

Noh Sumidagawa 隅田川

(“The Sumida River”)

A ferryman on the Sumida River is about to take a traveler across, but they decide to wait for a madwoman following close behind. The woman arrives and tells how she is looking for her son who has been taken by slave traders. As they cross, they notice a crowd on the opposite bank conducting a Buddhist memorial service. The ferryman tells how a boy died a year earlier after having been left behind by slave traders. The woman realizes that the boy was her own son.

The ferryman takes her to the grave. When she begins to recite prayers, the boy's voice is heard from inside the grave. He then appears to her but when she reaches out to touch him, he slips back into the grave and disappears.

Author: Kanze Motomasa (1401?-1432).

Scene: Early spring, the Sumida River in Musashi province, the present Sumida Ward, Tokyo.

Category: Fourth category miscellaneous (mad woman) play, present-time noh, without taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five shite schools. Komparu writes the title as 角田川. Staging differs as to whether the child's ghost is seen on stage or not. Motomasa thought the child should appear, while Zeami thought he should only be in the mother's imagination. Both versions are today employed. In the latter, a kokata may just sing from inside the grave, or in other cases may only be evoked by the chorus. The play is the basis for the English opera “Curlew River” by Benjamin Britten.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): a ferryman.
- Wakitsure (companion secondary actor): a traveller.
- Shite (Main actor): a woman. The actor wears a fukai middle-aged woman's mask and carries a sasa branch to suggest her madness.
- Kokata (child actor): the ghost of the boy, Umewaka-maru. If he appears on stage, he is dressed entirely in white.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki entrance: A grave-mound is placed on stage. A ferryman enters to the nanori-bue solo flute. He tells who he is and that he is waiting for travelers to ferry across the river. He also says that a memorial service is being held today to which all are invited.
2. Wakitsure entrance: A traveler enters to shidai entrance music. He announces that he is a merchant who is on his way home from the capital. He sings a travel song (michiyuki) describing his long journey which has at last brought him to the Sumida River. He announces his arrival and that he wishes to board a ferry.
3. Wakitsure and Waki exchange: The traveler asks to take the ferry across the river. The ferryman

agrees to take him but they decide to wait for the madwoman who is coming up close behind.

4. Shite entrance, mad uttering and dance: A woman enters (issei entrance music) and sings relating her wandering in search of her lost son. She performs a brief kakeri dance suggesting her agitated state. She recites how her son was enticed away from their home in the capital by slave traders in children, then sings of the fragile bond between parent and child, and her arrival at Sumida River.
5. Shite and Waki exchange: The woman asks to be ferried across but is told to “rave” and entertain them. The woman quotes a passage from the Tales of Ise where Narihira has come to the banks of the Sumida River. He sees Miyako (“capital”) birds and is reminded of his lover in the distant capital, and asks the birds to tell him if she lives or has died. The chorus sings for the woman and asks the Miyako birds if her son lives or has died.
6. Waki narration: The ferryman impressed by her speech, tells her to board. They all board. The traveler asks about a crowd gathered on the far bank. The ferryman replies that they are holding a Buddhist memorial service, and then tells how a year ago that very day a 12 years old boy was left to die by slave traders. Though local people tried to take care of him, he was too ill. Asking the people to bury him by the road to the capital, he recited Buddha's name and died. His grave is on the river bank. The boat arrives at the opposite bank and the traveler gets out offering prayers for the boy.
7. Waki and Shite exchange: The woman, still in the boat, in tears, questions the ferryman further. She realizes the boy was her son, Umewaku-maru. The ferryman, pitying the woman, leads her to the boy's tomb and tells her to pray for him.
8. Shite's lament: The woman laments saying she travelled all this way to find but his tomb. Singing for the woman, the chorus asks the people gathered to turn over the dirt of the tomb and show the mother her son one last time. Had he lived he would have known gladness, but now he is suddenly gone. Such sorrows show the truth of this sad world.
9. Shite's prayers: The ferryman urging the woman to pray gives her a bell to strike. The woman sings out repeatedly “Hail Amida Buddha”. Midway they hear the boy's voice from inside the grave.
10. Shite's action: As the chorus describes the scene, the boy appears (or seems to appear) twice before the mother. She tries to touch him but he slips away back into the grave. What seemed to be her child is but the wild grasses of the tomb. With only sorrow remaining, the woman weeps. [Richard Emmert]