

Noh Nue 鵙

(“Nightbird”)

A traveling priest stops in Ashiya for the night and there meets a strange-looking boatman on a boat approaching the shore. The boatman is the spirit of a nightbird, a chimera made of many parts: the head of a monkey, the tail of a snake, the limbs of a tiger, and the cry of a nue, a nightbird. The boatman tells how he agonized the Emperor until he was struck down by Yorimasa’s arrows. The priest prays for the boatman and in the second half the spirit appears in its true form.

Author: Zeami (1363?-1443?).

Scene: Spring, Ashiya Village in Settsu province, the present Ashiya City in Hyōgo.

Category: Fifth category ending (demon) play, phantasm (mugen) noh in two acts, with taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): a traveling Buddhist priest.
- Ai/Ai-kyōgen (interlude actor): a village man.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): a strange boatman. Mask: male spirit (mikazuki “crescent moon” or awa otoko “man of Awa”).
- Nochijie (second half shite): the ghost of the nightbird. Mask: male demon (ko-tobide “small bulging eyes” or saru-tobide “monkey bulging eyes”).

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki entrance: A traveling priest enters to shidai music and sings of his renouncement of the world traveling with no specific destination. He tells how he is traveling from province to province and now thinks he will head toward the capital, then sings a travel song through which he eventually arrives at Ashiya. He decides to look for lodgings.
2. Waki/Ai exchange: The priest asks a village man for a night’s lodgings but is told there is a law here prohibiting putting up strangers. He finally relents and suggests the priest stay the night at a communal shrine on a nearby sandy point. He also warns him that a luminous body appears there every night.
3. Shite entrance: A strange boatman enters to issei music and sings of being trapped like a caged bird, a drowned log sunken forever, a lingering dead soul; then of tears which toss his boat and his heart which does not rest.
4. Shite/Waki exchange: The priest describes how a strange figure approaches in a boat. The boatman asks why the priest considers him strange saying he has been disowned by men. They discuss his strangeness, the boatman asking if he is no different than a villager fires brine to make salt. The chorus sings asking if his appearance in the boat is real or just a dream, then for the boatman asks the priest to pray for him.

5. Shite’s narrative: The priest asks him if he is human. The boatman replies that he is the spirit of the chimera that was killed by Yorimasa during the reign of Emperor Konoe, then offers to tell his story. The chorus and the boatman tell how the emperor was nightly plunged in an agony which not even the greatest priest could cure. Nightly deep black clouds would hover above the palace gripping the Emperor in fear. The noble lords decided it was a demon specter so they chose the brave Yorimasa to protect him. Yorimasa took one trusted retainer, I no Hayata, and readied his bow and arrows waiting for the hour of agony. When the black clouds began to hover, Yorimasa looked within them and saw a phantom form which came tumbling down. His retainer quickly thrust his sword through it. With a torch they saw its hideous appearance: a head of an ape, the tail of a snake, hands and feet of a tiger, and the howling cry of a nightbird.
6. Shite’s departure: The chorus for the priest tells the boatman that must change this attachment to power to uplift him but the boatman denies he is able to do so. The chorus describes how the boatman floats, then sinks, screeching like a terrifying nightbird he faintly disappears.
7. Ai’s narration: The village man appears again and tells the priest in detail the story of how Yorimasa killed the nightbird here. The priest in turn tells what he has seen and the village man asks him to pray for the nightbird’s spirit.
8. Waki’s wait: The priest sings of chanting Buddhist prayers throughout the night.
9. Nochijite entrance: The ghost of the nightbird enters to deha music and the priest sings that all living things can attain enlightenment. The chorus for the nightbird sings of being gratefully guided by the sutras.
10. Shite’s narrative dance: The priest describes the monstrous nightbird which replies describing how he was a demon filled with hate. With the chorus, he goes on to tell how he nightly plagued the Emperor until he was hit by Yorimasa’s arrow when he came crushing down to earth. He further describes in detail how Yorimasa was honored by the Emperor with a prized sword connected which several poems have been written. While Yorimasa won fame, the nightbird became a wooden log floating down the Yodo River to this destination at Ashiya where he remains to rot away and sink into the darkness. Having gone astray, the nightbird, like the moonlight which sinks into the water’s depths, too must sink into the waters. [Richard Emmert]