“Critical Perspectives on the Noh play *Izutsu*”

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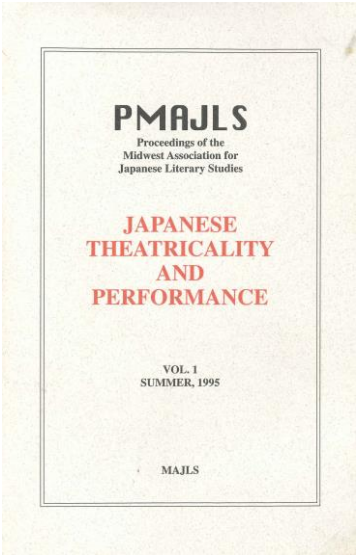

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE NOH PLAY *IZUTSU*

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Tsutsui izutsu...Perhaps no line in the noh repertoire is as readily recognizable as this one which opens the final scene of the play *Izutsu*. The play draws on material from the Heian classic *Ise monogatari* ("Tales of Ise"), whose 125 episodes have long been supposed to be about the poet Ariwara no Narihira (825-880). The lead actor, or *shite*, plays the role of Ariwara no Narihira's wife, referred to variously as "*Ki no Aritsune no musume* ("the daughter of Ki no Aritsune"), *izutsu no onna* ("the woman of the well-curb"), and *hito matsu onna* ("the woman waiting for someone"). Narihira is that someone, although he does not figure as a character in the play. Instead, the woman appears as a ghost to reveal her attachment to the memory of Narihira and their relationship.

The events of the story have long since faded into the distant past, but this ghost remains, leaving us with the sense that her waiting and her longing are endless. Waiting is also an important motif in her past life with Narihira. As the play unfolds, we learn that he had had another female companion some distance away, and had routinely absented himself for that reason. However, when Narihira overheard his wife intone a poem expressing her worry about his safety enroute to see her rival, he was moved by the purity of her affection, and ended the other relationship.

The expression "*izutsu no onna*" also reflects a central motif of the play, keyed to the following poem from the twenty-third episode of *Ise monogatari*:[1]

Tsutsu izutsu	By the round well-curb
izutsu ni kakeshi	our heights we used to measure
maro ga take	now that little boy
oinikerashi na	has outgrown the marks you made
imo	since last
mizaru ma ni to	he came to meet with you.

Narihira and *"Ki no Aritsune no musume"* had been childhood playmates. The poem is alluding to how the two had measured their height against the well-curb as children. In the play, the poem is used to evoke the tenderness and steadfastness of the young woman's feeling toward her husband.

Tenderness and longing climax in the aforementioned final scene of the play, which has the woman's ghost put on her dead husband's robe and cap, move to the well-curb captured in the poem (the bare outline suggested by a framelike prop at downstage center with a spray of pampas grass attached). Then she gazes into it intently, as pictured below.

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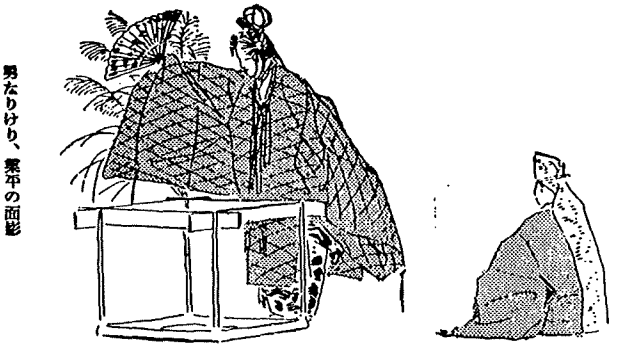
[1] Translation from Kenneth K. Yasuda, *A Prototypical Nō Wig Play: "Izutsu"*, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40.2 (December 1980), 449. Hereafter, translations of the text of *Izutsu* will be Yasuda's unless otherwise indicated. For original, see Yokomichi Mario and Omote Akira, ed., *Yōkyoku shū* v. 1, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei 40 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1960), 278.

Although the material in this play derives from *Ise monogatari*, the original tale does not refer to the characters of the two lovers by name. The casting of the two as Narihira and the daughter of Ki no Aritsune originates in medieval commentaries on the work. See Itō Masayoshi, *Yōkyoku shū*, v. 1, Shinchō Nihon Koten Shūsei 57 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1983), 403-404.



We watch her gaze at the image. We contemplate her contemplating it. *Warenagara natsukashiya* ('though it is myself, how it fills me with longing'[2]) are the lines that bring this moment to its close and underscore the texture of her contemplation. We become aware that she embodies a dual and co-dependent awareness: that the image in the well is Narihira, but that, then again, it is not.

Izutsu is by Zeami Motokiyo (1363?-1443?). Zeami seems to have had confidence in the work, for, in *Sarugaku dangi*, he assigns *Izutsu* to the grade of the "uppermost flower."[3] Records show that the play has been performed ever since. Today it continues to be staged regularly. Moreover, in the last several decades, *Izutsu* has received much critical and scholarly attention, assumedly due to its status as a case study in both the dramaturgy and the performance of Zeami's

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2 My translation. Original in *Yōkyoku shū*, I, 279.

3 The term that Zeami uses is *jōka* (characters for "up"/"above", and "flower." Original text in Omote Akira and Katō Shūichi, ed., *Zeami, Zenchiku*, Nihon Shisō Taikei 24 (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1974), 286. I have followed the interpretation of this term that is offered in the headnote on p. 286. It states that *jōka* refers to the uppermost of the nine grades of artistry (*kyūi*) posited by Zeami.

mugen (dream) play.[4]

Yet, Zeami lived 600 years ago, and, although styles of performance have varied, the language of the *Izutsu* text is believed to have remained virtually the same. One cannot help but wonder how the performance of a medieval text, no matter how fine, can hold up through such a long "run." If the play is the thing, then surely innumerable repetitions of it must sate audiences eventually. How can *Izutsu* continue to speak to audiences today? What kinds of standards come to bear in appreciation of the play in performance that might shed light on its continued popularity? To begin to explore these questions, this paper will look at a sampling of critical reviews of performances of *Izutsu* in this century. Although the samples below are very limited, they may serve to suggest some of the ways in which noh is viewed by one segment of today's audiences, the professional critic.

The review of a noh play is not limited to any particular aspect of a performance, of course. However, there are certain topics which can be anticipated. Most of them have to do with how the lead performer (or '*shite*') chooses to treat established precedents in the performance tradition of the play. One level of interpretation involves the choice of mask and of costume, for instance. Another important consideration is whether the play is being performed in the standard format, or whether a variant performance (*kogaki*) has been chosen. Also important is how certain key phrases in the text are rendered by the *shite*. For the mostpart, this third type of assessment involves description of how established choreographed modules of movement called *kata*, are matched to these phrases. Critics

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[4] Yasuda's study is a case in point. Also see Kanze Hisao, "*Zeami, engisha kara mita Zeami no sakuhin*, Nihon no Koten Geinō 3 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1970), 185-216.

look for how the prescribed *kata* are rendered, and whether the *shite* chooses to vary what is prescribed in any way. It is this matching of movement to the utterance that we will concentrate on below.

The play *Izutsu* appears to have several key phrases which regularly draw critical attention. It is in two parts divided by an interlude. The first part has three sequences, and one high point frequently singled out for scrutiny in reviews comes in the course of a choral chant at the end of the third sequence. The ghost, in disguise as a young woman of the area in the first part of the play, appears to the side actor, or *waki*, who is cast as a traveling priest. The setting is the ruins of Ariwara Temple, where Narihira's grave is located. She allows that she has come to make an offering at the grave. It is an autumn evening, and the moon is bright. The movements of the *shite* punctuate the choral line:[5]

Kore koso sore yo	This must be the very place
naki ato no	though nothing lingers

The *shite* advances toward the well-curb and gazes at the pampas cluster. [Gazing at the pampas cluster constitutes *kata* #1 in this sequence.]

hito mura	but the single
zusuki no	pampas cluster
ho ni izuru wa	forming silvery ears,
itsu no nagori	when was it planted there
naruran	to his memory?

She looks about at the grass. [*kata* #2]

Kusa	Grasses

5 Yasuda, p. 445-446. Original in *Yōkyoku shū*, p. 277.

bōbō to	growing, growing wild
shite	and dense
tsuyu shinshin to	dew drops deeply, deeply still
furuzuka no	lies the aging mound

The *shite* lowers the mask as if lost in the past. [*kata* #3]

The well-curb is positioned at downstage center. Throughout this passage the *shite* stands at stage right positioned upstage from the well-curb. For the first seven lines above, her body is turned on a diagonal toward the well, her gaze riveted on the spray of pampas grass. At the lines "Grasses growing, growing wild and dense," she slowly pivots in an arc away from the well-curb until she faces stage right. Then she slowly takes two steps further toward stage right, and lowers her gaze slightly, allowing it to sweep the "ground" in an arc. The masked *shite*'s pose of gazing at (imagined) grasses becomes the focal point of analysis in the following critique by Sakamoto Setchō:[6]

> I thought that when [the *shite*] executed the *kata* of gazing at the desolate scenery (that is, at "deep, deep the dewy grasses"), lowering her gaze to let it sweep in an arc from her position at midstage right, her eyes did not work their effect ['*hatarakanai*']... By that I mean that [her eyes] lacked the forcefulness to

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6 Sakamoto Setchō, *Sakamoto Setchō nōhyō zenshū*, v. 2 (Tokyo: Tsukubō shobō, 1943), 229. The review was originally written in 1916 about the performance of the twenty-fourth head of the Kanze School, Kanze Sakon (1895-1937). At the time of this performance, he went by the name Kanze Motoshige.

Although Sakamoto describes the sweeping gaze *kata* in conjunction with the line "dew drops deeply, deeply still," in the orthodox Kanze choreography today, the movement is usually matched to the previous line, "grasses growing, growing wild and dense." For instance, see the annotation about the choreography included in *Yōkyoku shū*, v. 1, p. 277. Whether this discrepancy reflects the individual choice of the performer or is a recognized variation needs further investigation.

make me feel that they were living.

In the second part of the play, the portion which claims the most critical scrutiny is the aforementioned scene at the well-curb. The *shite* approaches the well-curb from upstage center, stops in front of it, brushes the pampas grass gently aside with her open fan [*kata* #1], and leans slightly forward to gaze fixedly at her reflection [*kata* #2]. The pose is normally held for several seconds.

Sakamoto feels that the actor's eyes do come alive in this portion of his performance:[7]

> I thought, "Here her eyes are living." She did not give the impression that she was gazing into the well because such a *kata* was called for [in that spot], but rather that there was something of substance [being expressed].

In an addendum to this review Sakamoto attempts to get to the bottom of this sensation that the mask's eyes are alive:[8]

> To take the example of *Izutsu*, the chant, *kata,* and gesture belonging to the line, "Lord Narihira, reflected there," carry the content of poignant longing, and when the *shite*'s entire being is permeated with longing, and in that spirit [*kokoro*], she gazes into the well in search of Narihira's reflection, then the light of longing [*natsukashisa no hikari*] will appear in her eyes. However, when speaking of the emotion of longing, I am certainly not talking about the raw emotion. My argument refers, of course, to that which occurs within the conventions [*yakusoku*] of noh.

Sakamoto does not address the tricky question of the relation

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7 Sakamoto, 229.

8 Sakamoto, 229.

between what actually occurs on stage and what the spectator perceives occurring, i.e., the locus of this "light of longing."[9]. Instead, he slips into the subjective prospective of the ideal spectator, and his words are useful for understanding just what kind of expectations such a spectator ensconced in the tradition and conventions of noh might bring to a modern performance of *Izutsu.*

First, each play has its own emotional tenor, an overarching theme that informs the execution of all the elements of the performance. Second, it is assumed that the *shite*'s evokes the theme by means of conventional and predictable modules of movement. Furthermore, a successful performance requires that the *shite*'s combined concentration and artistic skill must come to bear in his execution of these *kata.* The critical discussion unfolds on the basis of selected lines of the text, to which these *kata* are matched. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, the high moments of a performance are located at certain points in the play, and identified by reference to the line(s) of text which they accompany.

Whereas Sakamoto is critical of how the *shite* renders the high points of *Izutsu*, he does not question whether these points should be privileged over others in the play. What parts of the play deserve critical attention does not appear to be an issue. Rather, Sakamoto and others seem to function on the basis of convention as well: a shared consensus about what is deserving of critical attention that goes unchallenged in the critical discourse. Finally, it is clear that Sakamoto, as ideal spectator, assumes that his readers are also spectators versed in

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[9] Sakamoto does seem to feel that the expressiveness is located in the mask itself. In the same passage, he does state that noh masks are crafted such that, as with the human gaze, they can express rapture, or stare penetratingly; they can seek, off in the distance; project veiled resentment; show joy or anger. Sakamoto, 229.

the same expectations regarding the play's emotional tenor and its patterns of execution.

Such premises remain remarkably consistent across time and critics. In particular, the importance of how *kata* are rendered continues to be one critical default. Take the following observations by contemporary critic Ōkōchi Toshiteru regarding the *shite's* execution of her approach to the well-curb in the final sequence. The approach comes right before the climactic well-curb *kata.*[10]

> At this line ["Lord Narihira, reflected there, I see! Oh, how dear he is!"],she raced toward the well-curb with movement so violent that she risked dashing herself against it. But, are we supposed to think that this is what the crescendo of heartrending emotion that the woman feels toward her lover should be like?...In noh acting, no matter how seemingly realistic [the material], it must always have a poetic flavor. Such realism without poetic flavor will do nothing but startle the audience. In any case, noh is not anything quite as free [form] as this.

Ōkōchi's remarks, made in 1954 about a *shite* of the Hīshì school, postdate those of Sakamoto quoted earlier by thirty-seven years, but the parallels are striking. Ōkōchi 's comment above about poetic flavor is in accord with Sakamoto's remark about the desirability of a distantiation between raw emotion and its articulation within the conventions particular to noh. If the actor allows realistic representation to compromise the formal beauty of the *kata,* then a failed performance results, at least in the consensus of the critics. The actor risks critical censure if he crosses the bounds of the traditional renderings

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[10]Ōkōchi Toshiteru, *Gendai nōgaku ron* (Tokyo: Nōgaku shorin, 1957), 196. Ōkōchi wrote this in 1954 about an actor of the Hōshō School named Ōtsubo Tokio (1908-).

of those *kata*.

Moving forward a few more decades to a recent write-up by critic Dōmoto Masaki,here too *kata* are used as a yardstick for assessing the *shite*'s performance. Dōmoto is writing in 1991 about a leading actor of the Kanze School. He takes the actor to task for losing his balance slightly as he executes an orthodox variant on the well-curb *kata*. In this variant, the *shite* approaches the well-curb and kneels to gaze into it, instead of remaining in a standing position. While kneeling and gazing, he rests one arm on the frame of the well-curb prop, which is lower in height than it would be for the standing version of the *kata*. Dōmoto states:[11]

> ...when he knelt before the lowered well-curb and gazed inside, his left hand grasped too high up at the fronds of the pampas grass, and in reaction to this his upper arm did not make contact with the well-curb. This caused his hand to float and his fingers to poke out of his sleeve. Within a thorough abstraction, protruding fingertips are too raw. Because he lost his center of gravity, [his] concentration ['kokoro'] was shaken, and the *kata* lost its capacity to instill a sense of thematic condensation.

Although Dōmoto 's criticism may seem harsh, it gives implicit credit to the *shite* for what Sakamoto refers to earlier as "something of substance [being expressed]." However, due to an error in technique, the *shite*'s concentration is rattled, undermining this original expressivity.

Perhaps the more damning kind of criticism is the reverse: when the actor is credited with technical mastery that is to no avail because it fails to convey anything beyond the *kata*

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11 Dōmoto Masaki, *Kasshikishō Dōmoto Masaki nōgeki hyōron shū* (Tokyo: Perikansha, 1993), 191. He is writing about the performance of Kanze Tetsunojō VIII (1931-).

themselves. Ōkōchi levels such a criticism at an *iemoto*, or 'head' of the Hìshì School of noh. Reflecting on that individual's overall portrayal of *Izutsu*, he notes:[12]

> He carried fear of failure to an extreme and devoted himself entirely to the execution of form. If you wonder why it is a poor idea to pay exclusive attention to executing form, it is because it becomes mere mechanical repetition, and no life force imbues the *kata*. If one wants only to demonstrate the formal aspects, then there is nothing very challenging about noh.

Ōkōchi goes on to speculate that such is the tendency in performance by any *iemoto* because, by virtue of his position, an *iemoto* tends to be put on a pedestal. Moreover, once on that pedestal, an *iemoto* tends to avoid taking risks in performance because unsuccessful results might tarnish the image that he enjoys.

The critics quoted above seem to concur that *kata*, although not artistic ends in themselves, are crucial to evaluating a performance. Yet, what is it that *kata* reveal? On the one hand, it would seem that the existence of these predetermined, choreographed elements at predetermined points in the text functions to discourage individual expression on the part of the *shite*. At the same time, however, the *shite*'s ability to live up to the demands imposed by the forms is not treated as an artistic end in itself, as we have seen. Rather, these *kata* seem to serve as a kind of common denominator in a performance, the means of judging what each actor brings to the role in question. It follows, then, that the focus of critical interest shifts away from the quality of the

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12 Ōkōchi, 189-190. This review, written in 1954 is about the eighteenth head of the Hōshō School, Hōshō Fusao (1920-).

play or its staging *per se*, to the questions of who is playing the *shite* role, and how he plays it. Do the *kata* take on a life of their own which expresses the individuality of the actor--his flavor?

Such foregrounding of the actor's artistry is frequently carried one step further in the discourse of noh criticism: stylistic comparisons of the execution of *kata* (and other elements) between family members, and/or between mentors and learners. In a review of Kanze Hisao's performance of the well-curb scene, critic Nishida Miyoshi explains that Hisao had stepped in for his father, Kanze Gasetsu (1898-1957), who had originally been slated to play the role that day. Nishida ruminates:[13]

> The type of mask he wore, Magoichi, which combines the features of the Magojirō and Koomote masks, had a very sweet quality, so the figure he cut was not voluptuous, but sweet. It suited Hisao. It is too bad that we will never know how Tetsunojō might have employed the mask.

The implication here is that Tetsunojō's persona might not have lent itself as well to the sweet quality of this mask, but more to the point, the question of how two different family members express some kind of individualized flavor by virtue of the same mask is clearly one that interests this critic.

In a similar fashion, Nishida observes the following about the performance of *Izutsu* by the Osaka Kanze actor Ōtsuki Bunzō (1942-)[14]

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[13] Nishida Miyoshi, *Nishida Miyoshi nōhyō shū*, 2nd ed. (Tokyo: Hinoki shoten, 1979), 345. Kanze Hisao (1925-1978) was Gasetsu's eldest son. At the time of the performance in question, September 14, 1963, Gasetsu was going by the name Kanze Tetsunojō. Gasetsu was the seventh head of the Tetsunojō branch of the Kanze School.

[14] Nishida, 358. The late Kanze actor Ōtsuki Jūzō was Bunzō's grandfather.

> In two or three of the spots that call for *kata*, there were impressive scenes, and, in particular, the image of the *shite* clad in a brocade kimono in the first part was reminiscent of the late Ōtsuki Jūzō, which aroused in me a prevailing sense of nostalgia.

The vocabulary that Nishida uses to describe his nostalgia (X *no omogake*/'the vestige of X'; *shinobareta*/'be reminiscent of; *natsukashikatta*/'inspired longing') replicates the language used in the dramatic text to allude to the ghost's longing for Narihira. Clearly, the dramatic fiction is not Nishida's focus, however. The focus is skewed toward what we can glean about the actor by virtue of his role in that fiction.

Nishida's preoccupation with how So-and-So executes such-and-such a move such two further tendencies in noh criticism. The first is the weight and shared sense of the performance tradition itself. Actors come and go, and, to be sure, *kata* too shift somewhat over time, but *kata* also reinforce a sense of continuity from one actor to the next in the larger tradition. Perhaps awareness of such continuity can bring its own aesthetic satisfaction to the veteran spectator of noh. The second point worth noting is that Nishida's explicit foregrounding of the personal attributes of the performer is perhaps the ultimate statement of how important insider knowledge is to the subtler nuances of noh appreciation. This knowledge amounts to a kind of "inter-performicality," to coin a phrase: the overlapping, personal traces of individuals, which become discernible because those individuals are performing the same play.

To conclude, appreciation of the play *Izutsu* is surely possible at multiple levels--aural, visual, poetic, dramatic.

This review was written in 1963.

There is no question that its performance has a polished beauty that can have appeal for the curious uninitiated as well as for the connoisseur. Yet, to examine the question of what attracts modern audiences to repeated performances of the play, one must go beyond analysis of the play as an aesthetic object to scrutinize the dynamics of its appreciation by audiences. Although the critical sample included in this paper is very limited, as is the account of the multiple levels of appreciation that are possible,[15] the examples above suffice to suggest that the locus of interest for many noh-goers should be sought in the circumstances surrounding particular performances of plays. For instance, who is playing the familiar role? How is the tried-and-true handled by this person to create a sense of freshness? What do we thereby learn about that person through his art? It can be argued that in the case of a classical art form such as noh, the originality of the play is better sought today in the "how" of performance than in the "what."

We have seen how finely tuned the critical evaluation of *kata* can be. One can't help but wonder what will happen next to sustain or promote audience interest. The practiced eye duly notes the most subtle variations already: a footstep here, a gaze there. How can such thin deli slices be sliced any thinner? Moreover, today, noh "gourmets" look to be a dwindling breed, whereas the number of casual noh-goers seems to be growing. Particularly conspicuous is the proliferation of *takigi* ('torchlit') noh performances: outdoor

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15 Among the levels of appreciation not touched on here is that of aural expression. The aural level is intimately related to the collaboration which unfolds between the *shite* and the other performers, the *waki* (side actor), the chorus, the musicians, and is therefore beyond the scope of this paper. However, the aural dimension is just as important as the visual for gaining an understanding of the nature of the artistic judgments open to the *shite*.

performances usually staged at night in the light of bonfires for large crowds in non-traditional settings such as parks, gardens, and the grounds of castles. The *takigi* noh, which currently number more than 200 a year throughout Japan, tend to embrace more casual spectators who are "swept up in the romantic mood engendered by primitive fire and percussion, but occasionally bored by the unintelligible chanting."[16] Assumedly, many among this new group of patrons could care less about whether the *shite*'s fingertips poke out from his sleeve, and in the dimly lit space of the *takigi* noh setting, probably could not see such details anyway.

This shift in the performance nexus poses interesting challenges on many levels. The open space of the outdoor stage is an impediment to that which critics consider a keystone of noh expression, the actor's projection of intense concentration. For instance, within the traditional confines of the orthodox, indoor stage, the intensity of the well-curb *kata* is effectively heightened by an envelope of silence and stillness. As the *shite* gazes into the well, one can typically hear a pin drop throughout the theatre. The question of how such conditions can be successfully replicated in an open space is one of many that performers and audiences steeped in the nuanced expressivity of noh must face.

A review written by Sakamoto Setchō early in this century about still another performance of *Izutsu* seems a suitable place to conclude. The entirety of the review, which regards the performance of a highly reputed *shite* of the Hō shō School, goes as follows:[17] "I have no complaints." ("*Monku*

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16 Jonah Salz, "New Noh in Old Bottles: The *Takigi* (Torchlit) *Noh Boom*," *Abstracts of the 1995 Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Inc, April 6-9, 1995/ Washington, D.C.* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Association for Asian Studies, Inc,1995), 173.

17 Written in 1917 about the performance of *Izutsu* by Matsumoto Nagashi

nashi.") In other words, Sakamoto is counting on his readers to be familiar with what the play is about, how it is performed, and, perhaps, even the acting style of the performer (not to mention the discursive style of the critic). Surely the days in which the critic's job is this luxurious are numbered.

(1877-1935) of the Hōshō School.