tomofusa himself. I thought about the character type and tried to interpret it. In short, I did not do any specific research on the character.

Rebecca Teele: How about you Udaka-sensei?

UT: I had no time to do any research for my *Mochizuki* (laughs). I was too busy with the production of the performance, ticket sales, etc. However, the way I prepared for this play was not simply by repeating my lines: I also tried to create the background of the story within me. I did that by looking at other actor’s *Mochizuki*, singing in the chorus, serving as stage assistant, etc. As Mikata-sensei said, the performance of a *nō* play is not something one prepares from scratch.

Also, I don’t think the audience will necessarily understand or perceive all the preparatory work the actors may do in the background. It is also true that actors do not make their interpretative choices too explicit.

DP: I think that, in the scene in which Mochizuki enters the lodge and Tomofusa follows him with his gaze, the dramatic tension is palpable. The audience sees that Tomofusa has realized that the traveler who just entered his lodge is in fact Mochizuki in disguise. I would like to ask you, what did you think or feel during that particular scene? Did you see the performance through the eyes of the character or did you focus more on technical aspects of performance, such as how to stand or how to keep a relaxed facial expression?

MS: I don't think I thought about either. (laughs)

DP: For example, when you look at the waki actor on stage, do you see their face or the face of the character?

MS: I see the actor, not the character (laughs). What do you see, as a spectator?

DP: Sometimes I see the character, sometimes I see the actor. I enjoy that back and forth movement very much. How about you, Udaka-sensei?

UT: I am not sure. If I said I am completely taken up in the narrative, I would not be honest. I constantly think I am Tatsushige performing. I never experience a complete identification with a character. There are many things happening when I am on stage, but I feel very concentrated. Thoughts and feelings come and go in waves ... it is difficult to explain in words.

RT: Mikata-sensei, earlier you mentioned that one of the difficulties of *genzai* plays is having to perform without a mask. How difficult is it to be on stage *hitamen*?

MS: You might not think so, but I'm shy. I do not like speaking in public or making announcements, so I dislike performing with my face in full view.

RT: But you certainly are used to being onstage without a mask, as an assistant or a chorus member. What is the difficulty of being the *shite* and showing your face?

MS: Plays like *Mochizuki* or *Ataka* are easy for the audience to understand. If the actor looks good and has a good voice, that's enough for the audience to enjoy the performance. The face is not an issue in plays where a mask is used. However, the difficulty is how to take these plays without masks to a higher level. Without a mask the humanity of the actor appears. Maybe it is also for this reason that these plays are more interesting when an experienced actor performs them, someone whose face can tell the story of his life.

UT: Personally, I'm not shy. Maybe I want to show myself. However, without a mask there is nothing to depend on, only one's face. It is easier to perform in the dark space created by the mask.

RT: One may think that without a mask it would be easier to act, simply because the stage is in clear view, while the mask hinders the vision of the actor so much.

MS: Of course, practically speaking, it is easier to move without a mask, but it is more difficult to act in a convincing way, or to show one's skills.

RT: I would like to know if there is a difference in how much audience and actors can see each other with and without a mask.

MS: Certainly both audience and actors can see each other well when a mask is not used. I think that's not good because the audience may focus more on the actor than on the character.

UT: I think that also depends on the type of audience. Some prefer to focus on the characters, while others enjoy seeing their favorite actors' faces on stage.

RT: Mikata-sensei, could you describe some differences between the first and the second time you performed *Mochizuki*?

MS: The first time I did it was upon request of other performers, as I said before. The *kokata* was a child who studied a lot with my father. Performing plays like these depends a great deal on timing and it is very important to have a good relationship with the *kokata*. The second time I did it with my daughter Azusa. These kinds of plays are indeed a very important chance for us to teach children who will become future professionals.

RT: It is part of the off-stage life, of the flow of time and passing of years within the family.

MS: Yes, the next time I would like to do it with my future grandchild.

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