

Noh Kakitsubata 杜若

(“The Iris”)

An episode in the Tales of Ise (Ise Monogatari) tells of the famed Heian poet, Ariwara no Narihira, and his stopping at Yatsunashi where he was struck with the beauty of its blooming irises. There he composed a poem using in order the five syllables of kakitsubata (iris) as the beginning of each of the five lines of the poem. In this poem, he recalled his ill-fated love with the Empress Takako.

In the play, a priest visits Yatsunashi and sees the beautifully blooming irises. There, a young woman appears to him and invites him to stay at her cottage. She then appears in a magnificent robe and reveals that she is the spirit of the irises immortalized in Narihira’s poem. She tells the Narihira’s story and dances in his memory.

Author: Traditionally attributed to Zeami (1363?-1443?). Recent scholarship suggests that Komparu Zenchiku (1405-1470?) is the more likely author.

Scene: Early summer, Yatsunashi (Eight bridges) in Mikawa Province, the present Aichi Prefecture.

Category: Third category woman (plant spirit) play, phantasm (mugen) noh in one act, jô-no-mai (slow, elegant dance) piece with taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): a travelling priest..
- Shite (Main actor): a young woman, in fact the spirit of iris flowers. Mask: young (wakaonna “young woman” or ko-omote) or mature (fukai “mature”) woman.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki entrance: A priest enters to nanori flute music and announces himself as a monk on a pilgrimage through various provinces who, having just visited the capital and seen all its famous places, is now headed to the eastern provinces. He sings a travel song telling of the many different pillows on which he has slept at diverse lodgings and how drifting in uneasy slumber he arrives at Mikawa. He tells of seeing irises blooming along the edge of a marsh and drawing near to look at them. [nanori, michiyuki, tsuki-zerifu]
2. Waki’s exclamation: The priest describes the beautiful flowers as insentient yet unforgotten of their season to bloom [sashi].
3. Shite/Waki exchange: A young woman calls out to the priest asking why he lingers by the marsh and he replies that the irises here are so beautiful. The woman tells him that this place is Yatsunashi which is famed for its irises, the subject of an old poem. She tells how according to the Tale of Ise, the poet Ariwara no Narihira composed a famous poem using the five syllables of kakitsubata (iris) to begin each line: “Rare robe of Cathay—it’s hem from long wearing worn, once by my wife when we were close, how far from her, I’ve wandered”. In exchange with the priest she goes on to tell how Narihira had wandered far remembering Yatsunashi and its irises

which reminded him of his past. The chorus sings of the irises and Ariwara’s memory, of Ariwara’s vows and the marsh as not being shallow while at this bridge, and of the day ending and hearts softening. [yobikake, mondô, kake-ai, ageuta]

4. Shite/Waki exchange: The woman asks the priest to stay at her cottage for the night and the priest accepts. [mondô] To monogi ashirai music, the woman changes robes and puts on a court hat.
5. Shite/Waki exchange: The priest tells how the woman of this humble dwelling now appears in a colorful robe and a young man’s court hat. The woman says that this is a robe of Empress Takako of the poem and the hat that of Narihira which he wore at an imperial banquet. She then reveals that she is the spirit of the irises and how through Narihira’s poem, even plants have received enlightenment. In exchange, they sing of observing a mass and invoking Narihira’s image in dance. For the spirit, the chorus sings of performing a dance of longing wearing this Chinese robe. She dances an iroe color dance. [mondô, kake-ai, shidai, issei].
6. Shite’s narrative dance: The chorus for the spirit narrates how long ago Narihira received an auspicious order and rose in imperial favor, how after prospering one’s fortunes decline, how Narihira left the capital and drifted eastward leaving his love behind, how he eventually came to Yatsunashi where the purple irises reminded him of his love for the empress, how of the many episodes in the Tales of Ise this one is especially profound, how Narihira was the embodiment of Absolute Reality and the God of Harmonious Love, and how the spirit wears this worn robe so she might dance. [Kuri, sashi, kuse].
7. Shite’s dance: The spirit and chorus sing of butterflies dancing among flowers, whirling snowflakes, and bush warblers fluttering through willows, and flashing specks of gold. The spirit dances the elegant jô-no-mai dance. [ei].
8. Conclusion: With the chorus, the spirit sings of the iris’s color remaining as of old and retaining Narihira’s name, the fading fragrance of orange trees associated with Narihira, the cicada casting off its “Chinese robe”, the pale purple of dawn’s glimmering clouds, the irises heart of enlightenment unfurled, how truly all things, even grasses and trees, can acquire enlightenment, and how she vanishes from sight. [Waka, wakauke, noriji]
[Richard Emmert]