January 2017

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Recommended Citation

Sheppard, W. Anthony (2017) "Centennial Reflections at the New York Japan Society: *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (1916) and *At the Hawk's Well* (1916)," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.34068/IYS.01.02.04>

Available at: <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/iys/vol1/iss2/5>

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**CENTENNIAL REFLECTIONS AT THE NEW YORK
JAPAN SOCIETY: CERTAIN NOBLE PLAYS OF JAPAN
(1916) AND AT THE HAWK'S WELL (1916)**

W. Anthony Sheppard

The year 1916 proved highly significant in the life and career of W. B. Yeats. In addition to the momentous impact of the Easter Rising, Yeats published the highly influential *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (hereafter, *CNPJ*), a collection of Japanese Noh plays translated by Ernest Fenollosa, and “chosen and finished” by Ezra Pound, for which Yeats provided an extensive and personal introduction. Yeats also premiered *At the Hawk's Well* in 1916, the first of his “plays for dancers” inspired by Japanese Noh. The centennial of these two major works of intercultural theater, and their continuing influence, was marked in Fall 2016 by the Japan Society in New York City with an exhibition, performances, lectures, gallery talks, workshops, and publications. At the center of this centennial celebration was the theater piece and installation entitled *At Twilight (After W. B. Yeats' Noh Reincarnation)* by the British artist Simon Starling.

Much of Yeats's introduction to *CNPJ* is devoted to discussion of what Noh has to offer modern Irish theater and how he has created a new theatrical form inspired by this exotic model. He states that these particular Noh plots seem to mirror Irish legends and that Noh has inspired him to invent “a form of drama, distinguished, indirect and symbolic, and having no need of mob or press to pay its way—an aristocratic form.” The routes of cultural transmission leading from Noh theater to Yeats's “plays for dancers” is as fascinating as it is circuitous, for Yeats never directly experienced Noh himself. The cross-cultural encounters leading to the publication of *CNPJ* may be traced back to the celebrated American zoologist Edward Sylvester Morse, who lived in Japan for extended periods from 1877 to 1883 and served as a distinguished professor in the Imperial University at Tokyo. In January of 1883 Morse began a series of lessons in Noh singing—becoming the first American (to my knowledge) to study any form of Japanese music performance. Like Morse, Ernest Fenollosa hailed from Salem, Massachusetts. With Morse's encouragement, Fenollosa arrived in Japan in 1878 to serve as a Professor of Political Economy and Philosophy. Fenollosa ended up becoming the premier American authority on Japanese art, serving as the director of the Imperial Museum in Tokyo and the Curator of Oriental Art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. In 1879 Fenollosa met former President Ulysses S. Grant who was on a goodwill tour of

Japan. Grant famously enjoyed a demonstration of Noh theater, allegedly urging the Japanese to preserve the art form and sparking Fenollosa's own interest in Japanese music and theater. In his study of Noh singing, Fenollosa literally picked up where Morse had left off—taking over Morse's lessons when the scientist departed for the United States in February 1883. Posthumously, through his literary executor Ezra Pound, and with the crucial endorsement of Yeats, Fenollosa became the primary catalyst for the later Euro-American modernist interest in Japanese theater and poetry with the publication of *CNPJ*.¹

It is clear in the introduction to *CNPJ* that Noh inspired a new conception of theater for both Yeats and Pound, a ritualistic approach that featured non-realistic and simple stage setting, the use of masks for main characters, and the importance of minimal musical accompaniment and intoned text. Yeats's four Noh-inspired "plays for dancers" consist of *At the Hawk's Well* (1916), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), *The Dreaming of the Bones* (1919), and *Calvary* (1920). *At the Hawk's Well* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer* form part of Yeats's cycle of plays devoted to the legends of the Irish hero Cuchulain. In *At the Hawk's Well*, set in "the Irish Heroic Age," Cuchulain seeks the well of immortality. He meets an Old Man at the well who warns him of the futility of his quest. Cuchulain is transfixed by the Hawk-like Guardian of the Well and misses his opportunity to drink from the magic water. He then embarks on a battle with the fierce mountain women and thus begins his heroic and tragic destiny. This play is based loosely on the plot of *Yoro*, translated by Fenollosa but not selected for publication by Pound, in which a young man seeks an immortal water for the benefit of his Emperor.² The "noble plays of Japan" assisted Yeats in his efforts to invent an "aristocratic" and ritualistic theater that could call up the heroic ancestral spirits of ancient Ireland for an exclusive and receptive audience composed of "the right people" in the privacy of the aristocratic drawing rooms of his patrons.³

In a nod to the original aristocratic salon performance context of *At the Hawk's Well*, as well as to Noh's origins as a form of outdoor theater, Starling's *At Twilight* premiered on the grounds of the stately Holmwood House in Glasgow in August 2016, produced by The Common Guild. Created in collaboration with the "theatre maker" Graham Eatough, *At Twilight* is a densely layered and self-reflective piece, which incorporates sections of *At the Hawk's Well* in alternation with lecture-format material on the relationship between Yeats and Pound and on the historical context of the original play's creation. In a sense, *At Twilight* functions much like a Noh ghost play, calling to the present major cultural figures from the past in a highly framed dramatic structure. Two actors assume the roles of Starling/Yeats/Old Man and Graham/Pound/Young Man (Cuchulain), thereby conflating the symbolic drama of *At the Hawk's Well* with the competitive relationship between Yeats and Pound and the contemporary collaboration between Starling and Graham, each of whom presumably

FIGURE 1: The Yeats and Old Man masks in Starling's installation.
Photo by Richard P. Goodbody.

attempted to gain artistic immortality at the spring of Japanese Noh.⁴ The two actors also assume the masks of other historical, fictional, and symbolic figures associated with the Yeats artistic circle and the First World War period as *At Twilight* imaginatively explores the creative context and premiere of *At the Hawk's Well*. The two actors end the play by donning an Eeyore costume—a rather whimsical reference to the fact that Stone Cottage, which Yeats and Pound shared during the creation of *CNPJ* and *At the Hawk's Well*, was located in Ashdown Forest, the inspiration for the One Hundred Acre Wood of A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* books which appeared ten years later.⁵ The role of the Guardian of the Well/Hawk is represented by an onscreen dancer: a practical solution that also projects the magical, transient, and utterly separate nature of the Hawk. Sections of Yeats's play and the lecture material interrupt each other and then repeatedly pick up from where they left off. The Graham character, eager to see his production of *At the Hawk's Well* proceed, is clearly annoyed by the Starling character's didactic interruptions and declares "I think that's pretty clear now Simon, it's all in the play"—which, of course, is "in the play" as well. The play and exhibition catalog have been published by The Common Guild and the Japan Society in a very handsome format that resembles the design of the 1916 publication of *CNPJ*.⁶

The Japan Society exhibit, *Simon Starling: At Twilight (After W. B. Yeats' Noh Reincarnation)*, which was on view from 14 October 2016 to 15 January

2017, provides another layer to Starling's work, taking us intellectually and historically behind the scenes of the making of *At the Hawk's Well* and *At Twilight*. The installation consists of an antechamber, two primary rooms connected by a transitional mirrored room displaying costumes from the Starling production, and a final room offering a documentary video of commentary and excerpts from the premiere of *At Twilight*. The installation suggests both aspects of violence and cultural reflection throughout. In the antechamber we encounter the two fencing rapiers employed by the Yeats and Pound characters in Starling's play, alluding to their artistic competition and to the fact that Pound attempted to teach the older poet how to fence during their time together at Stone Cottage. (Yeats's rapier was considerably frayed at the handle, perhaps suggesting his seniority.) We then enter a stunning and rather foreboding darkened large room in which are displayed the Noh-style masks of the various characters in *At Twilight*. These exquisite masks, made in collaboration with the Noh-mask artist Yasuo Miichi in Osaka, are dramatically hung from charred fragments of trees. We learn in the second main exhibition room that these sculptural stands were inspired both by a photograph of a First World War wasteland and by Goya's *The Horrors of War*. The layers of literary influence and networks of collaboration in both Starling's and Yeats's plays are therefore mirrored in these masks. For example, the "Michio Ito" Noh-style mask is made from paulownia wood, as are many traditional Noh masks, and is based on a 1926 mask-like bronze sculpture of Ito by Isamu Noguchi. The "Young Man" and "Old Man" masks also employ Noh mask carving techniques and materials and are based on Edmund Dulac's masks for the original production of *At the Hawk's Well*, which, in turn, had been inspired by Dulac's understanding of Noh theater.

Serving as a backdrop to the theatrical installation of these masks in this first room is a large screen on which is projected the Guardian of the Well's dance from the production of *At Twilight*, thus suggesting that we have entered onto the stage itself. The dance, choreographed by Javier De Frutos in association with the Scottish Ballet, was inspired in part by still photographs from the 1916 production of Yeats's play. The instrumental music for the Hawk's dance, composed by the Chicago-based jazz and film composer Joshua Abrams and Natural Information Society, has distant echoes of Indonesian gamelan and Chinese opera percussion, rather than featuring anything Japanese in style. In general, the minimal musical accompaniment for *At Twilight* proves effective and is certainly in the same spirit as Dulac's music for the original production of *At the Hawk's Well*. In both works, the few musicians are visible on stage as they are in Noh theater.

The second large room functions conceptually as a "backstage" scholarly exhibit to Starling's entire project. Upon entering this brightly lit exhibition

FIGURE 2: Overview of the “backstage” room in the exhibit. Photo by Richard P. Goodbody.

FIGURE 3: Simon Starling’s “mind map” in the installation. Photo by Richard P. Goodbody.

space we are momentarily disoriented by wall-length mirrors at either end of the room, suggesting a potentially infinite number of connections between all of the art objects, photographs, and manuscripts on display and extending far beyond the confines of the exhibit. (These mirrors might also allude to the backstage “mirror room” in Noh theaters where the *shite* actor contemplates his reflection as he dons the mask.) A central focus is a large scale drawing, a diagram or “mind map” that Starling created to ponder multiple cultural roots and branches connected to Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well*. For example, Starling draws connections not only between the blasted tree limbs

supporting the masks of *At Twilight*, images of the First World War, and Goya's depiction of war's aftermath, but also with the traditional pine-tree decoration in Noh theaters, the mythic Irish faerie trees, and the tree under which Vladimir and Estragon sit in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, noting that Beckett cited Yeats's play as a major influence.⁷ This room displays an astonishing number of objects and original documents associated with *At the Hawk's Well* and with Noh—in effect, realizing in three-dimensional space Starling's own “mind map” for *At Twilight*. We find Yeats's original letters to Edmund Dulac, on loan from the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, revealing the poet's concerns about how *At the Hawk's Well* would fare when presented in New York for the general public rather than for his ideal initiated audience. Constantin Brancusi's 1928 gleaming bronze abstract sculpted portrait of Nancy Cunard is also on display as it served as the model for the “Nancy Cunard” mask employed in *At Twilight*. (*At the Hawk's Well* premiered at the Cunard family home in London, and Pound and Cunard were intimately associated during this period.) Starling's installation and play are highly stimulating for any student of European modernism, though the content is not quite as revelatory in terms of uncovering cultural history and drawing connections as is implied, since these relationships and convergences are familiar to Yeats scholars.

Rather than producing Starling's play, the Japan Society presented the Tokyo-based Kita Noh school in performances of plays selected from *CNPJ* and from the second Fenollosa/Pound collection, ‘Noh’, or, *Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage of Japan*, which also appeared in 1916. The first program on 19 November offered a selection of highlights from five plays presented in different traditional formats, and the second evening featured complete performances of *Kayoi Komachi* and *Shojo-midare*. The selections appeared to have been made with the New York audience in mind, featuring dramatic battle scenes (as in *Kumasaka*, during which the audience audibly gasped in response to a stunning spinning leap) and comic episodes (as in a display of divine drunkenness in *Shojo*). The theater at the Japan Society is a very good size for Noh performances and is suitably transformed to include a reasonable semblance of the *hashigakari* entrance bridge, the four pillars, and the beautiful painted pine background of the Noh stage. Two video screens provided well-timed English translations. The generational depth of the Kita school was evident in these performances led by Japanese National Living Treasure Tomoeda Akiyo, whose own performance of an excerpt from *Tamura* without a mask was impressively intense. A workshop on Noh movement and instruments led by some of the younger members of the Kita company made absolutely clear the level of accomplishment required by Noh. When I found myself unable to produce almost any sound at all on the larger hand drum

FIGURE 4: The Kita Noh company performance at the Japan Society.
Photo courtesy of the Japan Society.

(the *otsutzumi*), the professional player told me not to feel discouraged since it had taken him three years of study before he had achieved a good tone on the instrument himself.

In the afternoon of the first performance Tomoeda Akiyo gave a brief gallery talk in the Starling exhibition where he singled out one Noh mask for particular praise, noting that it was perfectly installed with a slight downward tilt as it would be on an actor's face, thereby appearing alive and dramatic. In contrast, he felt that the other Noh masks in the gallery were displayed as mere lifeless objects. It was clear that Tomoeda viewed Starling's installation entirely through the eyes of an active performer. He pointed out that the photographs of the original Yeats production and the video of the Hawk's dance in *At Twilight* did not much resemble Noh movement, though he felt that both exhibited a clear depth of performance spirit. In a public conversation with me prior to the start of the first performance, Tomoeda related that he found performing new works, such as the various Noh versions of *At the Hawk's Well* based on Yeats's play, more challenging than performing traditional plays because there was less for him to draw on, and, therefore, new Noh works required him to assume a more creative role as an actor. He has played both the Old Man and the Hawk in Noh versions of *At the Hawk's Well* at various points in his career and

explained to the audience that Yeats's tale has been one of the most frequently performed in new Noh plays precisely because its symbolic plot holds something very basic and universal for all people.

Yeats concluded his introduction to *CNPJ* rather wistfully: "for though my writings if they be sea-worthy must put to sea, I cannot tell where they may be carried by the wind." Yeats's interest in Noh launched a cycle of global cross-cultural influence and inspiration, and I know of no more astonishing modernist example of this phenomenon than that represented by the flight patterns of *At the Hawk's Well*. Yeats's play owed much of its inspiration and subsequent voyages to the Japanese choreographer and dancer Michio Ito. Yeats celebrated Ito as the "tragic image that has stirred my imagination" and stated that Ito made *At the Hawk's Well* possible. Though Yeats and Pound turned to Ito as a primary source of information on Japanese Noh movement and production, Ito himself had little experience with traditional Japanese performance and, instead, was inspired by the modernist choreography of Nijinsky in Paris and Isadora Duncan in Berlin. By the time he met Pound in London in 1915 and began his professional dancing career, Ito was fully committed to the aesthetics of modern Euro-American dance. Following the 1916 premiere of Yeats's play, Ito left for the U.S. and went on to perform his own production of *At the Hawk's Well* at the Greenwich Village Theatre in New York in July 1918 with a new score by the famous Japanese composer Kosaku Yamada. Ito took this production to California in 1929 and to Japan in a 1939 performance. He returned to Japan for good in 1943, following his release from a Japanese-American internment camp. Ito had traveled around the globe and had inspired multiple writers, choreographers, and composers with elements of Japanese music, theater, and dance. Yeats's *At the Hawk's Well* was then adapted in 1949 as a Noh play, and it entered the Noh repertory as *Taka no Izumi*, as well as in several other versions, thus completing a most extraordinary circle of cross-cultural encounter, with further reflections appearing globally to this day.

Notes

1. For further discussion of Morse's and Fenollosa's study of Japanese Noh and of Fenollosa's attempts to transcribe Noh music, and Pound's omission of various orthographic details in his publication of Fenollosa's papers, see chapter 1 in my *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination* (forthcoming). Yeats probably first learned of Noh from the theater director and designer Edward Gordon Craig, perhaps by reading a 1910 issue of Craig's *The Mask*.
2. *Yoro* has been cited for decades as the model for *At the Hawk's Well*, starting with Richard Taylor's book in 1976; see Richard Taylor, *The Drama of W. B. Yeats: Irish Myth and the Japanese Nō* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).
3. For further discussion of the influence of Japanese Noh on Yeats as well as on the works of such figures as Bertolt Brecht, Paul Claudel, Benjamin Britten, and Harry Partch, see my

Revealing Masks: Exotic Influences and Ritualized Performance in Modernist Music Theater (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

4. I should note that Starling had already brought together Noh theater and masks and British artistic modernism in his 2010 film and installation *Project for a Masquerade (Hiroshima)*.
5. On the relationship between Yeats and Pound during this period, see James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
6. Simon Starling, *At Twilight* (Dent-de-Leone and New York: The Common Guild and the Japan Society, 2016).
7. See Katharine Worth, *The Irish Drama of Europe from Yeats to Beckett* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978), chaps. 7 and 10.