

XIX. *Japan, Italy and Elsewhere: Nō and Shinsaku Nō from Cultural Diplomacy to Intercultural Dialogue*

by Matteo Casari

This paper focuses on the role of Japanese traditional theatre in the establishment of solid diplomatic relations, particularly between Japan and Italy, starting from the 19th century. In order to understand the dynamic as well as profound connections between an institutional cultural identity and its various intercultural projections, the case of *Nō* theatre and its innovative and experimental version, known as *Shinsaku Nō*, will be examined.

Diplomatic relations between Japan and Italy have been very good for a long time. These links are grounded in the cultural dialogue that has supported and, in some cases, laid the foundations for them to develop. The diplomatic significance of culture is almost self-evident. Indeed, most countries assign a primary role to it in their foreign affairs business because it is able to promote a positive as well as alluring image of the country. Today's sensibilities have fostered a progressive shift in the use of "cultural diplomacy", which is being replaced by "public diplomacy" (Leonard 2002). This is one way to underline the recognition of all the social partners not part of the institutional or governmental circles.

From "public diplomacy" the use of the expression "cultural relations" has since become more frequent, emphasizing dialogue and equal cooperation among all the partners involved, with the aim of gaining mutual benefits and achieving reciprocal enrichment. Cultures engaging in dialogue can be termed "intercultural" as they are open to each other's influences, and they are actively inclined to forms of inclusion and re-elaboration of otherness.

The current decade has offered numerous occasions to celebrate significant anniversaries in Japanese-Italian cultural and diplomatic relations. For instance, 2015 marks the 400th anniversary of the arrival in Rome of the Hasekura diplomatic mission (which began in Mexico in 1613) to visit Pope Paul V. The visit was deemed essential to underwrite a commercial treaty between Japan and Mexico, and also to confer the honorary title of "Roman citizen" to Hasekura Tsunenaga.

In 2016, the 150th anniversary of the start of official diplomatic relations between a Japan, then still to return to imperial rule, and an Italy, still grappling with national unification, will be celebrated.

The celebration¹ marks the birth of a diplomatic union at an uncertain and precarious time, when the destinies of two aspiring modern nation states were at stake. The decision yielded interesting cultural repercussions. For example, celebrations for 50 years of activities at the Japanese Institute of Culture in Rome² have recently drawn to a close. The project began in 1954 when ambassadors from both countries signed a specific cultural agreement³.



1 - Onoe Baikō dances for the inauguration of the Japanese Institute of Culture in Rome (12/12/1962).
©Japanese Institute of Culture in Rome

The institute opened in 1962, the very first abroad, with *Kabuki* dances performed by Onoe Baikō. In the Institute's 50th anniversary, traditional theatre, this time the *Bunraku*, was the highlight of the celebration, with two repeat performances at Rome's Argentina theatre (4-5 October 2013) of the celebrated *Sonezaki shinjū* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*) by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, in a

¹ Between 2016 and 2017 several events took place, both in Italy and in Japan, to celebrate the 150th anniversary and the theater has had a crucial role. We should mention the important tournée led by the *shite* Sakurama Ujin – descendant of Sakurama Sajin, one of the three Grand Masters of the *Nō* during the Meiji period along with Umewaka Minoru and Hōshō Kurō – which staged traditional and innovative *Nō* performances in Rome, Florence, Venice and Vicenza. With him and his troupe, the actors Zenchiku Jūrō and Daijirō staged *kyōgen*. On the Japanese side, an important performance has been the interesting contamination between opera and *Nō* in Japan *Orfeo* by the musicologist and conductor Aaron Carpenè and the director Stefano Vizioli. This article could not debate such cases due to editorial deadlines.

² The Japanese Institute of Culture in Rome began its activity on December 12th 1962. Formerly managed by the International Cultural Relations Society (Kokusai Bunka Shinkōkai) and funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, its management was transferred to The Japan Foundation (Kokusai Kōryū Kikin), which continues to run it. The Institute plans its own activities aimed at improving knowledge of Japanese culture in Italy. It organises and supports Japan Foundation projects with those same goals.

³ The equivalent Italian presence in Japan dates back to 1941 with the inauguration of the Casa di Cultura Italiana (Institute of Italian Culture) in Tokyo. The Italian Institute for Culture, destroyed in a 1945 air raid, was rebuilt in 1959. It has since operated without interruptions.

version that was both traditional and innovative.

If cultural diplomacy hitherto described unites Tokyo and Rome, there is another Italian city that has played a leading role in the cultural and institutional ties between Italy and the Land of the Rising Sun: Venice. The Venetian framework that strengthens such ties is the Biennale. In its 26th edition, in 1952, Japan made its first official national participation. Four years later, it unveiled its own pavilion, six years before the inauguration of the Roman institute. Sixty years later, in 2012, the project *Architecture. Possible here? Home-for-all*, curated by the architect Ito Toyo would win the *Leone d'Oro*⁴. From art to architecture, the *Leone d'Oro* takes us back to cinema and, from cinema, to the theatre in that nodal year 1954.

In 1951, Venice awarded Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashōmon* with the *Leone d'Oro*, thereby introducing Asian cinema in the West. This victory was also due to the efforts of Giuliana Stramigioli, one of the first of Japanese studies scholars in the post-war period, and a representative of the Italiafilm company in Tokyo, which lobbied to present the film, notwithstanding tepid reviews received at home (Pellecchia in Casari 2012: 28)⁵. Stramigioli herself committed in 1953 to gain permission for the performance of *Nō* beyond Japanese borders⁶, in Venice and during the Biennale. The excessive costs of the operation delayed it for another year, and the performance was done on a stage made of cypress constructed in Japan and sent by ship to the Isola di San Giorgio, which hosted two days of recitals: 6 August (*Sagi, Aoinoue, Shakkyō*) and 7 August (*Shōjō, Hagoromo, Shakkyō*). The main actors would be some of Japan's best known *Nō* actors: Kita Minoru, Kanze Hideo and Kanze Hisao.

The Western debut of *Nō* marked a key moment in a long journey which started in the Meiji period. It was a journey which saw actions done to confirm and reinforce traditional statutes while at the same time foster the introduction of new and experimental things. In order to better understand this process, it is necessary to see it within its historical and cultural context.

Due to the limits of this article, I shall limit my attention to landmark moments in which the history of Japan and that of *Nō* faced potentially fatal challenges. Central to this process is an analysis of the country's cultural and artistic (of the *Nō*) identity during the Meiji and post-war period⁷.

⁴ Other achievements of the Japanese Pavilion at the Biennale: "Gran Premio" (Munakata Shikō, 1956 and Ikeda Masuo, 1966); "Leone d'Oro" (Isozaki Arata, 1996); "Special Mention" (exhibition of Tanaka Kōki, 2013).

⁵ All the translations from Italian quotations are my own.

⁶ Performances not counted are the ones held in the Japanese colonies (*gaichi*) in the first half of the 20th century. See Kagaya 2001.

⁷ On Japanese artistic compartment during the Allied occupation, see Sandler 1997.

Indeed, the theatre is an excellent place to reflect on cultural history and the changes it records. It also helps to reflect on humans and their capacity to interpret history and to act on it. Fabrizio Cruciani (Cruciani in Cruciani and Savarese 1991: 3-4) invites us to consider theatre not as a subject of study but as a field of inquiry – comprising the works and the professions that in different ways contribute to theatre and to its continued existence – as it is embodied in the material culture, in the spectators and in the people of the theatre, the actors above all.

A single focal point emerges in the figure of Umewaka Minoru (1828-1909), the actor unanimously considered the saviour of *Nō*, he being the one who trawled it against all odds beyond feared extinction following the imperial restoration in 1868. After two and a half centuries of isolation (*sakoku*) ending in the mid-nineteenth century, Japan was forced to open its borders due to the commercial pressures of Western powers. The military government (*bakufu*) resisted, but its power was by then greatly undermined and thus ended almost seven centuries of military leadership in the archipelago.

Radical political, cultural, and social changes followed the fall of the *de facto* government of the samurai class. Japan, wanting to avoid direct Western domination, threw itself into the construction of a modern nation-state, undergoing technical and industrial development and acquiring structures of government and administrative apparatus from the West. It had to endow itself with symbols and languages capable of embodying and communicating – both to the Japanese and to the foreigners – the new values and, at the same time, a distilled and institutional image of indigenous culture that could trace the country's ideal and physical profile.

The theatres of tradition – *Nō*, *Kyōgen*, *Kabuki* and *Bunraku* – in different times and ways were an integral part of a mechanism of the construction of an identity perceived to be both authentic and capable of telling the story of the 'true' Japan. The composite and synthetic nature of the classical theatres – literary and poetic anthologies, a slice of practices and customs, exaltations of the applied arts, reservoirs of music and dancing art – together with the authoritativeness stemming from their ancient tradition, made them highly suited to the purpose.

This reconsideration, for the *Nō*, was neither immediate nor painless. After having been protected and safeguarded for almost five centuries by the military caste, *Nō* was on the verge of disappearing following the fate of its former patrons, who had been stripped of authority and socially declassed. Performances were interrupted and then restarted only thanks to the courage

of Umewaka Minoru, who, defying norms that forbade him from taking on main actor roles (*shite*)⁸, and to the bewilderment of his actor colleagues, despite being reduced to poverty, resumed public performances, obtaining such success that revived the genre little by little. Umewaka Minoru says about that period: “when the Restoration started, nobody believed something like the *Nō* could be staged again because society was in great confusion. So everyone looked for another occupation; and I also made my family members look for odd jobs on the side” (Umewaka in Kagaya 2005: 164). It is precisely in this movement of rebirth that *Nō* found the space and the chance to put its own artistic cipher to cater to the needs of the new Japan – on the domestic front, the need to have an idea to have of itself; on the international stage, the need to have an image to give of itself.

Umewaka Minoru’s success rested, apart from his undoubtedly artistic gifts, on the favor that he obtained from the new imperial hierarchy. The latter, committed to the construction of a modern nation-state, was then searching for a national theatre genre sufficiently capable of synthesizing the *ethos* and the *koinè* of a millenary culture which was stubbornly determined to play a role on the international stage at par with the other protagonists. The renowned Iwakura Mission (1871-1873), set to the West, visiting the United States and various countries of Europe⁹, and, on the return route, the Middle East, marked the most significant action towards that aim.

If Japan pushed itself towards the West to know the “Other” better, the “Other” became, as of 1868, an ever-more sporadic and non-influential presence in the archipelago. The new Meiji establishment banked on *Nō* from the outset, expecting already in 1869 (Meiji 2) the first stage set especially constructed for foreigners. This one, in honor of Prince Alfred Duke of Edinburgh, was followed by various others, like the one in 1872 (Meiji 5); for the Russian Prince Alexander Alexandrovich, in 1876 (Meiji 9); and for Tommaso di Savoia Duke of Genoa.

In the 44 years of the Meiji period, there were 24 analogous stage sets altogether, thus distributed: (Meiji 1-10): 4 sets; (Meiji 11-20): 9 sets; (Meiji 21-30): 3 sets; (Meiji 31-40): 3 sets; (Meiji 40-44): 5 sets (Kagaya 229). The Iwakura Mission consolidated this situation – various new theatres were built – and Iwakura himself hosted *Nō* performances in his residence and even started to study its song (*utai*).

⁸ The *querelle* between the Kanze School and the Umewaka family for this violation lasted until 1954. See Casari in Mastrangelo et al. (177-203).

⁹ The delegation stayed in Italy from 8 May to 2 June 1873 and visited Florence, Rome, Naples and Venice.

Then some foreigners started studying the *utai*: the most prominent being two Americans, Edward Morse (1838-1925) and Ernest Fenollosa (1853-1908). Fenollosa arrived in Japan in 1878 to teach philosophy and political economy, and was later designated Imperial Commissioner for the fine arts. He would study under Umewaka Minoru for twenty years, becoming the first foreigner to undertake the way of *Nō*.

In learning the *utai*, Fenollosa was able to collect substantial dramaturgical materials – he did the first translations – and notes on the aesthetic practices and principles of the *Nō*. That was a body of knowledge ready to leave Japan to nourish an extraordinary European theatrical experimentation that, at a certain point, would produce a return flow to the archipelago, contributing to birthing and enhancing the experimentation internal to the *Nō*.

The choice, apparently innocuous, to welcome a foreign pupil, heralded unimagined and unimaginable outcomes, and produced a butterfly effect¹⁰ capable of modifying the scenarios of the *Nō* and the theatre. If Umewaka Minoru had consciously and strenuously wanted to salvage the *Nō* in its traditional dimension – technical and organizational – he also helped, perhaps unwittingly, to lay the foundations for growth – which is at an exponential rate today – for theatrical proposals labelled *Shinsaku Nō* (new *Nō*).

Shinsaku Nō indicates a rather heterogeneous set of theatrical works that can be traced back – owing to their dramaturgical, interpretative and representative characteristics – to traditional *Nō*. Originally, though, *Shinsaku Nō* was used more simply with reference to all the *Nō* composed starting during the Meiji period, albeit structured according to traditional dictates.

These days, the meaning of the term has been broadened to include a great variety of experiences ranging from the staging of classical Western works in traditional *Nō* style, to “regular” *Nō* works. It also covers contemporary themes, from stage directing, rereading and unconventional *mise en espace* of the great titles of the *Nō* repertoire, to hybrids with other Japanese and non-Japanese theatrical genres.

The inventive character of some of these proposals is at times underlined by terming them *Sōsaku Nō* (creative *Nō*)¹¹. The extent of the phenomenon, which originated in Japan in the heartland of the *nō* theatre, is seen in its leaving original boundaries to take on international and transcultural

¹⁰ The ‘butterfly effect’ refers to Chaos Theory, which posits that a small perturbation in the initial condition of a system results in major changes in the outcomes.

¹¹ On *Shinsaku Nō* and *Sōsaku Nō* see, among others, Casari 2012 and Cross 2007.

features.

In short, using an oxymoron, we could well say that Minoru's was an intervention that was revolutionary in a reactionary way.

Going back to Fenollosa: his widow, Mary McNeill, having inherited from her husband a wealth of papers and notes on the *nō*, decided in 1913 to entrust them to Ezra Pound, who shared them in turn with W. B. Yeats. The latter found in them the right inspiration for the theatrical renewal he had been pursuing at length (Albright 1985). Thus *At The Hawk's Well* saw the light of day, whose definition and staging (1916), saw the participation of Itō Michio.

This Japanese artist, after this collaboration, had a successful career as a dancer and choreographer in the West, although he arrived in Europe in 1911 to study singing, equipped with scarce rudiments of *Kabuki* and practically knowledge of *nō*. He had seen a performance only once before at age 10 (Taylor).

The geographical and artistic overspill gave birth to theatrical experimentation that we could define as "*Nō* in translation" – a rather free translation, considering the inventions of Yeats and Itō to fill in knowledge gaps and the shortage of materials from the outset. It nevertheless achieved great success, producing an echo capable of resounding in turn in Japan.

Yokomichi Mario, illustrious scholar and great connoisseur of *Nō* music, drew from the work of Yeats for his *Taka no Izumi (The source of the falcon)*. Yokomichi would re-elaborate this version in 1947, writing *Takahime (The falcon princess)* in 1967. *Takahime*, done in the style of the Kanze School – led by celebrated actors Kanze Hisao and Hideo and supported by the *Kyōgen* actor Nomura Mansaku, an indefatigable experimenter who mixed tradition and innovation – met with the public's approval.

Critics gave mixed verdicts, given the work's dramaturgical-performative heterodoxy of a definitely experimental flavor. The chorus, for instance, much more evident than in traditional works, recited wearing half masks.

We find again here two of the actors who in Venice, in 1954, lent their bodies and voices to the institutional face of *Nō*, the theatre form chosen to represent Japan and its new course in the second half of the twentieth century. Worthy of note is the fact that these same actors – and those cited are obviously not the only ones – were then contemporaneously engaged in maintaining and safeguarding the traditionally-sanctioned disciplinary boundaries. In moving within the margins,

boundaries transformed from being rigid and impermeable something elastic and porous.

The years immediately after 1945 were crucial to the growth of a generation of actors interested in operating within such margins. In 1949, artists of every traditional performative sort inaugurated, in collaboration with critics and scholars, Dentō Geijutsu no Kai (Association of the Traditional Arts), to blur the borders separating different genres and disciplinary issues.

Other similar events moved in a similar way, but the postwar period's hybridization and transversality tendencies, provided fertile terrain to many experimenters and aroused a number of questions among the *iemoto* (heads of family) gathering in the Nōgaku Kyōkai. "By 1953, with the Japanese economy on the rebound and the *nōgaku* world also showing new life, the atmosphere was beginning to return to the conventional predisposition favoring complete, hierarchical control" (Kobayashi 2007: 153)¹².

Nevertheless, positions were not definitively set and the conservation-innovation dynamic must be read akin to a dialogue, however bitter, and not as a Manichean opposition. The dramatist and critic Takechi Tetsuji (1912-1988), for example, was a disappointment in the Nōgaku Kyōkai.

In 1954, Takechi produced a three-day spectacle entitled *Evening of creative works in the Nō and Kyōgen style* (*Nō Kyōgen no Yōshiki ni yoru Sōsakugeki no yūbe*). In 1955 he combined the modern Nō of Mishima *Aya no tsuzumi* (*The damask drum*) with *Tsuki ni sukareta Piero* (*Pierrot Lunaire*), based on the work of Schönberg, in collaboration with the avant-garde collective Jikken Kōbō. After this production, which shocked the public at the time, collaboration with *nōgaku* actors waned¹³. However, elaboration of new codes in the tradition and away from the tradition had started, and it was impossible to stop this trend.

If that phenomenon could be traced back to the admittance of Fenollosa as a pupil of Umewaka Minoru, we can consider the Japanese experimentation of the early 1950s and the Venetian debut of Nō in the same period of time as symptoms of an intercultural horizon in theater Stanca Scholzcionca and Christopher Balme accurately observed this when they spoke of "intercultural performers" as agents of profound theatrical innovation.

After the 1954 performances, which increased the prestige of Nō inside and outside Japan, the number of shows abroad increased, becoming an important activity of the companies. "What

¹² That rethinking should also be traced back to legislation on safeguarding artistic heritage, passed in 1950 in the wake of a fire that destroyed the temple of Hōryūji (Nara) the year before. In 1954, the law would also be extended to intangible heritage, like the theatre, as the legislation emphasized conservation above all things. On this matter, see Howard 2012 (ed.).

¹³ On the question of artistic "purity" of the *nōgaku*, see Casari in Wada and Colangelo 2015, pp. 47-57.

initially were the actions of a few individuals have developed into a steady traffic. [...] even eccentric individuals... Examples of a new species of intercultural performers able to mediate between cultures and, in some cases, even to challenge established gender boundaries” (Scholz-Cionca and Balme 2008: 9).

Where cultural diplomacy first operated to distill an identity to show to the Other in order to represent itself, it actually created the premises such that the Other, responding to that stimulus, might answer by initiating a dialogue. The dialogue, its unexpected progress, is, in turn, at the heart of that drive that can positively lead culture to make itself and to perceive of itself as inter-culture. Hence, the *Nō* with its interpreters showed how, during the time period considered here, an artistic development that respected traditional artistic identity, made possible its constant rethinking and opened channels of reciprocal influence with other theatrical genres, thereby contributing significantly to the advancement of theatrical research *tout court*.

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