

Noh **Funabenkei** 船弁慶 (“Benkei Aboard Ship”)

The story concerns the historic relationship between the general Yoshitsune, fleeing the wrath of his brother the Shogun Yoritomo, and Benkei, his mighty retainer. However in *Funabenkei*, neither is portrayed in the main role. Instead, the main role is divided between Shizuka Gozen, a popular *shirabyoshi* dancer and Yoshitsune’s lover, and the ghost of Taira general Tomomori whom Yoshitsune defeated in battle during the Genpei civil war, the two characters related only by their strong passions toward Yoshitsune. Though the play takes on a third category feel in the first half with Shizuka, the appearance of the vengeful ghost of Tomomori in the second half determines its fifth category status. This bipartite nature likely accounts for it being one of the most popular plays in the noh repertory.

In the first half, Shizuka wishes to travel with Yoshitsune’s fleeing party but is told that it is too dangerous for her. They have a sad farewell in which she dances, and then returns to the capital alone. When the party sets out to cross the Inland Sea, they are suddenly met by strong winds and waves made by Tomomori’s wrathful spirit. They are saved by Benkei’s priestly chanting. Yoshitsune, who has little to do in the play, is portrayed by a child actor because given the noh way of assigning roles hierarchically, a lesser adult actor in this minor role would instead be an insult to the representation of such an august personage.

Author: Kanze Nobumitsu (1435-1516).

Scene: Autumn, the first year of the Bunji era (1185), immediately after the Genji victory over the Heike in the Genpei civil war, the shore of Daimotsu Bay, Settsu province, the present Amagasaki in Hyogo prefecture; then on the Inland Sea.

Category: Fifth category (brave general) play, phantom noh in two acts, with taiko stick drum.

Performance Practice: Performed by all five *shite* schools.

CHARACTERS (in order of appearance):

Kokata (child role character): Minamoto no Yoshitsune, victorious Genji military commander and younger half brother of the Shogun Yoritomo.

Waki (secondary character): Musashibo Benkei, priest and Yoshitsune’s chief retainer.

Wakitsure (accompanying secondary characters): several retainers of Yoshitsune.

Ai-kyogen (interlude character): a boatman.

Maeshite (first half main character): Shizuka Gozen, a *shirabyoshi* dancer and the lover-mistress of Yoshitsune. Mask: young (*waka-onna* or *ko-omote*) or middle-aged woman (*fukai*).

Nochishite (second half main character): ghost of Taira no Tomomori, the Taira general who took his own life after being defeated in battle by the Genji forces led by Yoshitsune. Mask: vengeful ghost (*mikazuki* or *ayakashi*).

SYNOPSIS: Scene by Scene

1. *Kokata/Waki/Wakitsure entrance*: Entering to shidai music, Yoshitsune, Benkei and other retainers are escaping from the capital. Benkei relates the discord between Yoshitsune and his brother, the shogun Yoritomo. They sing a travel song describing Yoshitsune's innocence and purity of heart, and how they soon arrive at Amagasaki on Daimotsu Bay.
2. *Waki/Ai exchange*: Benkei has the boatman prepare a room for Yoshitsune to rest and a boat to travel on the Inland Sea.
3. *Waki/Shite/Kokata exchange*: Benkei suggests to Yoshitsune that Shizuka should not travel with them further. Yoshitsune agrees. Benkei goes to her lodgings to convey this decision. Shizuka doubts Benkei and goes with him to meet Yoshitsune who confirms this. She apologizes to Benkei for having doubted him. The chorus sings lamenting Shizuka's separation from Yoshitsune.
4. *Shite's prelude dance*: Benkei pours sake for Shizuka and asks her to dance. During the monogi musical interlude, Shizuka dons a tall gold *eboshi* hat typically worn by shirabyoshi dancers. She dances a short refined *iroe* dance.
5. *Shite's narrative dance*: As Shizuka dances, the chorus compares Yoshitsune's situation to that of T'ao Chu, chief councilor to the 5th century Chinese king Kou-chien. The song expresses hope that Yoshitsune's plea of innocence will be eventually recognized by the Shogun Yoritomo.
6. *Shite's dance*: Shizuka performs a medium tempo *chu-no-mai* dance.
7. *Shite's departure*: Shizuka, declaring that surely Yoshitsune will prosper, leaves the stage weeping.
8. *Ai/Waki exchange*: The boatman expresses sympathy for Shizuka. He reports to Benkei that the boat is ready.
9. *Waki/Wakitsure exchange*: A retainer informs Benkei that Yoshitsune is hesitating about leaving. Benkei insists that now is the time to depart. He calls to the boatman to put the boat out to sea. The boatman brings the frme boat and the party steps in.
10. *Ai/Waki exchange*: The boatman rows while commenting on the good weather. He asks to be made director of shipping when Yoshitsune returns. He then describes seeing dark clouds approach and how the sea turns rough with several huge waves as the boatman rows vigorously. A retainer says that the boat seems possessed by an evil spirit and both Benkei and the boatman scold him for saying such unlucky words.
11. *Kokata/Waki wait*: Benkei describes how the spirits of the defeated Heike warriors are now rising from the sea. Yoshitsune declares that these spirits can do no harm because they had in life defied gods and buddhas and committed egregious crimes.
12. *Entrance of nochijite*: The ghost of Tomomori appears to *hayafue* "fast flute" entrance music and announces himself.
13. *Nochishite dance*: The chorus singing for Tomomori declares that he will drag Yoshitsune into the sea. Tomomori dances a strong *maibataraki* action dance attacking the boat. Yoshitsune draws his sword but Benkei interferes and instead invokes the great Buddhist gods as he rubs his rosary. The evil spirits drift away on the tide, conquered by Benkei's prayers. [Richard Emmert]