

Zeami Breathing

by

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"The word kagura [god-given entertainment] employs [a] character [which] stands for the word 'god' and consists of the radical ... which means 'sacred' and the root ... which means 'to speak.' ... [B]ecause of the original meaning of the root ... 'to speak,' sarugaku also means 'to speak of pleasure.'"

The significance of breathing bursts upon various segments of the human race from time to time -- showing up in the fields of ecstasy, therapy, heresy, medicine, and performance for instance -- and since breathing has been my preoccupation for many years I have been curious about some of my confreres. I first heard Nô drama in London in the 60s, and have, at intervals, explored it ever since. Zeami, who performed, taught, and wrote in the 1400s, was not published in Japan until the early 20th century, and was translated into English soon thereafter. His conclusions about breath and voice confound current accepted thought. Perhaps we can persuade the new millennium to take another look?

Speaking of sacred pleasure, an actor's voice work encourages him or her to take serious pleasure in speaking. This self-aware pleasure in the actions and rhythms of the performer's own diaphragm and mouth are part of how an audience takes pleasure in listening. The sensation of the vibrations of the voice in the performer's body and the sensation of the act of aware, presence-giving breathing help to bring an audience to a kinesthetic sense of their own immediacy. Zeami's available writings on breath and the voice, and listening to Nô vocal performance are also pleasurable.

Zeami writes of the "Two Arts" of Nô: Chant and Dance. While they are interdependent he clearly puts Chant, or the voice, first. He writes that Nô is "an art founded on the mastery of the breath" (Rimer & Masakazu: 204. All subsequent page references are to Rimer & Masakazu). The (invisible) breath, according to Zeami, is the Bones of the Chant (utai), the melody is the Flesh of the Chant, and the beauty of the vocal tone, the Skin of the Chant (69-70). The elements of Skin, Flesh, and Bone are also to be equated with, respectively, the art that comes from Sight, the art that comes from Sound, and the art that comes from the heart. So in discussing breath, we are discussing the Bones of the Flesh.

Zeami's references to breath, in the treatises available in English translation, are infrequent but significant, for in context of the generally hidden and mysterious aspects of the Nô the entire structure of the performance depends on deep level (Bone) skills.

Breath is, as Zeami indicates, deep knowledge of Voice. Without the involvement of breath any attempt at reproducing the vocal tones or melodies of Nô are the kind of superficial imitation of results that is not a true monomane (artistic imitation) and could not result in the awareness and expertise that Zeami outlines. While the Sound of the Nô does not represent the heart in the above schema, "it is poetry that moves the heart.' This maxim applies to all kinds of poetry and to the chant of the Nô as well" (172). So it might be said that the Chant is the art that comes from the heart, since, too, the heart is one of the five places that the breath comes from, according to Zeami (77). And the management of breathing and the energy acquired and used as a result of breathing is what gives Nô its depth and its "novelty" (newness or presence) through the focus and freedom that such training gives an actor.

Focus and Freedom

Zeami states that Nô that "succeed[s] through Sound shows from the beginning a very serious atmosphere" (100). An actor cannot "skip" by trying to imitate a more accomplished actor. An external imitation of the Nô is of the Function of the Nô only rather than the Substance. Substance and Function are compared to a flower and its odor (71). One recognizes Substance with the spirit, and Function with the eyes (or ears or nose). Function can never become Substance, and an actor should never attempt to imitate Function, which is external. Only Substance can be imitated, and from it Mood, or artistic elegance, "flows like a breeze."

The focused quality that an actor achieves in this way is Perfect Fluency, which is an internalization of all necessary skills by an actor, for "[i]f an actor has mastered the means to realize his text and to fuse music and movement, he will have learned how to give a strong performance and how to give that performance the quality of Grace as well." Even beyond this level is Perfect Freedom, a strategy for experienced actors which allows for the mixing in of various "impure elements," a kind of breaking of the rules.

Training

But rules must be learned before they can be effectively broken. Actors should study the Chant in different ways at different ages:

Age Seven: " . . . he should be left free to perform [chanting, etc.] in his own manner, according to his own desires. . . He should only be taught dancing, movement, and the chant . . . not . . . Role Playing."

Age of Eleven or Twelve: "From this age onward, the voice begins to achieve its proper pitch. . . A boy's appearance . . . will produce the sensation of Grace. And his voice at this age will always sound charming as well. With the appearance and voice of a child, a boy actor, if he shows skill in his performance, can hardly give a bad impression. Still, this Flower is not the

true Flower. It is only a temporary bloom. . . The words of his chanting [must be] distinct."

From the age of Seventeen or Eighteen: " . . . since the actor's voice is changing, he loses his first Flower . . . the actor's will falters . . . he feels embarrassed and discouraged. As concerns training . . . the actor must . . . retire to his own house, and, in a pitch comfortable to him, practice his chanting, using appropriate techniques for morning and evening. . . Although the pitch of the individual voice at this age may vary, it usually lies between the oshiki and the hanshiki. [untranslated in the original] If the actor tries to regulate the pitch too strictly [by forcing], he risks getting into bad habits with his posture. Then too, this may be the cause of damage to the actor's voice in later life."

From Twenty-four to Twenty-five: "The limits of the actor will be fixed by his training and self-discipline. His voice will by now have settled, and his body will have matured. These are the strong points required in our art: voice and physical appearance" (7).

A schedule for training, which continues throughout an actor's life, is also found in the descriptions of the Nine Levels (120-122) in which Zeami's language seems visual and metaphorical in the extreme, yet the skills inherent here apply in very practical ways to both of the Two Arts. Basic mastery of the form of the Chant occurs at the sixth level when the actor discovers the True Way of performance. This will expand through Broad Mastery to the art of the True Flower, when he must become accomplished in his playing of the Three Role Types and develop Perfect Fluency in the specific vocal patterns of each role. Beyond this point he achieves an ease which represents the Flower of Tranquillity, from which he rises to the level of the Flower of Profundity where his vocal performances "manifest the beauty that surpasses the difference between adorned and unadorned" (123) and here he achieves peerless Grace. It is above this level that descriptive words are no longer possible, "where the workings of the spirit and their manifestation in performance can no longer be divided" (123). This is Peerless Charm. After this, some actors, for their own amusement, will select the styles of the lowest three levels, but an actor should never start his training there, Zeami says, or he will never be able to rise to the higher levels.

Pitch (Frequency)

Zeami maintains that the breath is responsible for the pitch of the voice (74). Modern physicists and acousticians would disagree with this, yet in practice it is clear that the greater the sub-glottal pressure, the stronger the resistance by the arytenoids within the larynx needs to be, and this tightening, unless countered, stretches the vocal folds and forces the pitch upwards. Zeami is sensitive to the interplay of diaphragm and larynx in a way that modern more mechanistic thinking might not perceive. (At a Symposium of the Voice Foundation I heard a singing teacher deliver a paper on the

interconnectedness of the vibrato of the vocal folds and vibration at the diaphragm, which complex behavior he said was initiated by the diaphragm. He played an x-ray movie showing this link. Most otolaryngologists were dismissive of his position, but I found it clear and persuasive.)

Zeami insists on the importance of the physical workings of the breath, as far as he was able to describe them, and writes of the "five 'storages' and the breath that comes from them" (77-76). In the accompanying footnote these are described as "the heart, lungs, spleen, liver, and kidneys, [and t]he 'five notes' {kyu, sho, kaku, chi, and u} were thought to correlate with breath movements depending on the five internal organs." The "storages" also determine the five colorings, or timbres, which in turn are divided into "five tones" and "five modes. Three of these modes fall in the ritsu pitches and are referred to as sojo, oshiki, and ichi kocho, whereas hyojo and banshiki represent the two that lie in the ryo pitches. Mujo is a combination of ryo and ritsu pitches. When the voice is produced on the basis of these five 'storages' the entire body begins to move, and this movement becomes the genesis of the dance"(78). Chant is then, for Zeami, the origin of dance! And though the human voice is not usually the accompaniment, can one imagine modern dance without sound? Zeami says "[D]ancing is impossible without the strength of sound behind it" (79). For "both dancing and gesture are external skills"(90).

Zeami's "proper order" (a jo-ha-kyu) for the origin of the voice is "first, determining the pitch, second, preparing the breath, third, producing the voice." (74). Kyu, yin, and the ryo pitches are derived from an imitation of the female phoenix and are related to the Earth and the inhalation of breath. Sho, yang, and the ritsu pitches are derived from the male phoenix and are related to Heaven and the exhalation of breath (105). The patterned combination of these elements creates a balance of upper and lower into twelve pitches and five tones. This balancing of yin and yang Zeami describes as the essence of the Flower, and as the essential element in the success of all undertakings (19). "The Flower represents the principle that lies at the deepest recesses of our art . . . [t]he Flower of youthful beauty, the Flower of the voice, and the Flower of Grace."

Volume (Amplitude)

Grace and strength are contrasted with roughness and weakness, and all these elements are applicable to sound through the use of changes in sub-glottal breath pressure which creates variety of intensity or amplitude, and quality (as well as pitch). Zeami encourages subtlety by asking the actor to "unite" or identify with the role, vocally as well as with his movements, so that he will use the right amount of Grace in a rough role, and strength in a weak role. In general, however, Zeami does not seem much concerned with loudness. His actors would have had no problem with audibility because of the resonant nature of the Nô voice. Intensity and projection are not required when the whole body vibrates with sound.

Tone (Timbre) and the qualities of Speech Sounds (Articulation)

Strength and Grace appear also in the qualities of both sound and words:

Then, too, the slight differences in the sounds of the words in the text are most important: for example, words such as nabiki (waving or fluttering), fusu (to lie down), kaeru (to draw back), yoru (to come close), and so forth have a soft sound and seem of themselves to create a sense of gracefulness. On the other hand, words like otsuru (to fall down), kuzururu (to crumble), yabururu (to break), marobu (to knock down) have a strong sound and require forceful gestures. Thus it can be understood that the qualities referred to as strength and Grace are not totally distinct and separate but rise from a fidelity to the object of the role being portrayed, while weakness and roughness indicate a divergence from that ideal (48).

A thin, high voice is described as "vertical," and a thick, low voice as "horizontal" (105). And perhaps the qualities of "bear, tiger, and panther" (105) refer to tonality also. Effects may be heavy or light, and be clear or complex in sound (104) and the actor's voice must be able to express "so many different kinds of emotion - felicitation, yearning, love, pity, jealousy, wrath" (168). But these effects cannot be consciously imitated or visibly calculated, or they will not seem genuine (192-193).

With respect to correctness of pronunciation, Zeami's position is not rigid. He writes of final participles that "even if the pronunciation becomes altered to some extent, so long as the rhythm is correct, the problem is not a serious one," and "even if there should be some deviation in . . . pronunciation, there will be nothing disagreeable in the sound" (192-193). But "mistaken accents on such substantive words as nouns, verbs, and adjectives are harmful" (103). For "the beauty of the chant derives from the syllables and the words" (102) and they should be chanted "in a clear and correct manner" (102) and in accordance with the melody.

Rhythm and Rate (Duration)

Rhythm of speaking depends on breath, which requires concentration to be directed properly, and which results in emotional depth and calls forth empathy within the audience. Working with breath and time, an actor should "forget the voice and understand . . . the melody. Forget the melody and understand the pitch. Forget the pitch and understand the rhythm" (102).

The basic pattern of rhythm that informs Nô plays and their performance is that of jo-ha-kyu. Jo means "beginning," and beginnings should be simple, gentle, and easy to understand. Ha breaks the mood of jo, and brings greater complexity. Kyu, meaning "ending," is the final stage which is characterized by agitation (83-84). It is "[t]he fulfillment of jo, ha, and kyu [which] provides the spectators with a sense of novelty, and the creation of jo, ha, and kyu by the performers brings this phenomenon about" (138). And with regard to rhythm in speaking Zeami writes "As for my personal explanation of 'Pitch, Breath, Voice Production,' the jo can be said to be represented by

the stage of hearing the pitch and gathering in the breath. Ha is represented by pushing out the breath, and kyu by the production of voice itself"(139). The proper fulfillment of this rhythmic process gives rise to pleasure.

The rhythm of speaking, inherently based on breathing, should also inform the body's rhythms. Zeami says:

. . . [A] truly fine play involves gesture based on chanting. . . If the actor bases his chanting on his movements, he shows himself as a beginner. For an artist of experience movement will grow from the chant. . . In any aspect of life it can be said that our intentions give rise to various aspects of our behavior. It is through words that our intentions are expressed. In the case of the Nô, too, therefore, the chant provides the substance of which the movements of the actor serve as a function. This is because functions grow out of substance and not the other way around. Thus, at the time of an actual performance, the actor stresses the importance of the chant (45-46).

Again, Zeami writes of the primacy of the Chant with:

Actually the audience should first hear the Chant, then see the appropriate gesture afterwards, so that when they see what they have already understood, the satisfying sensation of a genuine union between the two images will be created in the moment of transition from one to the other . . . If the audience sees the motion of the sleeve before the concept of weeping is settled in their minds . . . the words will somehow seem left over, and the entire action will appear to be reduced (76).

Within post-romantic, naturalist, or post-modern theatre the words are indeed "left over," as actors nowadays are taught to play "Actions" and emphasize verbs, which makes it hard for an audience to know "what" is being talked about, or sometimes verbal meaning may be lost altogether. The text has lost its centrality within theatre, physicality (which for Zeami is the Skin, or most external aspect) of performance is stressed, and currently most Western actors do not care to work on their voices. But several later theatre mavericks such as Delsarte, taught that movements follow spoken words, Steiner's eurhythmy gives gesture to syllables, the Word precedes the actions of creation in the Judao-Christian tradition, the Natyashastra and Bon and Sanskrit performance theories hold syllables as sacred, and for Kashmiri Shaivism all things originate from sound. And when I visited Grotowski in Italy at his invitation in December 1996 to show him what I was doing with breathing and voice, it was clear that voice was then, at the end of a spectacular career, a central interest of his. We spoke of vibration as soul, as creation. The deep meaning, the hidden infrastructure, is also for Zeami in Substance, or sound, for which breath is the initiating energy. Inspiration denotes both an inhalation and a creative idea. Breathing is meaning. And respiration is identified with spirit, coming from the same Latin root.

Conclusion

To transcend "outward manifestation" and "succeed through the Heart" it is necessary, Zeami tells us, to "forget the specifics of a performance and examine the whole. Then forget the performance and examine the actor. Then forget the actor and examine his inner spirit. Then, forget that spirit, and you will grasp the nature of the Nô" (120).

Breath, or the inner spirit, is that essential element that makes each performance new, immediate, and present, as I understand the meaning of "novelty," rather than, as the preface suggests, novel in the sense of unusual or different, as though some original piece of business or intentional change in vocal delivery were necessary. "Novelty" is the bringing to life, moment to moment, of a performance. Without breath we are all brain-dead, or only "in our heads" without the immediacy of our feelings, as both emotions and physical sensations.

Within the inspired performance of a Nô play this intense and concentrated presencing of the human voice through its breath energy serves as an example for a fully realized life. "The performances serve as prayers for the peace of the whole country," Zeami writes. Related to Zen Buddhist practice (which includes breathing practice), and to an intensely spiritual view of community, history, and life itself, Nô performances, especially their sound, are purely performative, always in profound relationship with the audiences, always new (novel) and always seeking to be more dimensional in ways which only the performers fully experience. The "interior spiritual power" that Zeami sees as a necessity for the actor is the seed that gives rise to the Flower of the Nô, just as Non-being can manifest itself as Being. The actor becomes "one in spirit with the vessel of nature and achieve[s] in the depths of the art of the Nô an ease of spirit that can be compared to the boundlessness of that nature itself, thus to achieve at last the Flower of Peerless Charm" (119). This state of presence is pure experience, and writing it is unrealizable. Zeami constantly notes that his concepts are impossible to describe in words and that his metaphorical discourse is intended for a private audience of cognoscenti. He advocates oral transmission of his secret knowledge of the Flower.

In explaining the Flower (hana) with reference to the chant, Zeami says that even though a beginner may perform the music correctly, the "gifted performer is one who will truly grasp the essence of the 'inner music' or the 'Flower within the Flower'" by infusing the chant with new feeling and "even though he changes nothing, he will use anew all his old arts, color the music and his voice in a skillful manner, using a level of concentration he has never felt before. . ." (54). He insists on the secrecy of the Flower within the Nô, and compares it to the strategy that a military commander might use to surprise his enemy (59).

Zeami's theories are descriptive of practice, and are not abstract, however seemingly metaphorical, for they are based in experience (the awareness, feelings, and actions) of the body, as is spirituality (as contrasted with autocratic religion or hallucinatory mysticism). A good (Nô) performer's experiences have no exact names within the

normal discourse of a materialist society: they are at the "first level of the Flower of Peerless Charm." Yet Zeami's desire to bring such experience, at least through encouraging aware reception, to all types of audiences disproves charges of elitism. The ("vertical") rewards of aware breathing and sounding are available to anyone who takes the time to practice just as the ("horizontal") rewards of reading and writing are, for " . . . mastery seems to depend on the actor's own state of self-understanding. . . Real discernment of the nature of the differences between external and interior understanding forms the basis of true mastery" (90). The secrecy that surrounds those skills of which Zeami writes is not because of their esotericism but because they can only be thoroughly taught through oral transmission. And it may be expected from any serious artist that, just as Zeami did, he desires to achieve greater skill levels and also that he exhorts his family to keep his secrets for their own artistic, and commercial, benefit. And "where there are secrets the Flower exists. Where there are no secrets the Flower does not exist"(60).

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