

Noh Uneme 采女

(“The Lady-in-Waiting”)

A priest visiting the Kasuga shrine one evening comes across a young woman planting a tree. In response to the priest's questions, the woman says planting the tree was the will of the god of Kasuga Shrine. She takes the priest to Saruzawa pond and, after telling the story of a woman who drowned there, reveals that she is the woman's ghost. She disappears into the pond. The priest begins to pray for the drowned woman and the ghost appears once again. She dances and then disappears once again into the pond.

Author: Zeami (1363?-1443?)

Scene: Nara, in the Kasuga vicinity; spring (3rd month)

Category: Third category woman play, phantom noh in two acts, jo-no-mai dance piece, with taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools. Performance variations include shortening scenes 2, 3 and 8 and emphasizing the water imagery in the second half, as if the woman were dancing and speaking from the surface of the pond. The jo-no-mai dance is replaced with an iroe (color dance) in some performances.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): Traveling priest, dressed as such with cornered hat, travelling cloak, large white split skirt.
- Wakizure (accompanying waki actor): Traveling priests, dressed as above.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): Local woman dressed in brocade robe with folded over robe at hips; wears young woman's mask (such as ko-omote) or mature woman's mask (such as fukai).
- Ai/Ai-kyôgen (interlude actor): Local man.
- Nochijite (second half shite): Ghost of the lady-in-waiting; dressed as a court woman in brocade robe covered with long, silk dancing cloak, patterned split skirt; mask as for maejite.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Entrance of the Waki: To nonari flute music, the waki and his companions enter. They are priests on a journey from the capital to Nara. As they travel, they describe the sun rising over the mountains. They arrive at Kasuga in Nara.
2. Entrance of the of the Maejite: To shidai music, a woman enters carrying a branch. The evening has deepened and the falling blossoms quietly carpet the ground. She has come to worship at Kasuga Shrine, and she plants her tree as she quotes a poem about the purple of the wisteria among the colors of the cherry blossoms.

3. Shite, waki exchange; shite's narration: The priest asks the woman why she's planting a tree in an already dense forest. In reply, the woman says that planting trees was based on a decree of the patron god of the shrine. The shite circles the stage as chorus describes sacred sites, the scenery on Mt. Mikasa and that at Kasuga Shrine.
4. Shite's narration, exit: The woman approaches the priest and offers to show him to Saruzawa Pond. There, long ago, a lady-in-waiting to the Emperor drowned herself when his affections for her had waned. The woman then reveals that she is the ghost of the lady-in-waiting. She gazes at the surface of the water and then disappears into the pond.
5. Ai interlude: A man from the village of Kasuga enters and discusses the past suicide with the priest. He prays briefly for the woman and then exits.
6. Waki's wait: The priest chants the Lotus Sutra and prays for the soul of the woman.
7. Entrance of the Nochijite: To high-pitched flute music (issei), the nochijite enters as the spirit of the dead woman. She thanks the priest for his prayers which have assisted her on the path to enlightenment.
8. Shite's narrative dance, slow dance: Dancing as she sings (with chorus speaking for her), the woman recalls her life at court, when she would recite poetry to please the Emperor, quoting the famous Asakayama poem as she looks at the mountain scenery the poem describes. As she dances, she describes the entertainments at court. Then, the reminiscing over, she performs a slow and stately dance (jo-no-mai).
9. Conclusion: The woman prays for the peace and prosperity of the country and the current ruler. Then, as the shite falls to one knee and covers his face, the chorus describes the woman gazing at the water's surface once again, and then disappearing into the pond. After stamping to indicate the end of the performance, the shite exits. [Richard Emmert]