Ritualizing in the Nō Performance: A Six Centuries-Old New Theory about Ritual

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Ritualizing in the No Performance

a six centuries old new theory about ritual

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1. Preliminaries

The purpose of this paper is not to demonstrate there is a relation between ritual and theatre. This is something that doesn’t need to be proved anymore. It is well acknowledged that the origins of the theatrical performance are in ritual. Even today, ritual and performance are connected and it is virtually impossible to interpret a ritual (be it a festival, a rite de passage or a healing rite) without taking into account its performance side: dancing, masking, incantations, etc.\footnote{The present paper originated in two graduate seminars I took at The University of Pittsburgh (Spring, 2001): one on the no theatre (instructor: Dr. J. Thomas Rimer) and the other on myth, symbol and ritual (instructor: Dr. Fred W. Clothey). Both instructors helped me a lot in understanding what is the paper missing. Dr. Clothey’s observation regarded the underdeveloped theoretical part of the paper (namely, the relation between theatre and ritual, which should have been the topic of an independent chapter, comprising Victor Turner and Richard Schechner’s theories). Thinking that this would considerably lengthen the paper, I decided to include the chapter in a forthcoming, more detailed paper. Dr. Rimer, on the other hand, rightfully remarked the limitations of Grimes’ theory as applied to the no and I felt myself that I should especially stress the idea that Grimes is, of course, NOT the only way of interpreting the no. As for the canonization of no, Dr. Rimer shared with me his own insights.}
What I will try to argue here is how a new theory about ritual – Ronald Grimes’ – is applicable to the most spectacular form of the Japanese traditional theatre – the *no*. And again, not the simple application of Grimes’ idea about “ritualizing” (the term he uses to replace the old-fashioned, rusted “ritual” in those instances in which he has to analyze new, “nascent” ritual) to *no* is of particular interest, but how the founder of the *no* in the very shape we know it today (Zeami Motokiyo) argued his theatre is an interactive, improvising performance rather than something stuck in prescribed gestures and verbal formulas. To him too, six centuries ago, the plays were not to be performed mechanically, but they were supposed to take into account various factors Grimes included among those which shape the *ritualizing* process: audience, place, time, etc.

In other words, Zeami’s secret treatises about how *no* should be played, about how the actors should be trained and how the plays should be written are not only congruent with Grimes’ ideas about the newly emerging ritual, but they also insist on the method of keeping the theatre alive: bringing “novelty” in each and every performance.

Of course, this paper’s task is not an easy one. And the first major difficulty is the misunderstanding of the term “ritual” itself. As long as Grimes’
appropriation of the term is not fully understood and his “ritualizing” is simply superposed on “ritual”, the present paper would seem meaningless. To Zeami, nō is of divine origin, but it is not a ritual in the traditional understanding of the term. However, he is making it so by his treatises. He prescribes rules, designs stages of training for the actors, and these become, in time, more important than the “novelty” Zeami seemed to be so fond of. So, he is, in my opinion, nō’s brilliant innovator and its burier. After him, nō doesn’t develop too much originality, but becomes a canon instead, blindly followed by generation after generation of actors. So, the “ritualizing”, as I will try to prove we encounter in his treatises, will become “ritual” and the first buds of it are easily traceable in the same treatises of Zeami. I will use again Grimes’ modes of ritual sensibility to enhance this paradox: same texts that consecrate nō as a performance that could resist only by being novel don’t do other than canonize it.

The second section of this paper will consist of a thorough presentation of Ronald Grimes’ definition of ritualizing, followed by those elements I consider to be proofs of this process in Zeami’s texts.

The third section will focus on Grimes’ modes of ritual sensibility and on those of Zeami’s ideas that fit into his scheme (see Appendix 1).

The last section will choose two of Zeami’s god plays (the first category of the nō plays) and attempt a “ritualistic” analysis on them, according to the

Later, usually much later, once the music is thoroughly internalized, then ‘individuality’ and ‘skill’ can come to the fore.”

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already mentioned modes of ritual sensibility. The purpose of this final analysis is to show that not only in theory, but also in practice, something that was supposed to be part of a perpetual ritualizing fell into the domain of "ritual".

2. Ritualizing

To Grimes, ritualizing is not to be defined by what it is, but by what it does. Namely, "Ritualizing transpires as animated persons enact formative gestures in the face of receptivity during crucial times in founded places". (Grimes, 1982, p. 55). Feeling himself that this way of defining his new concept is rather puzzling to the reader, the author gives a thorough explanation.

Ritualizing as a word is meant to replace the old-fashioned ritual, which to Grimes "has a bad reputation". (p. 55). Ritualizing is to be applied to all rituals when they are performed. This is because, Grimes believes that when performed, rituals do not follow the prescribed canon step by step, but in fact one performance is by no means identical with those performed before. Various things change: audience, weather conditions, performers, beliefs, customs. The simple fact that the people who attend a certain procession are not same who attended it last time when it was performed means the ritual can already be considered ritualizing.
The main idea of using this term is not to deny the existence of ritual, but to prove rituals are in movement, that they are in continual change.

On the other hand, the same term is to be used for the “nascent” rituals. New rituals are invented every day, no matter if they are personal or collective, religious or not. They are ritualizing, but not rituals. “Ritualizing is a process which occurs continually, and it may or may not result in stable structures that a culture deems ‘rituals’” (Grimes, 1982, p. 56). For a ritualizing to become ritual several factors are involved, among which the applicability of one of the modes of ritual sensibility is important. In other words, if drinking tea at 5 PM with my roommates becomes our daily (or weekly) way of getting in contact and sharing our experiences, then we can talk about our meeting becoming a ritual of decorum. Still, if one particular day, not only my roommates and me attend it, but also some other friends, then that’s ritualizing. It doesn’t have to become ritual, though, unless the newly came friends include our tea-drinking meeting among their own personal rituals. Same with bringing doughnuts instead of chocolate chip cookies in one of the days. If we all agree doughnuts go better with tea than the cookies and we start have them from that day on, what was ritualizing will become ritual.

By transpire, Grimes means that rituals “have lifecycles and lifespans” (Grimes, 1982, p. 57). “They occur. They do not merely recur”, he says (Idem, Ibidem). Changes will occur in its original shape, independently of its creator’s will. Grimes is using the term “transpire” precisely to show that rituals are “like
breathing, [...] fluctuate in frequency, force, and volume according to their cultural context” (Idem, Ibidem).

The other term of Grimes’ definition I would like to insist upon is *in the face of receptivity*. Rituals cannot exist without receptivity, because “Ritualizing is enactment in the face of imagined, socially experienced, and mythologically constructed receptivity” (Idem, p. 63). Receptivity does not necessarily mean “public”, but someone or something that, at least in the performers’ mind represents the instance for which the performer of the ritual is acting. The interaction performer-audience (receptivity) is crucial because it is the means through which the ritual’s effectiveness is confirmed. The receptivity’s reaction to the performance is everything. The ritual shows signs of decline, when receptivity losess interest in attending it. “A decline in the importance of ritual is usually signaled by a symptomatic loss of receptivity and a consequent confusion of enactment with sheer willful activity divorced from cultivated passivity” (Idem, p. 64)

*During crucial times* is also an important term as far as the present paper is concerned. This could be considered a major difference between Grimes’ terminology and Zeami’s way to put it. That is because, mainly concerned with ritual, Grimes is thinking of it in direct connection with what time was understood to be in previous ritual studies. He talks about ritual time being associated with transitions and crisis moments in histories and lifecycles and then about “anticipated time”, or “circular time” in Eliade’s terms (Grimes,
1982, p. 65). One could argue there is no such ritual time in the no, at least in its frame as envisaged by Zeami. On the other hand, there is one particular line in Grimes’ text that made me think that, in fact, there is no such big a difference between the two ways of appreciating the importance of time and, more than that, of timing. Grimes believes that “Rituals concentrate, and thereby consecrate, time. The auspicious moment […]. the kairos, is a pulse of opening and closing. It occurs when enactment and receptivity are in synchrony. Such times can occur without warning in illness, disaster, or social breach. Ritualizing processes spontaneously proliferate in these moments. No one has to decide to create them.” (Idem, Ibidem).

So, crucial times create ritual. Ritualizing, then, pertains to crisis. In this aspect, it is too much to say that Zeami has the same idea of timing. Timing is different to him and I will later show how. Crucial times in performance are those of the representation itself. But, there is a crisis that pushes Zeami to write down his ideas about no, and therefore to ritualize. It is the crisis of the acting techniques and this is one of his main concerns. He feels it is his duty as the head of one of the major schools of no in Japan to pass his knowledge to the younger generation. The ritualizing here does not, however, consist of the no, but of the act of writing itself, which is a topic for another paper.

Place is the last term involved by Grimes’ definition. The places he is talking about are founded, so they have the characteristics of being suitable for the rituals to occur. In this aspect, Grimes thinks the place does not necessarily have to be
consecrated by previous ritual or religious experiences, but it is enough to be picked up for such a performance. “... founding a space may also occur by defining an area with actions, rather than cordonning off an area with rope or erecting huts” (Grimes, 1982, p. 66).

Traditional spaces for ritual are “empty”, when there is nothing taking place there and burial grounds, courtrooms or cathedrals are such examples, Grimes argues.

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There are two ways in which Zeami is trying to be innovative, and, to ritualize the no performance. One is at the general level of the disposition of plays in a performance sequence127, and the other concerns the innovations that are to be brought in the way of acting.

Innovations in the jo, ba, kyu sequence are probably one of the most important way in which Zeami is ritualizing the no performance. It is to be said

127 In traditional performances, a no program included a sequence of plays. So, five plays were to be performed in one program. The first one (a god play), which also corresponds to the jo component (slow tempo and not of great emotional intensity), the second, third and fourth plays exhibiting mounting dramatic intensity correspond to the ba component, while
from the very beginning of this demonstration that Zeami's main concern is the audience, so Grimes' in the face of receptivity is of crucial importance. The entire ritualizing process is basically derived from Zeami's belief that the audience has to be satisfied by the performance, and that everything has to fluctuate according to audience's mood, social stratum or timing.

The part where the importance of not sticking with a structure that can eventually not meet audience's expectations is in the Chapter 8 of the Kakgyō (Mirror Held to the Flower, pp. 83-87\textsuperscript{128}) treatise. Zeami acknowledges the fact that traditionally there were 4 or 5 plays to be performed in a program, but in the same time, if the public (and the segment of public that really concerns him is the nobility, the sponsor of the no performances) requires changes in program, the actors are not to refuse. So, consciously or not, Zeami improvises and moves the structures of the performances. This freedom of movement will later lead to the adapting of the performance to modern time and tastes – now, there is only one play performed in a program, but, of course, the length of the plays is considerable longer than it was in Zeami's times.

But still, it is not enough just to change the order of the plays and of the three components and to have the audience satisfied. Zeami argues the head of the troupe has to take quick and smart decisions because the audience has to be

\textsuperscript{128} The English translation I am using and to which the pages quoted refer to is J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakazu’s. From now on, abbreviated as Zeami, 1984
in the proper mood in order to properly enjoy a play of the kyū level. 

Otherwise, the performance will be a failure.

How important are special situations that may occur during a performance is stated in several instances. It may happen that members of the nobility come late to the performance, so by that time the rest of the audience has already reached the stage of ba or kyū. The latecomers, on the other hand are only at the jo emotional level, so their emotional answer won’t match the atmosphere. So, to Zeami, the danger in this kind of situations is very great and something has to be done in order to save the show. His solution? Improvising, or, in Grimes’ terms ritualizing. “Therefore, on such an occasion, the actor must choose a play from the ba category that seems as appropriate as possible, then try to inject into the performance some of the elements appropriate to jo; he must play in a gentle and relaxed manner, so as to capture the emotions of the nobility present” (Zeami, 1984, pp. 85-86). So, not the structure as inherited from the tradition is important, but how to make the performance valuable to that audience, in that particular situation.

Some other crisis situations are mentioned – in this way, Grimes’ definition of crucial times meets Zeami’s - which inevitably lead to ritualizing. The troupe is unexpectedly summoned to perform at a banquet, where the emotional level of the spectators is already at the kyū level. Still, the rules require a performance to start with a play of the jo level. Zeami suggests the troupe does not have to change that, but “while playing at the level of jo, […] begin to introduce some
of the feeling of *ha*, performing in a light and agreeable manner, so as to move the atmosphere along to the level of *ha* and *kyu* as rapidly as possible. Played this fashion the performance should be a success.” (Idem, p. 86).

The way of acting is also subject to permanent change and Zeami gives a great importance to this too. His treatises being meant to teach the young in his troupe how to act, are in fact concerned to this aspect to the largest degree. Zeami’s ideas about acting are based on the concept of *mokumonau* (roughly, imitation). But the imitation is not everything, and it does not have to be done without paying attention to details. He argues it is not enough for a young actor to imitate the way an experienced one performs one role or another. He has to have his *flower* properly developed. The concept of *flower* is also very important in Zeami’s treatises and I will later argue that by introducing it, the author is actually moving the ritualizing towards ritual, *flower* being an expression of both ritualization and decorum in Grimes’ terms.

Still, how is the actor ritualizing? The audience is again very important. There is no point in ritualizing in front of an uneducated audience, somewhere in the countryside. The public won’t be able to see the novelty, because they have no idea of the traditional way. Novelty, then, depends upon the receptivity, and on p. 59, Zeami declares, “the principle of novelty represents the nature of the *flower*”, while earlier he wrote that art has to appear novel to the spectators (Idem, p. 52).
The three elements that have to characterize a good performance are: flower, charm and novelty, because they all three partake of the same essence. So, flower, as part of actor’s gift, or, in fact, almost congruent to it, brings the novelty. He believes flower pertains to biological gifts (like beauty and personal charm) and for best results it is combined with elegant gestures. These are both parts of what Grimes calls ritual sensibility. The first is ritualization, the second, decorum and they characterize the ritual (without necessarily denying the ritualizing, but still pertaining to ritual in its traditional understanding). The same ritual, which Grimes sees as being in permanent movement. So, I could say, without mistake, that Zeami is in fact on the same line. Flower represents a mastery of technique, he writes, but it is a technique achieved in order to create a feeling of novelty (Idem, p. 53).

The concept of novelty is, in my opinion, Grimes’ ritualizing. “An understanding of the principle of the Flower explains why in the no there does not exist that stagnation that results from the monotony of any single means of expression. As the no does not always remain the same, various new aesthetic qualities can be emphasized, bringing a sense of novelty” (Idem, p. 52).

The audience is then the only one who can sense the novelty in a performance. It is crucial to have it all the time alert and to surprise it all the time. Otherwise, it can loose interest in the performance, and as Grimes’ says, that represents “a decline in the importance of the ritual” (Grimes, 1982, p. 64).

This is why, to Zeami, everything that is part of the acting, chanting, dance,
gesture, expressive movement has to bring the spirit of novelty. The educated audience will immediately see the difference in acting and its interest will be kept alive for what is going to happen next.

And I think there is no better way of concluding this first part of my demonstration about the importance of ritualizing in Zeami’s treatises than quoting him again: “The reason that the same actor who performs with the same highly developed skill will achieve different results from different performances may well be because, depending on the occasion, the balance between jin and yang may not be in harmony [with the rhythm of the performance]. Conditions vary because of the four seasons, day and night, morning and evening. The nature of the audience itself changes. [...] Then again there variations due to warm and cold weather, day and night, morning and evening” (Idem, pp. 126-127).

The importance of audience (which I equal to Grimes’ receptivity) has been already stressed in various previous instances, in relation with ritualizing and novelty. But audience is also important for the success of the show. Zeami requires his actors to be able to predict whether a performance will be a success or a failure by looking at the audience. (Idem, p. 18)

I believe all these prove that Zeami’s treatises are an account of a nascent ritual: the ritual of the no performance as envisaged by himself. In the next section I will show that, unfortunately, the same treatises represent the first step
on the canonization of no, which I believe will eventually kill the performance, at least in the form we know it today.

3. Modes of Ritual Sensibility

In his first theoretical attempt of organizing the ritual materials, Grimes proposes six modes of ritual sensibility, which may arise in the course of a ritual. They are *ritualization, decorum, ceremony, liturgy, magic* and *celebration*. I will first give short definition of each of them and then I will try to find in Zeami’s treatises proofs that they are present in the no theatre, as he sees it. (In order to be faithful to this present demonstration, I think the most appropriate way of referring to the *ritualizing no* is by calling it Zeami’s *no*).

*Ritualization* is that with which ritual begins. It pertains to our body and to our biological functions: eating, drinking, moving about, reproducing, dying, mating, fighting. (Grimes, 1982, p. 36) So, *ritualization* is in everything we do with our body and we cannot escape it. We don’t necessarily have to be aware of it, but this does not mean is less a participation in a ritual. “The rituals which embody *ritualization* processes most fully are seasonal, agricultural, fertility, divinatory, funerary, and healing ones, because they make explicit the interdependence of people with their physical environments and bodies” (Idem, p. 37)
It is not ours to decide whether we want or not to be part of *ritualization* processes. So, walking, kneeling, talking, waving a fan will also be part of it (these are actions easily to be found in a *no* play, and in all theatre performances, for that matter).

*Decorum* springs from our civic and social life. It basically represents the way we interact with other people: greeting, behaving in society, tea drinking are all part of rituals of *decorum*. “What is distinctive about ritual *decorum* is its courteous formalization and stylization. No longer elicted primarily by natural rhythms of the biological, genetic, and seasonal kind, decorous action marks the rhythm of social occasions” (Idem, p. 40). All that is part of the conventions that rule the social behavior can be subsumed to *decorum*. Through it we display our roles, statuses and interpersonal intentions. “It is also a way of affirming sociability itself” (Idem, p.41). Like *ritualization*, *decorum* cannot be virtually escaped.

*Ceremony* is one of the ritual sensibilities that are not to be found in Zeami’s treatises\(^ {129} \). And this is because *ceremony* includes political attitudes: standing for the national anthem, bearing a clan’s coat of arms into battle and so on. The basic difference between *decorum* and *ceremony* is that the first pertains to interactions of the “face-to-face” kind, while the latter to the “large-group” kind. (Idem, p. 41). “*Ceremony* invites the participant to surrender idiosyncrasies

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\(^ {129} \) Many of the plays, however (especially those in the second category) could be characterized as rituals of ceremony, in Grimes’ terms.
and independence to some larger cause, for which one is willing to fight, die or pay homage” (Idem, p. 42).

*Liturgy* is a ritual action with an ultimate frame of reference and the doing of which is felt to be of cosmic necessity (Idem, p. 43). Meditation, invocation are actions done in such rituals, both involving doing the “ritual” work and approaching the sacred in a reverent, “interrogative” mood. “*Liturgy* is a full emptiness, a monotony without boredom, a reverent waiting without expectation” (Idem, p. 44).

*Magic* pertains to healing, fertility, divination rites and it represents the contact with the sacred. It is not the “interrogative” attitude from the *liturgy*, but an imperative action of demanding the divine to intervene. It is a deed having transcendent reference and accomplishing some desired empirical result (Idem, p. 45).

*Celebration* has its roots in play, in the ludic impulse. It is represented by carnivals, birthday parties, festivals and it involves rather the playful attitude in interacting with the sacred than the seriousness of *liturgy*. “Whenever we begin to detach ourselves from ordinary matters requiring pragmatic modes of participation so we may toy with forms themselves, we are beginning to play” (Idem, p. 48). Like *ceremony*, *celebration* is not a ritual sensibility that can be found among those appearing in Zemadi’s treatises139.
To prove that in Zeami’s treatises not only ritualizing but the modes of ritual sensibility are to be found, it is a way of reaffirming that ritualizing and ritual coexist. The novelty part in his texts is what he believes will keep the performance going on, while the concepts used to define various sensibility modes represent an attempt of theoretically organizing both the new and the old material of the no. They are not opposite, but complementary at this stage. In time, ritual will win over ritualizing and canon will be imposed on the performance, though.

Ritualization. As we have seen in the definition Grimes gave before, ritualization is part of the way we deal with our biological heritage. In the case of no this is particularly important, even more important than in European theatrical tradition. Correctness of body movements in the no is very difficult to achieve and this is why each gesture made on stage stands for years of practice.

Fushikaden (Teachings on the Style and Flower, Zeami, 1984, pp. 3-63) is one of the texts that deals a lot with body issues. The basic idea of the actors being trained according to their ages, because depending on the age there are different biological changes involved, which can be used, is part of ritualization. The body is so important, at least in the younger stages, that sometimes it is enough in itself to produce a good performance. “In the first place, a boy’s appearance, no matter in what aspect, will produce the sensation of Grace. And

130 for Grimes’ chart of the modes of ritual sensibility, see Appendix 1

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his voice at this age will always sound charming as well. Because of those two strong points, any defects can be hidden and the good points will be made all the more evident” (Zeami, 1984, p. 5). The aging process is, of course, to be taken into account and Zeami is very insistent about some issues like the usage of a mask, when the performer is older or the playing of roles that don’t require physical strain due to age. (Idem, p. 8).

Women roles, on the other hand, have to be played in a natural manner in order to make the character look real. Body postures, gestures, movement on stage, stamping the foot, hands position in a particular dance all are very important and require thorough training and practice. So, one could say, using Grimes’ terms that no performance is a ritualization ritual.

Decorum is also very important in acting. One could argue that there three kinds of decorum ritual going on. One is at the stage level and it concerns the interactions that take place between the actors involved in the play, the other is at the audience level (from Zeami’s writings, we understand the no representations were a very good opportunity for people to meet – I mentioned before the possibility for a troupe to be called to perform at a banquet), and the third is represented by the interaction between actors and public. There is no way of knowing if there was any particular way of being dressed or greeting when people were attending no representations, but there are some glimpses in Zeami’s treatises. For instance, from the very special mention of nobility members coming late to a show, it is easily understood that that was not the
norm. Contemporary kabuki performances give us other potential suggestions of decorum behavior during a no performance, as far as the audience is concerned – applauding occurs only at certain moments during the show, when the actor poses, and no one except for those who are very knowledgeable about kabuki can initiate the applauding.

Zeami’s texts are giving some idea of decorum ritual at the stage level. This is mainly concerned with indications of how an actor should impersonate one or another character using gestures. On page 11, in Fushikaden, we learn that when performing mad women’s roles “the actor should hold a fan or a sprig of flowers, for example, loosely in his hand in order to represent female gentleness.” Later, on pages 14-15, in the case of playing high-ranking priests roles, “the actor must use the majesty and dignity of the character as the basis for his performance.” By contrast, “When it comes to lesser-ranking priests, such as those who have abandoned the world and practice austerities. Their religious pilgrimage is of paramount importance to them, and so it is crucial for the actor to create the impression that such characters are absorbed in their religious devotions.”.

Of course, in these above-mentioned cases, the actor has to employ not only gestures and postures specific to the character, which he is supposed to play, but also body movements. So, in those instances, both ritualization and decorum sensibilities are present. One particular role, though, requires the exclusive usage of decorum means. Paradoxically, it is the god role. “Particularly
in the case of a god role, the only means available to the actor to represent such a being lies in his being properly dressed, and therefore he must give particular attention to the creation of a properly noble appearance. The actor must decorate his costume correctly and adjust his clothing in an appropriate manner.” (Zeami, 1984, p. 16 – my italics)

As far as the interaction of the actor with the public is concerned, there are aspects of overwhelming importance. In fact, the plays I am going to analyze from this point of view, carefully mark the moments when the actor has to face the audience, and therefore visually interact with it. Zeami could not ignore this aspect of the acting. In Kakyo, he is very precise about the moment when the actor has to face the audience for the first time during the performance. The exact moment is when he is on the second half of the entrance bridge, about to enter the stage (See Appendix 2). Not only the moment, but the precise spot of the audience that has to be faced is mentioned: the nobility: “At this moment the actor should face that part of the audience in the best seating area yet not concentrate his gaze directly on the spectators. In general, the actor should direct his performance toward the nobles seated in the audience” (Idem, p. 84). This kind of detailed and careful indication became canon in time, killing the originality of the no.
One particular sentence brings together the *ritualizing* and the *decorum* ritual, the novelty and the bud of the future stiffness. “...when *sarugaku*131 is performed in a large playing space (novelty = *ritualizing* in founded places), the performer must take care to make the distance from the nobility seem as short as possible. On the other hand, when the performing space is restricted, a sense of distance should be created between the actor and the nobility. This principle is even more important to observe when the performance is held indoors” (Idem, p. 83). It is probably enough to mention here that today these principles are obsolete: the stage has always the same size, playing outdoors is extremely rare and one of the techniques the actors have to master is counting their steps when they move on stage.

*Liturgy* and *magic* go together in Zeami’s treatises. He operates with a series of rather mystical terms like *flower* (which is more likely a unit comprising *ritualization* and *decorum*, plus something pertaining to *liturgy*), *grace* (more likely in the sphere of *liturgy*, with elements of *ritualization* and *decorum*), or *perfect fluency* (which rather pertains to the *magic* ritual, but still keeping connections with *ritualization* and *decorum*). It is easily noticeable that *ritualization* and *decorum* are basically everywhere and this is probably because the most important matter commented in the treatises remains the acting.

*Flower* could be thought of as being gift or talent, but there is also something mystical about it. In the same time, there is not something innate to

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131 the name under which *no* was commonly referred to in Zeami’s time
the actor, but it is rather a combination of innate characteristics and practice of
the *no*. *Decorum* too is very important since the idea of *flower* “developed from an
appreciation of visual glamour and courtly sophistication to that of rustic and
profoundly simple austerity, of the kind associated in Japan with Zen aesthetic,
in which truth is seen in terms of understatement and apparent negation”
(Sekine, 1985, p. 144). *Flower* is novelty and spontaneity, it is *ritualizing*, but the
actor cannot be spontaneous unless he is very well trained. So, the two
components of the *flower* are visual beauty (comprising *ritualization* and *decorum*)
on one hand and sophistication and subtlety (*grace*) on the other.

*Grace* is the ultimate goal of a *no* performance. Those performances, which
create *grace* are regarded as great successes. *Grace* is to be achieved by practice
and by imitating, because, for instance, the nobility has *grace*. A song can be
sung with *grace*. But there is something else, something beyond that, beyond the
physical and behavioral aspect that defines *grace*. Zeami talks about balanced
atmosphere, using the *yin* and *yang* elements. The equilibrium of these two is
sure to bring harmony, an essential element for a good performance. Zeami
even gives some tricks to ensure this equilibrium, being positive about the
importance of the harmony between stage and its surroundings (Zeami, 1984, p.
45).

The solid-rock terrain of before fades away in face of these terms with half
magic significance. They are not real, they are not simply based on training, and
so they leave space for speculation. This is another great issue about the becoming of Zeami’s no as a ritual and later as a canon.

Eventually, in the sphere of the “untouchable” are the flower of peerless charm and the perfect fluency. Imitation is not enough for someone to achieve the perfect fluency. “... witnessing a performer who has attained the flower of peerless charm and who practices his art with perfect fluency, a young actor who may think to imitate him would be as foolish as someone who thrusts his hand in the air thinking to strike at the moon”. (Zeami, 1984, p. 137). This is where Zeami gets closest to Grimes’s magic ritual. Perfect fluency is beyond human perception; it pertains to the divine. “only one who has genuinely made himself one with his art can truly be said to have attained a state of perfect fluency. There is a Zen phrase that says ‘true humanity lies beyond individual rank and value’. There is also the expression ‘excellence without external form’. Such represents a true value that transcends objective value. Such ideas represent perfect fluency.” (Idem, p. 135).

The actor has to be in permanent search for the perfect fluency, but still this doesn’t have anything to do with his conscious artistic intentions or with any outward manifestation of those intentions (Idem, p. 135). “The mental attitude of one who has attained this state can be said to represent a perfect fluency that transcends his training” (Idem, Ibidem).

All these are part of a system that attempted to modernize the no theatre, as it was known in the 14th century and to pass secrets whose purpose was to keep
the art alive. No in Zeami’s mind was by no means something to be stoned in
the same shape for six centuries. History worked against his will, though.
Ironically using precisely Zeami’s ideas, his followers made the no more and
more a ritualized performance. The gestures got slower and slower, the chants
became more profound, the dancing more patterned. The Tokugawa shōgunate
(1600-1868) accomplished the destruction of creativity, by forbidding the
performances of no other than in front of the nobility. This way, the most
important part of the ritualizing of the novelty was not needed anymore. The
nobility simply needed plays performed in one single way, so the actors stopped
improvising. No lost its audience and was replaced by kabuki. Recuperated by
the Imperial family after the Meiji Restoration (1868), no remained elitist in its
way because of long centuries away from the popular taste. It is now probably
too late to start improvising again, even if major changes have been brought,
like the reintroduction of women actresses in 1935. But no gives humanity new
ways of expression, recuperating in this way its extraordinary heritage. This
strange evolution makes one wonder whether the way Zeami designed the no six
hundred years ago was the right one, or the fact that the court imposed its
monopoly on it actually saved the no in that original shape. This is hard a
question to answer. One last fear before the actual analysis of the two god plays
written by Zeami: one of my colleagues in the Theatre Arts Department asked
me if I really believed that each no representation is a ritualizing process. Faithful
to Grimes, I answered without thinking: “Yes”. “Then, how come that the one
I saw was so boring and I didn’t have any particular feeling about it?” I had no reply to that and I only could remember how much importance Zeami gave to the audience.

4. Modes of Ritual Sensibility in Kureha and Takasago

I chose two no plays from the traditional repertory and I will try to stress various modes of ritual sensibility that are possibly applicable to them. Because the only material I have access to are the texts, I cannot make any demonstration that would involve ritualizing. Ritualizing pertains to performing, while the text is a fixed structure. So, the point I am making by analyzing these plays is to prove that they already have the characteristics of ritual, because there are examples of ritual sensibility in them, so, even if written by Zeami, they couldn’t escape standardization.

Both plays are of the first category (god plays) and their plots are very old, being in fact old Japanese legends. – The ritualizing in this case is also done by the act of writing itself. Zeami gave his own variant of old folk tales. The texts of the plays are taken from Royall Tyler’s anthology of no plays (from now on Tyler, 1992).

Kureha
Kureha is the name of the village where this play takes place. It is, according to Tyler (p. 172) within the boundaries of present day city of Ikeda, near Osaka International Airport. The only problem seems to be that even if in the play the action takes place on the shore, there is no sea nearby the real Kureha village. The explanation is that sometime in the past the sea actually used to reach the spot through an arm. The name of the place comes from kureha-tori (‘weaver from Wu’), Wu being a Chinese province, the area of the mouth of Yangtze River), one of the central characters in the play.

The plot is taken from Nihon shoki (The Chronicles of Japan, 720) and it refers to an episode which took place in the reign of Emperor Ojin (r. 270-310), when four weavers from Wu came to Japan. Two of them (two sisters, like those in the play) reached the site of the play. Other sources talk about the two sisters as “transformations of the Great Deity Amaterasu”, who “descended from Heaven to the village of Kureha”. So, the two sisters wove clothes for the emperor, just like Amaterasu weaves the order of the world. The play Kureha is about the sacred craft of weaving and it is a reenactment of the weaving the two girls were doing in illo tempore.

The ritualization is the easiest to observe, especially through the stage directions. There are movements inside the stage, both on real distances and on imaginary. For instance, on page 174, “Official mimes walking” and the texts reads: “… beyond, lies our goal,/ Kureha village, and we have arrived/ Kureha village and we have arrived”. Then, there is real movement on the stage; all
actors sit, the stage assistant places a loom and a stool at side of stage, Heddle maid enters carrying a length of silk, Shuttle Maid also enters the stage. Throughout the play there are various moments when the actors move and there are of course dances that cannot be described by the text.

Decorum is also everywhere. Both kinds of interaction between the actors on stage and between the actors and the audience are specifically mentioned. The actors either “face audience” or “face each other”, depending on the particular moment of the play.

The text also provides a moment, which I consider to be part of the decorum ritual involved by the play. I am thinking of the scene when the official talks to the two ladies and Shuttle Maid admits she is ashamed because they have been found weaving by this stranger. They are weaving, but judging upon their appearance (again, decorum element), the official understands they are not “villagers, no simple folk” (Tyler, 1992, p. 175).

The liturgy is represented by the story the two maids tell the official revealing how the craft of weaving came to Japan. In the story there is a subtext, which implies ceremony also, since it remembers the audience the time of glory (probably invented) when Japan has conquered the three Korean kingdoms.

What is missing in this play is the moment of magic, when the shite character in the first part of the play reveals himself as the ghost of some famous historical character or as the impersonation of a god or of a Bodhisatva (most of the plays in the second and the third categories use this pattern). Kareha is
different from this point of view because the identity of the maids as being those who centuries ago came to Japan is revealed from the very beginning. Still, the atmosphere of magic is somehow present even here because of the reenactment of a sacred craft.

**Takasago**

*Takasago* is one of the most famous plays in the no tradition and probably the most interesting and the most moving in the first category. According to Tyler is “one of Zeami’s greatest successes, and his writings leave no doubt that he was proud of it” (Tyler, 1992, p. 277). Here we also have an old legend whose material has been adapted for the stage of no. It is not only an old Japanese legend, but also the universal myth of the felicitous couple that chooses to die together and it is transformed in trees by the gods (Philemon and Baucis in the ancient Greek mythology). In the Japanese version, the old man (the pine of Sumiyoshi) and the old woman (the pine of Takasago) are, curiously enough, not together, but separated by a three days distance. Still, this is not an impediment for their love.

Tyler gives one interpretation according to which the play enjoyed such popularity because the pine is the symbol of the emperor and the old, wise man in the play would stand for his image. Luckily enough, during the shōgunate period, it seems that because of the pine tree represented in the play, Tokugawa shōguns also considered the play as an auspicious one for their own prosperity.
as a clan, since their original name was Matsudaira (where *matsu* means pine) (Idem, Ibidem).

I don’t feel like further stressing upon *ritualization* sensibility, since its presence in the play is obvious. There are, however, some elements of *decorum* ritual, which I find very interesting and challenging in this particular play. When they first enter the stage the old couple is by no means to be recognized as the deities of Takasago, and Sumiyoshi shrines, respectively: “*To shin-no-issei* music, enter Old Woman and Old Man, in that order. Old Woman, who carries a broom of evergreen fronds, stops at the first pine. Old Man carries a rake; he stops at third pine. They face each other”. (Tyler, 1992, pp. 281-282). They appear to be simple folk, because they are to prepare in this way the *magic* moment of the Sumiyoshi god (he is the only one to come back and perform the dance)’s apparition in the second part of the play. They are not deities, but some simple folk who happen to share the same story as the two deities – a couple separated by distance but united by their perennial love.

There is one particular moment in the first part of the play that makes me wonder of its meaning and I am not sure whether it belongs to the *ritualization* sensibility or to the *decorum*. On page 283, “… Old Woman moves to corner and Old Man to center. Both stand facing audience”. Now, because movement is involved, the simplest way to interpret this scene is by classifying it under *ritualization*. Without being wrong, this is not entirely correct. There is not only movement here. The meaning behind it is probably that the Takasago deity is
already taking a retired position by comparison with the more important god of Sumiyoshi, the true image of the emperor. Later, on the next page, the deity of Takasago goes further back, while the deity of Sumiyoshi is facing the audience (“Old Man faces audience, Old Woman goes to stand before drums”, p. 284 – see Appendix 2). She will not move from that spot until he will finish to tell the story and explain the meaning of their existence as a couple, in other words until they exit. He is the master of the stage and goes from one point to another, just like he will do it in the second part when he returns as a god.

The liturgy consists of the whole part one during Sumiyoshi deity’s explanations about the sacred character of the couple’s love. Just like in Kureha, this is more like an initiation moment, which will entitle the waki – Tomonari – to see the real manifestation of the god. The second part of the play is the magic ritual moving the characters into the realm of the transcendent.

5. Conclusion

This is far from being a thorough examination of the no plays using Ronald Grimes’ ideas about ritual, but I think it is a good point to start one. Ritual in movement and inventing rituals is a very challenging perspective that can offer
new reflections on old manifestations of the ritual. Zeami was not, of course, aware of his inventing a ritual and he had no idea of ritualizing. But his treatises prove that he was very conscious of the danger of having the no canonized. Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened. Fortunately, it is because of that we still can see it. But, as Zeami put it, "generations change" and who knows if no will not mean other than a museum exhibit in one generation.

Of course, interpreting the no from this perspective has its limitations. There are various other aspects within the boundaries of the complex phenomenon called no, which have been eluded by the present paper, and rightfully so, since it was not my purpose here to offer a thorough analysis of the traditional Japanese drama. I have only tried to give a new perspective, to polish another of the multiple faces of the diamond. To which extent I did succeed in my attempt is not to me to judge anymore.
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