

Noh Izutsu 井筒

(“The Well Curb”)

A travelling priest stops at the Ariwara Temple where a beautiful woman appears offering water and flowers at the grave of the ancient poet Ariwara no Narihira. She tells of the relationship of Narihira and the daughter of Ki no Arisune, known as the “well curb lady”, and finally reveals that she is, in fact, the spirit of that woman. She disappears and after the priest prays for her, she reappears wearing the costume of Narihira. She dances, and then vanishes at dawn.

Author: Zeami (1363?-1443?)

Scene: Autumn, the remains of the Ariwara Temple in Isonokami, Yamato Province, in the present Tenri City, Nara Prefecture..

Category: Third category woman (true wig) play, phantasm (mugen) noh in two acts, jo-no-mai (quiet dance) piece, without taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): a travelling priest.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): a village woman. Wears a young (waka-onna, ko-omote) or mature (fukai) mask.
- Ai / Ai-kyogen (interlude actor): a villager.
- Nochijite (second half shite actor): the ghost of the daughter of Ki no Arisune dressed as her husband. Wears the same mask as in the first half.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

Stage assistants place a well curb on the stage.

1. Waki entrance: A priest enters to nanori-bue solo flute music, and tells that he is on his way to Hatsuse and has stopped here at the Ariwara Temple. He recalls how this is the site where Narihira and the daughter of Ki no Arisune lived long ago as husband and wife and recites in part a poem that the wife had once recited. He says he will comfort the spirits of the two of them.
2. Shite entrance: A village woman enters to shidai music carrying a rosary and a small leafy branch. She sings of offering holy water at dawn, about the loneliness of autumn nights at this ancient temple, winds whispering the late hour through the pines, the moon gleaming through grasses, and about the memory of one long gone from this world. She continues singing of her hope in Buddha, of the enlightenment of those who are lost, of the moon sailing across the autumn sky, the elusive winds shifting in this dream-like world, and finally asks what sound will bring on awakening.
3. Waki/Shite exchange: The priest speaks of seeing the woman enter, and draw water and offer flowers for the benefit of a grave mound. He asks who she is and she replies that she is from nearby and that she gives comfort to Ariwara no Narihira who founded this temple. The priest

says that since Narihira lived such a long time ago she must have a deeper tie with him but she refutes this. In exchange they sing of Ariwara’s fame from the past still lingering now. The chorus sings of Narihira’s name remaining here with an old pine growing from his grave now covered with thick and wild grasses. Indeed, it does call forth a wistful yearning for the distant past.

4. Shite’s narrative: The chorus and the woman sing of long ago when Narihira wed Arisune’s daughter, yet he loved another lady in Takayasu. They quote the poem his wife sang showing her love and dedication to him by expressing anxiety for his night travel to see the other woman. The chorus goes on to sing of their story, how they were neighbors as children, played with each other by the well curb, and eventually grew older and more modest toward each other. In time, they exchanged poems expressing their love for each other, how he had grown taller since seeing her last by the well curb, and how her hair had grown long waiting for him.
5. Shite’s departure: The chorus sings for the priest who thinks that the tale is strange and asks the woman her name. She reveals that she is Arisune’s daughter, the “well curb lady”, bound to Narihira since childhood. The chorus describes her disappearance into the well curb.
6. Ai’s narrative: A villager enters and to the priest’s questions, tells the story of Narihira and Arisune’s daughter. This includes how Narihira pretended to leave one night to visit his lover but stayed behind to spy on his wife, and heard her recite a poem in anxiety about him travelling alone at night. Narihira, amazed at his wife devotion, thereafter gave up his visits to his lover. The villager asks the priest to pray for them.
7. Waki’s wait: The priest sings of the late hour, the moon in the sky, and preparing to dream while lying down in a bed of moss.
8. Nochijite entrance: The ghost of Arisune’s daughter, the “well-curb lady”, enters to issei music and sings a poem of waiting for someone who rarely comes like the fickle cherry blossoms. She sings that she is that lady who is waiting so long that now in the afterlife she takes on the robe left by Narihira.
9. Shite’s dance: She sings of the swirling blossom sleeves of the “man of old” (Narihira), and then dances the elegant jo-no-mai quiet dance. She sings again briefly of the radiant moon shining in the Ariwara Temple.
10. Shite’s dance, conclusion: In exchange with the chorus, the ghost sings Narihira’s famous poem of the moon and spring of old, then of comparing heights as children beside the well curb, of looking like Narihira, of still loving him in his phantom form like a withered flower with color gone, of the temple bell tolling the dawn and the dream and dawn breaking.
[Richard Emmert]