



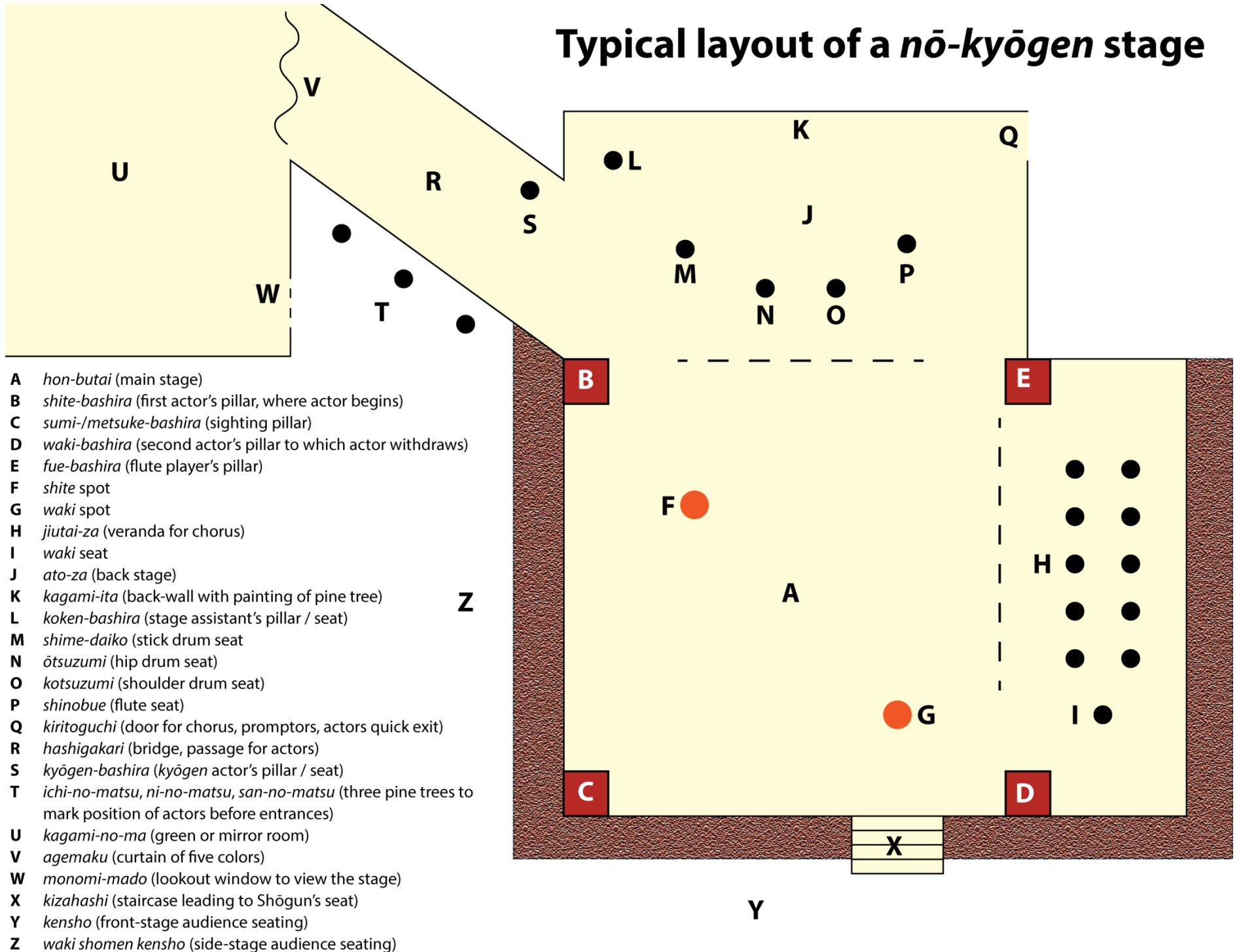
狂言

Mad Words

the Comedic Theatre of
Japanese Kyōgen

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Typical layout of a *nō-kyōgen* stage



Mad words. Wild speech. Fictitious. Fake performance. Farce.

All this and more have been used as readings for 狂言, known as *kyōgen*, a comedic theatrical art of medieval and feudal Japan. It's history, existence, style, and traditions are inseparably tied to the better known dramatic art of *nō* (also written as *noh*). While some foreign scholars will dismiss *kyōgen* as trivial, simply comic interludes of *nō*, *kyōgen* is a rich art form in its own right.

Monkey Business of Theatre Before *Kyōgen*

Like many cultures, the origins of theatre and the performing arts in Japan are heavily entwined with local religious customs. The nomadic people of the Jōmon Period (before 250 b.c.e.) may have already practiced shamanistic trance dances as part of their various rituals. In the following Yayoi Period (through 300 c.e.), an agrarian culture emerged, creating both a societal class system and seasonal celebrations and festivals based around the farming calendar. The older rituals were incorporated into the celebrations with song and dance in hopes of encouraging good fortune and gratitude. The wealthiest land owners became territorial leaders who tried to gain favor from the emperor of China by having the most impressive religious and secular performances to seem highly cultured for visiting dignitaries. During this time, *miko* priestesses commonly performed with dance and song during various ceremonies including funeral rites.



Shunsai Tomihasa (春齋年昌), Amaterasu's Cave

The artwork of the Kofun Period (300-710) shows the continuation of ritual dancers, drummers, and musicians. During this time, the story of Amaterasu is solidified. Having been ridiculed by her brother, the sun goddess hid herself away in a cave and refused to come out, casting the world in eternal darkness. The other gods and *kami* gathered to stage a performance to bring her back (choosing a dry river bed, a location that would continue as a popular stage in Japan for many centuries). This host used ceremony, festival, ritual, and sympathetic magic to appeal to Amaterasu. Ame-no-Uzume-no-mikoto (the goddess of dawn, mirth, and revelry) danced on the river bed and on an upturned bucket and even disrobed to elicit “thunderous

laughter”. Scholars of the legend debate if the laughter was sympathetic magic (in celebration of the sun’s return so Amaterasu would have to follow through) or in response to Uzume’s performance, her nudity not depicted as obscene but solely for the purpose of entertainment and amusement, thus celebrate as theatre. Her dance would be mimicked by *miko* (though her legend may have been inspired by the Jōmon shamans) and was described as *wazaogi*, a term that would also mean performer.

From about the same time came the legend of the godly brothers Umisachi and Yamasachi. After a quarrel, Umisachi agreed to become subordinate to his brother as a *wazaogi* and perform pantomime of his misfortune and thus was considered Japan’s first professional actor as his performances were not tied to a ritual. This story was reflected in the servitude the Hayato clan was forced into by victorious Yamaot. For centuries, at festival and banquets, the *Hayabito* would pantomime like Umisachi be considered the official court jesters.

As Japan continued to be influenced by Chinese culture during the Heian Period (794-1185), various forms of theatre arose including the popular *sangaku* (from Chinese *san-yāo* probably meaning “miscellaneous music” or “scattered music”). What was first introduced as rhythmic posturing to the beat of drums and instruments popular in China’s Sui court, quickly adopted indigenous folk elements from Japan such as the *Hayabito* who now included acrobats, tumblers, jugglers, musicians, and more.



Sarugaku, photo from National Noh Theatre

Before the end of the Twelfth Century, the term *sangaku* had been corrupted into *sarugaku*. A popular theory is that *saru* is from the Japanese word for monkey because of the buffoonish antics and mimicry of the performers. It’s believed some troupes had performing monkeys as well as players disguised as monkeys. Another concept suggests it’s a derivation of *zaregato* meaning joke. In any case, *sarugaku* became the more popular name and the art form considered “monkeyish”. The term *sarugaku* would also become applied to any foolish and noisy merrymaking.

According to the poet, scholar, and courtier Fujiwara no Akihira in the mid Eleventh Century, the purpose of *sarugaku* was “to twist the entrails and dislocate the jaws of its spectator with foolish nonsense.” His primary interest was in farce (he believed the plays should be so humorous that they “loosened the chins” of entire audience) and he wrote several plots that would influence *sarugaku* and later arts. The humor was often extemporaneous and the action could have been rather bawdy.

A major socio-political upheaval occurred when the *samurai* class overthrew the old order and began the Kamakura Period (1185–1333). No longer under the protection of the Heian courts, many *sarugaku* players sought other ways to survive without becoming laborers or being taxed. No longer performing as often for state ceremonies and in palaces, many actors moved to rural areas and became *hōshibara*, disguising themselves as monks though they were not actually associated with any monastery or temple. To earn their keep and respect from the populace, the *hōshibara* would enact any desired performance for money, from religious rituals to acrobatics and mime and thus *sarugaku* became extremely popular among the people.

Over time, these performers would climb the social ladder, finding ways to make claims of familial association with actual religious officials. Adopting costumes and masks of popular religious icons, they grew with money and influence, much to the chagrin of the actual temples and shrines who saw them as false. During the Muromachi Period (1336 to 1573) as Japan sought to embrace their own historic traditions above foreign influence, many *sarugaku* performers who had embraced local folklore saw increased patronage from temples, shrines, and government leaders.

Embraced by powerful elite again, actors and troupes continued to hone their talents and *sarugaku* had shaken off some of its “monkeyish” traits while establishing a sustained theme. Probably learning from performers of *ennen* entertainment prayers, *sarugaku* and other theatrical styles evolved with a strong emphasis on plot and story. While many plays still had comedic elements, others became more serious and tragic dramas. *Sarugaku* was split into *honge* (“principal craft”) and *noge* (“refined craft”). The *honge* mixed humor with the performing arts of Shinto festivals, *sanbaso* and *dengaku* while the *noge* combined song and dance with tragic stories from history and legend. As such, *honge* and *noge* would soon give rise to what would become known as *kyōgen* and *nō* respectively.

***Nō-kyōgen* Takes the Stage**

A fortuitous day happened in 1374 when Kan'ami Kiyotsugu and his son Zeami Motokiyo performed before the young Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. The shōgun was so impressed he became patron to both Kan'ami and Zeami (some think he was extremely impressed with the boy who was still a preteen at the time). Brought into the court, Kan'ami was able to refine his art and Zeami had access to education and great literature. Perfecting the branches of *sarugaku*, modern *nō* and *kyōgen* theatre was born.

Because the Shōgunate court was guided by the Zen aesthetics of Buddhism, Kan'ami and Zeami accepted the Zen standards of their audience, showing restraint from some of the more exaggerated and extreme emotions and humor from *sarugaku* and *dengaku*. The more tragic plays became *nō* while the comic plays *kyōgen*. However, though comedic, Zeami believed *kyōgen* humor should “kindle the mind to laughter” and “a laughter that makes the laughter joyous.” He was against raucous and rowdy laughter and believed having a goal to produce laughter from the audience was failure for laughter without the comic idea behind it

would be harsh and without essence. He insisted on the necessity of restraint and subtle suggestion, “a tinge of unreality in reality”. Above all:

“...neither in speech nor in gesture, should there be anything low. The jokes and repartee should be appropriate even to the ears of the nobles and the refined. However funny they may be, one should never introduce the vulgar. This is of utmost importance to bear in mind.”

In the Fifteenth Century, many adept *sarugaku* and *dengaku* players who had been attached to rural shrines migrated to Kyoto for the new popularity of *Nō-kyōgen*. Because of their regional differences of folk arts, they soon formed different schools that would pass down their traditions generation after generation. Though many plays and elements were shared between the schools, each developed their own techniques and interpretations of the art. By the end of the century, *nō-kyōgen* was fully under patronage of the Shōgunate and would spend the next two hundred years as the official state sanctioned theatre, acquiring credibility and developing its own literature.



The Monkey-Skin Quiver from Illustrated Scroll of Noh and Kyogen

Kyōgen was meant to be seen performed live and not read. Originally, all themes and dialogue were handed down orally from master to apprentice. The performances themselves were semi-improvisational to a brief outline scenario, much like *commedia dell'arte* of Sixteenth Century Italy. With each generation, the actor was considered the author, having the freedom to mold the play to suite the occasion. Zeami believed the actor was solely responsible for the performance: ““As to an officer of the *kyōgen*, his chief function is that of a merrymaker, a drawing-room jester, who makes up an entertaining scene by means of old anecdotes and incidents.” Later academic and writer Arai Hakuseki (in the early Eighteenth Century) wrote about early *kyōgen* as “not presenting a play which already existed, but rather an impromptu performance of something amusing for that particular occasion.”

At first, if anything was written down about *kyōgen* it was in memoranda and not the actual complete text. The earliest known document of scenarios, the *Tensho Kyōgen Book*, was penned in the 1580s. Around sixty years later, the actor Ōkura Toraaki wrote texts of 203 plays classified into eight major groups according to subjects. He prefaced his work by saying: “Under no circumstances should this manuscript be shown to strangers. Since I am not naturally bright, I fear I may forget what my father has taught me. Hence I write these plays down. There may be

some who blame my doing so, but I shall appreciate those who think my task creditable.” Later as a postscript he added: “Previous to this, the plays were handed down from generation to generation by oral tradition and never have been recorded. I fear, however, in due time they may become so far removed from the original that they cannot be recognized.” His father, Torakiyo Yaemon Ōkura, endorsed and testified to the accuracy of oral tradition. Toraaki believed the themes and dialogues had reached point where further improvement not possible or desirable.

After this, *kyōgen* became less improvised as full scripts of dialogue were chronicled. While the teaching of *kyōgen* is still passed down through oral rote, many hundreds of plays were written down. However, out of the four to five hundred known plays, only 260 are currently in circulation of the remaining two existing schools: Izumi and Okura.

From its early days, *nō* and *kyōgen* often operated in tandem. An entire day was devoted to performances and *kyōgen* would serve as a comedic interlude between the more serious and often tragic *nō* plays. While *nō* tackled epic stories from legend and history as well as dire consequences of actions, *kyōgen* usually focused on rather small and “human” situations. Even when *kyōgen* employed supernatural beings (a common theme in *nō*), they were rather human in their qualities and character.

Like *nō*, *kyōgen* plays could have as few as two and usually no more than three or four except on the rare occasion of crowd scenes or use of a chorus. Like *nō*, characters and their actors were classified into different categories as shown below.

<i>shite</i>	main actor (almost always the first to appear and first to speak)
<i>ado</i>	supporting actor(s)
<i>koado</i>	secondary supporting actor(s)
<i>kokata</i>	supporting roles, extras (often speechless)
<i>jōtai</i>	chorus (used seldom in <i>kyōgen</i>)

From Lucky Gods to Blind Men: the Categories of *Kyōgen* Plays

Kyōgen plays are divided into different classifications usually based on the overall theme of the play or which character was considered *shite*. Not every school or scholar agree on which play is in which category or even how many classifications exist. In a few cases, different schools interpreted different characters as *shite* thus belonging to different categories. Below is one overall example.

- **waki** (celebratory). These are not considered very funny, instead concerning felicitous ceremonies and conferring of blessings. Named after the celebratory category of *nō* (and would appear in a program immediately after such a *nō* play).
 - **fukushin** (happiness gods). The gods explain their auspicious history and bestowing blessings. Ending with formal dancers accompanied by chorus and musicians, these plays are much more formal than most *kyōgen*.
 - **kahōmono** (wealthy men). A man of some means sends his foolish and lazy servant Tarō’kaja on a fetching errand. Tarō’kaja messes it up, often by being swindled by a shyster. The employer here is expressed as wealthy man and not just master of the house (see below) so is also auspicious. Tara’kaja gets back into the wealthy man’s good graces via song and dance, thus celebratory.

- *hyakushō* (farmer). Two or more farmers are traveling and encounter each other, usually on their way to meeting with some civic officials (such as for taxes or record keeping). The farmers tell each other and the officials their stories and their triumphs at farming. Usually ends with celebratory dance or laugh. Farmers are honored and celebrated in Japan.
- Other: quarrels of traveling merchants, *ichiba* (tradesmen), craftsman, entertainers, plant spirits.
- *daimyo*: These plays feature a *daimyo* (regional lord) as *shite*. To avoid offending their patrons, these characters usually do not represent any real *daimyo* and those lords depicted are shown to be minor, possibly former, and maybe fraudulent. Often a *daimyo* sends Tarō'kaja on an errand to fetch item or a new employee and he, of course, messes it up. Occasionally more than one *daimyo* will meet and quarrel with each other.
- **Tarō'kaja**. Unlike the above, the foolish servant serves as *shite* and these are some of the most well-known, common, and popular plays in the *kyōgen* library. A master of a house or small plot of land employs the foolish but kind hearted Tarō'kaja who messes up every task and is often chased off in a run at the end. Sometimes he is joined by other equally inept servants. Tarō'kaja is never malicious (even if tricky) and can show great affection and respect for his master even if inadvertently giving him grief. Also called *shōmyō* plays as small landowner can be used to describe the master (*ado*) and how he's even lower than the *kyōgen daimyo*.
- *muko* (groom / son-in-law).
 - *muko iri* (first ceremonial visit). Based on a medieval custom of a groom making a formal visit to home of his new father-in-law. This is celebrated as a once-in-a-lifetime occasion but the humor stems from groom being inexperienced and nervous about making a good impression, often leading to misunderstanding.
 - *muko tori* (choosing a son-in-law). A wealthy man is trying to find (or trick) someone into marrying his daughter.
 - *fūfu* (married couples). A couple who has been married for awhile gets into a conflict with the bride's father. Some of these could easily be in below category.
- *onna* (women). Though in most Japanese literature women are often portrayed as weaker gender, in *kyōgen* women are usually show to be strong, forceful, and fearful.
 - **Aged nuns**. These are the only *kyōgen* with a *shite* female character (more common in *nō*). The nuns (often in a group) have to deal with some trouble.
 - **Married couple**. A couple, young or old, are often bickering or having some disagreement. Sometimes the husband has to put up with foolish wife and other times wife deals with an obstinate husband. Several contain theme of the husband trying to leave his wife but the wife tricking him into staying faithful.
 - *shūjo* (ugly women) / *mōshi-zuma* (bride searching). A man tries to find a bride (praying to the gods usually) but discovers the potential bride to be too ugly for him.
- *oni* (demon). Contrary to *onna* plays, demons in *kyōgen* are foolish and not terrifying. Some may still try to act like sinister and fearsome creatures but fail to do so. Others are actually kind-hearted and just misunderstood.
 - **Enma**. As the king of hell, Enma is usually trying to capture new souls (his numbers are down) but winds up being tricked and often chased off by his own demons.

- **yamabushi** (warrior priests). Based on actual real-life *yamabushi*, followers of an offshoot of Tantric Buddhism but developed unique traits by adopting local folk lore and elements of Shinto. They spent their days wandering the lands (often the rural mountainous villages) to chant and give incantation blessings to those in need (and often those who could pay). They wore grandiose and pompous clothing and often acted fearsome (as they had some warrior skills) but their spells did not always work so they become objects of ridicule. In *kyōgen* they are pompous and braggart and either end up being clueless or their spells backfire and make the situation worse.
- **shukke** (priests). Japan has a rich religious evolution and many sincere priests; however many other men begrudgingly became priests when they failed at their original career goals while others pretended to be traveling priests in order to take money from people. Many *kyōgen* plays features priests who are disgruntled, immoral, or shysters.
 - **Acolyte**. This well-meaning acolyte of an experienced (and sometimes soon-to-retire) priest will mess up every task given to the annoyance of his mentor who struggles to keep his discipline.
- **zatō** (blind men). Throughout Japan's history, many blind men became performers as well as performing priests, possibly including the earliest religious music. In *kyōgen*, blind men are often mistreated by both family and strangers by being teased, swindled, and even beaten. And though they become seemingly worse off, the fact that the blind man is still happy and virtuous in the end shows he is better than those who wronged him. Actors often actually blindfolded.
- **zō** (miscellaneous) or **atsume** (group). These plays are not any lessor in quality and many are highly loved with some requiring great skill to stage. These plays can include bandits, living plants and objects, with complex group choreography.
 - **Mai kyōgen** (dance *kyōgen*). The *kyōgen* representation of the *mugen* (phantasmal) *nō* plays. These feature a wandering priest (*waki*) discussing a legend or historical episode with a local. As in *nō*, he then meets the ghost or the legend in person for song or dance. Some are direct parodies of *nō* plays, taking the epic story and mimicking it with non-legendary beings in mundane situations. One example took a famous *nō* play about the tragic end to a great warrior and retold as the trials of a cicada.

The Joy of Laughter

As stated above, Zeami believed *kyōgen* should evoke pleasant laughter. However, many plays contain scenes and human so hilarious and ludicrous audiences may erupt in thunderous laughter that would Uzume proud and rival the best farces from other cultures. Still, *kyōgen* has an aesthetic to be more subdued, encouraging joyfulness.

The *waki* ceremonial plays and many others use felicitous words and encourage peace and harmony even amidst buffoonery. This is often generated by a dance to sooth and amuse, even if the end is still chaotic. Drinking party scenes are said to have a similar effect.

Most plays use some form of wordplay. *Shūka* is a style of wordplay originated from *waka* and *renga* poetry and is dependent upon double entendre jokes or puns and as well as used for riddles. Double entendre is also employed when characters confuse one thing for another as base for the overall plot. Onomatopoeic parodies of chants (especially for *yamabushi* and priests)

and sound effects (especially for servants) are funny and amusing. And sometimes actual *renga* is used as linked-verse poetry in plots of plays such as a battle of wits between characters.

Many *kyōgen* focus their humor on the comedy of being human (even for non-human beings). Characters will ridiculous and outlandish claims and act in extremely nonsensical manners.

Though overall *kyōgen* did not directly poke fun at society (presumably because its patronage was the state itself), quite often elements of satire are visible. Minor *daimyo* and small land owners are shown to be more egotistical than their status would suggest. Disgraced priests are highlighted. Conflict and disagreement between Buddhism and Shinto is shown and acted out in humorous ways.



The Fortified Beard from Old Noh and Kyogen Illustrations from the Early Edo Era

While most *kyōgen* feature the common occurrences of daily life (even if ludicrously exaggerated), some are instead surrealistic and absurd. Spirits of flora and fauna appear to converse, hold court, or do battle. Stylized dancing can become the story's climax and conclusion. Trivial creatures enact epic legends.

Some *kyōgen* are not very funny (especially to modern and foreign audiences) and may even seem like they may focus on sorrows (such as blindness, age, failure, marital strife). However, in doing so they also highlight the aspects of hope and the warmth of life, bringing about a joy from the audience.

Sharing the Stage: Acting the *Kyōgen*

For all its history, *kyōgen* is typically performed alongside *nō*. As such, they both share the same stage and many of the same customs. The *nō-kyōgen* stage evolved from Shinto shrines, especially sacred dance shrines. All stages, even if inside a larger complex, still possess a roof to establish the stage as its own entity. However, it is kept open with no curtains or walls so the audience will feel connected to the action and the actors, so much that the audience can even see the players in the moments before entering stage and the moments after exiting.

The roof is held by four pillars though these posts are also important to the art, helping the actors mark their entrances and dialogues. Typically, the *shite* starts at the pillar of the same name as he is entering stage and continues past the immediate downstage pillar to the *waki* pillar on stage right. When depicting traveling, the actors will follow this route and usually return directly to the *shite* pillar in a straight line (while also commenting on their journey as a long trek can be expressed in mere steps and seconds). The pillars are also sometimes used to represent objects such as trees, temples, mountains, and walls and occasionally an actor stretch outside of them to show obstacles between himself and another actor.

The upstage right triangle between the *waki* pillar and *shite* pillar is called *yin* and typically sees little action; it's become custom for an actor sitting in the *yin* part of the stage to not be considered part of the current scene. Stage right is where the chorus sits though seldom used in *kyōgen*. Drummers and the flute player sit upstage of the action though again not as

common in *kyōgen* as in *nō*. At the rear of the stage painted on the back panel is a *kagami-ita*, a painting of a sacred pine tree.

A unique feature to the stage is the *hashigakari*, a narrow bridgeway to leads from upstage left back to the actors' green room. Like the stage is too is roofed and open so the audience can view. Typically it is just a passageway for the actors but some plays will use the bridge, including shysters plotting “out of sight” and to represent extreme and frantic travel.



Top left: Hiroaki Ohta from National Noh Theatre (the-noh.com). Top right: Stage at Sasayama Kasuga Shrine (<http://www.kippo.or.jp/>). Bottom left: Stage at Itsukushima Shrine (<http://www.miyajima-wch.jp/>). Bottom right: (<http://w00.middlebury.edu/>).



Nō-kyōgen stage, Hiraizumi, Iwate: photography by Joshua Powell

Behind the Masks: Human and Inhuman

Like *nō*, *kyōgen* employs face masks but for fewer characters. The masks are usually rigid and cover the actor's entire face – though nothing more (often not covering the chin, sides of cheeks, or hair). Whereas almost every *nō* play has masked characters, in *kyōgen* masks are typically reserved for inhuman characters (such as gods, demons, and animals) and occasionally for the very old. Most female characters are maskless (with long strips of cloth hanging from the head to denote long hair) but when the play needs a woman of excess cuteness or age masks may be utilized.



Buaku

Foolish *oni*
(demons and goblins)



Oto

Plump/ugly
women,
goddesses or
Buddha



Usobuki

Spirits of
insects, plants,
or fish



Hakuzōsu

Buddhist
monk
disguise for a
fox



Saru

A monkey



Byakko

A *kitsune* – a
fox or fox spirit
in true form

Simple Props and Elaborate Costumes

Real objects are quite used for the props but certain stylization has occurred. A fan is considered a *kyōgen* actor's greatest prop; it can be used as a fan for all dances but also folded it can be a whip, hammer, saw, knife, swords, or other weapons and tools and while open can be markers, pitchers, cups, shields, doors, targets, and more. Similarly, the *kazura oke* is a cylindrical black lacquered box that acts as stool, a sugar container, and a persimmon tree and its lid can be used as a wine cup.

Costumes in *kyōgen* are elaborate and beautiful. Few characters are wealthy so their costumes may be more subdued than the best in *nō* but *daimyo* and other rich men will have ludicrous and pompous attires. *Yamabushi* costumes are inspired by their real life counterparts but exaggerated. Female characters did not typically wear women's clothing as the fake long hair served to identify. Personified animals and plants still wore typical-style Japanese clothing. Many costumes were works of art on their own, often with fantastic illustrations, designs, or scenes printed or painted on the fabric.

Most *nō* had a complex and captivating transformation requiring an adapt costume change off stage. *Kyōgen* characters typically stayed in the same outfit the entire play and if in disguise would often dress themselves in view of the audience as their character.



Ebisu and Bishamon from Old Noh and Kyogen Illustrations from the Early Edo Era

The Laughter Lives On

Both *nō* and *kyōgen* enjoyed success and patronage from the ruling and wealthy classes for several centuries. In more recent time, newer styles such as *kabuki* drew attention away from the older arts (though were often influenced). Western interest in classic Japanese theatre (especially comparing *nō* to European opera) so a revival in Japan. Today, *nō-kyōgen* can be seen on stages across Japan in productions and acting styles very close to what it was centuries ago, often by actors that have inherited an unbroken lineage from the rise of the art.

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