

## *Where Rivers Meet*

*Linda C. Ehrlich*

*Where Rivers Meet, a fall 2015 theatre/film series/symposium/music/art event/workshop in South Texas with international and local participation, is detailed. The event drew together the Japanese nō play Sumida River (Sumidagawa) and Benjamin Britten's "church opera" Curlew River and added a new kyōgen play, Song of the Yanaguana River, written by San Antonio poet Carmen Tafolla.*

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"Texas" and "nō theatre" might not seem an obvious pairing but, between September and November 2015, *Where Rivers Meet* made that pairing a reality. The project, which took place in San Antonio and Houston despite Hurricane Patricia and other unexpected events, offered audiences the unprecedented opportunity to experience the combination of the Japanese nō *Sumida River (Sumidagawa)*, a new *kyōgen (Song of the Yanaguana River)*, written by Texas's 2015 poet laureate, Carmen Tafolla, and an opera based on nō (Benjamin Britten's 1964 "church opera" *Curlew River*). Performers from Japan, the United States, and the United Kingdom thrilled Texas audiences.

Spearheaded by Kevin Salfen (associate professor of Music at the University of the Incarnate Word [UIW]), this theatre/film/art fes-

tival was produced by UIW, St. Luke's Episcopal Church and School (San Antonio), and Theatre Nohgaku. Salfen is a member of this international theatre troupe, founded in 2000, whose mission is to train performers in and educate audiences about *nō* and to create new *nō* in English.<sup>1</sup> According to Salfen, the chief reasons the university chose to support the project were to mark the opening of UIW's new music building and to communicate to the civic community the dynamism of the university's arts programs. St. Luke's Episcopal Church joined *Where Rivers Meet* to relaunch its lapsed concert series. Preparations took about three years, and the project was funded through a combination of external grants,<sup>2</sup> UIW, and a great deal of in-kind support from individuals and San Antonio institutions.

A major part of the educational programming for the project was an eight-film series focusing on the central themes of the festival (water, grief over lost children, Japanese *nō*, Benjamin Britten, borderlands), with the author of this report as guest curator. Connections to Asian theatre were present in some of the films: *The Men Who Tread on the Tiger's Tail* (*Tora no ō o fumu otokotachi*, 1945/1952, dir. Kurosawa) is based on the kabuki play *Kanjinchō*, which itself is based on the *nō* piece *The Ataka Barrier*; *Late Spring* (*Banshun*, 1939, dir. Ozu) includes a scene in which the characters attend a *nō* of *Kakitsubata* (The Water Iris, see Ehrlich [2015]); and Jean Renoir's *The River* (1951), which is set in India with a *bharata natyam* sequence. Other film events included an evening focused on Benjamin Britten's music, *Night Mail* (1936, dir. Harry Watt and Basil Wright) and *Beau Travail* (1999, dir. Claire Denis), which uses portions of Britten's opera *Billy Budd*; and Miyazaki Hayao's *Ponyo* (2008). The film series offered a range—from silent to sound, black and white to color, documentary, animation, experimental film, and the all-star feature film.

Leading up to the performances, a select group of students had the rare opportunity to participate in a mask-making workshop taught by master artisan Kitazawa Hideta (b. 1968), a second-generation wood-carving artist of Shinto portable shrines and *nō* masks (see Kitazawa 2011). An exhibit of Kitazawa's traditional and contemporary masks at the San Antonio Central Library supported a further understanding of this aspect of *nō* costuming.

An academic symposium opened the week of the performances and opened with a rich program of original and classical music in UIW's new music building. The program ranged from instrumental music from *nō* (performed by Richard Emmert, sixteenth-generation *ōtsuzumi* player Ōkura Eitarō, and James Ferner) and the traditional *shakuhachi* piece *Takiochi* (Waterfall Falling) played by Martha Fabrique, to a range of new compositions. One highlight was Kevin Salfen's composition

for tenor soloist and choir, *Birding (super flumina) Babylonis* (a “psalm-mandala”), based on an interweaving of words of the Latin version of Psalm 137 with excerpts from the journal of Jonathan Trouern-Trend, a former Iraq-based Marine who is a birding enthusiast. The lingering effect was a reaffirmation of our underlying humanity. The eclectic musical collage of this Thursday night event—with instruments as varied as water gongs and Mexican indigenous guitar—set the tone for the multicultural, multifaceted event to follow.

The two-day symposium provided an opportunity for scholars and community members to interact around topics related to the project. One highlight of the symposium was a live performance of Benjamin Britten’s score for the 1936 experimental documentary *Night Mail* with the twenty-five-minute British film (in a special cut made by Peter Martens of Texas Tech University) projected on the screen above the musicians. The ensemble, which included a part for steam whistle, was conducted by Brett Richardson of UIW. The live performance of the score emphasized the multitude of (Foley-produced) sounds in this now classic documentary, which ends with a poem by W. H. Auden set to rhythm by Britten—a sort of 1930s rap! In a paper on Britten’s use of French horn, Drew Stephen of the University of Texas at San Antonio explored connections between Britten’s experience of Japanese instruments (in a 1955 visit to Japan where he saw *Sumidagawa* twice) and *Curlew River* (1964).

John Oglevee of Theatre Nohgaku described a “workshop model” for teaching *nō* to students overseas designed by Oshima Kinue and Matsui Akira, both Kita school actors who work with the company. Group lessons stress, for example, maintaining a strong *kamae* (framework) for the body, as students learn a string of *kata* (movement patterns) that eventually result in a complete dance. Tom O’Connor of UCLA and Theatre Nohgaku called for us to view theatre through the “permeable nature of international boundaries,” which contest rigid views of nationhood, citing some *shinsaku nō* (newly written *nō*) performed by Theatre Nohgaku as examples. In another session, Oglevee and David Surtasky (another Theatre Nohgaku member) provided a special hands-on demonstration about *nō* costuming.

A symposium panel titled “Making *Song of the Yanaguana River*,” moderated by Jody Blake, curator of the Tobin Collection at McNay Art Museum, offered revealing insights into how story development, costume design, and movement training created that new *kyōgen* production. Filmmaker Brian Higdon discussed working with elementary students in Fukushima, Japan, on a film of their design. A poetry reading and interfaith dialogue provided additional breadth to the symposium’s offerings.

Ultimately, all the “tributaries” came together—like the swollen Barton Springs in Austin after the severe rains—in the performances, which were held in the Bennack Music Center, St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, and the Asia Society Texas Center in Houston. Flooding of the Dougherty Arts Center in Austin in the wake of Hurricane Patricia compelled a sudden switch of the opening night venue to San Antonio’s UIW Bennack Music Center. Multiple challenges brought about by flooding felt almost fated in a project highlighting water.

The three theatrical pieces gave audiences an opportunity to see Japanese theatre interact with forms outside Japan, including local ones. One problem with this kind of multifaceted performance evening is how to transform a proscenium stage into some approximation of the liminal space of the *hashigakari* (passageway), the four pillars, and the relative proximity of the audience allowed by a traditional *nō* stage. For *Where Rivers Meet*, a *nō* stage was grafted onto a proscenium stage, which means inevitably that something of the character of *nō* was lost. *Nō* in English also presents particular problems, not the least of which is what to do with the final consonants (almost absent in Japanese) as all of the players strive to preserve a sense of *ma* (intervals, rhythm). Although a libretto was provided for *Sumida River*, Richard Emmert’s English-language version of what he called in the program “the saddest play in the classical repertory,” supertitles might have been a more effective means of helping the audience follow along.

Fifth-generation *nō* performer Oshima Kinue (Fig. 1), the only professional female performer in the Kita school, performed the role of the Madwoman (the *shite*) in *Sumidagawa* in English, something few (if any) professional *nō* actors can claim to have done. Oshima was supported by a women’s chorus, whose voices provided an unusual and striking tapestry. This is probably one of the few times that a full *nō* has been performed with a women’s chorus outside Japan. Oshima’s eloquent stillness and gestures projected the Mother’s vulnerability and longing. Her chanted English was at times hard to understand, but the movements of her *nōmai* (dance) were exquisitely fluid and unforced.

Other cast members included Richard Emmert (*waki*, Ferryman), and Matthew Dubroff (*tsure*, Traveler). Emmert and Dubroff’s strong vocal delivery helped underscore the narrative elements of the play. Dubroff’s daughter Miriam Kagan-Dubroff played the *kokata* (child) role (Spirit of the Boy).

As Salfen wrote in the informative program guide for the event, *Song of the Yanaguana River* served as “a linking piece between two rivers, with *nō* and Britten meeting in South Texas.” (Yanaguana is an ancient name for the San Antonio River.)

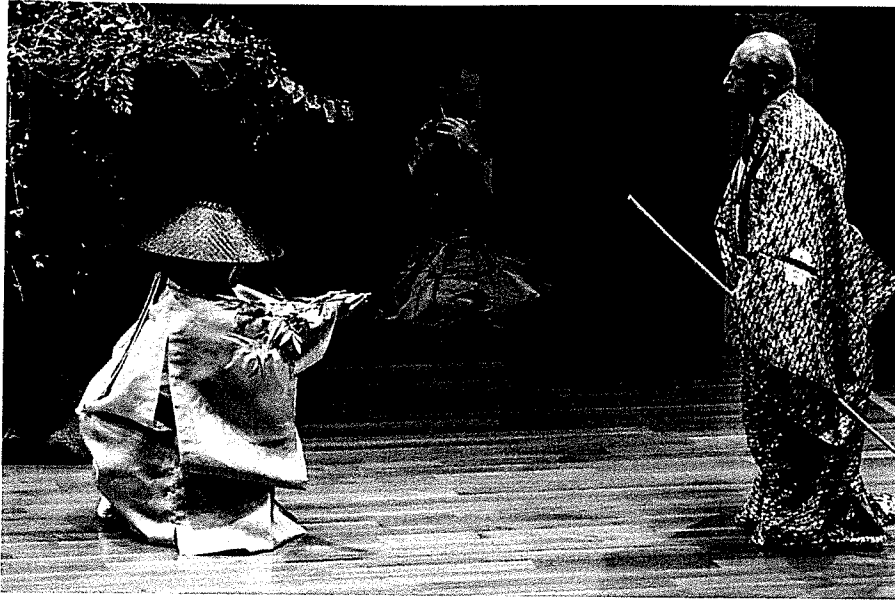


FIGURE 1. Oshima Kinue as the Madwoman in *Sumidagawa*, with Richard Emmert as the Ferryman. (Photo: David Surtasky, Courtesy of Theatre Nohgaku)

After receiving an introduction to *kyōgen* from director Jubilith Moore, who has worked extensively with San Francisco's Theatre of Yugen as well as Theatre Nohgaku, Carmen Tafolla composed a piece with the San Antonio River "as both setting and actor," making what must surely be the first Texas *kyōgen*. Tafolla's comic piece also continued her concern with expressing the stories of (in her words) "people flattened by history"—in this case, a Barge Driver whose ties to the San Antonio area predate colonialism. The character of the Barge Driver (played by Teresa Vincent) also served as a clever transposition of *Sumidagawa's* and *Curlew River's* Ferryman figures to contemporary San Antonio. Tafolla also used the sense of *mūgen* (dream) *nō* to include a larger-than-life Spirit of the River (performed by Marissa Garcia, Fig. 2). With face painted blue and in a richly textured costume—a shiny blue dress with undulating patterns, representing the river as the mother of life—designed by Margaret Mitchell (professor of Theatre Arts at UIW), she wandered freely around the stage and circulated through the audience.

A group of five instrumentalists sat on stage on low stools, with a range of small instruments (frame drums, tambourines, and antique cymbals) to accompany several songs and to provide a Foley-



FIGURE 2. The Spirit of the River (Marissa Garcia) in *The Song of the Yanaguana River*. (Photo: David Surtasky, Courtesy of Theatre Nohgaku)

like soundtrack. Nods to traditional *kyōgen* included the comic role of the Novio (“boyfriend,” played by Miguel Alcántar), an international student nervously being rowed to meet his beloved’s father, carrying a bottle of fine mezcal liquor. (Those familiar with *kyōgen* can imagine what happens to the contents of that bottle.) Aspects of famous *kyōgen* plays *Busu* (Sweet Poison) and *Bōshibari* (Tied to a Pole) cropped up. Jubilith Moore’s sensitive direction of beginning *kyōgen* actors (all UIW students) was one of the finest “balancing acts” of the project.

The staging of *Curlew River* naturally invited comparison with *Sumidagawa*. For the performances on 5 and 6 November, *Curlew River* was performed in a church, as Britten intended. In these performances, the central aisle became a passageway for the monks and instrumentalists to approach the “stage” in front of the altar. The choir loft and aisle also became sites for the Spirit of the Boy to communicate with his mother, perhaps inspired by the *hashigakari* of *nō*. Although there was certainly an austerity to the direction (by Mark Stringham of UIW), the staging area was more occupied by the singer-actors than in *Sumidagawa*.

One of the most engrossing aspects of the performances of *Where Rivers Meet* was having the chance to compare the characters in *nō* with those in *Curlew River*. Both performances effectively conveyed the

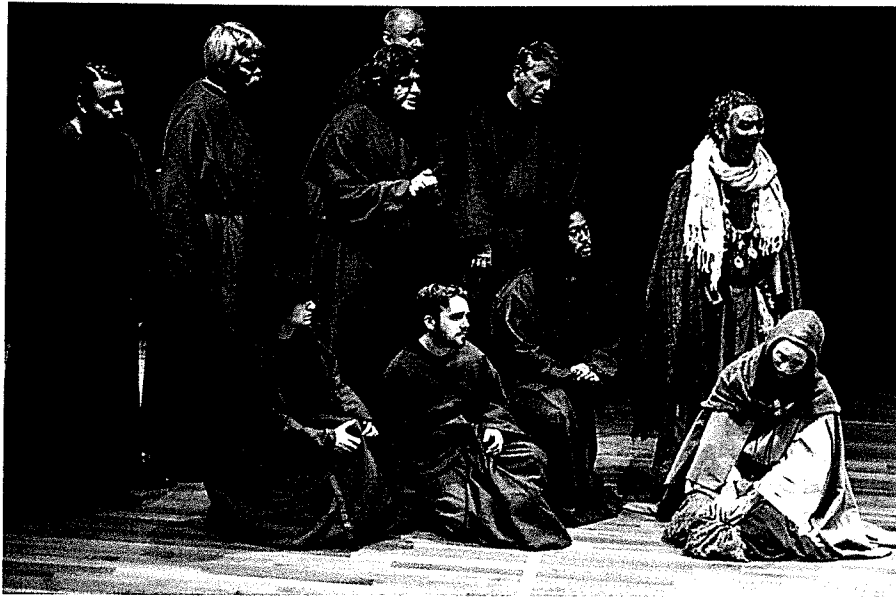


FIGURE 3. Confronting the Madwoman in *Curlew River*. (Photo: David Surtasky, Courtesy of Theatre Nohgaku)

Ferryman's growing empathy for the woman's plight. Keeping with the restraint of *nō*, the scorn shown toward the Madwoman in *Sumida River* is mainly verbal and her grief is shown in a series of subtle gestures that may have been difficult for the uninitiated audience members to perceive. By contrast, the Madwoman in *Curlew River* (performed with eloquence and pathos by Steven Brennfleck, Fig. 3) is shoved brutally by the chorus (dressed in long maroon robes). Brennfleck managed to deliver the difficult musical phrases of the Britten score while preserving an air of mystery, as in the Japanese play.

The sensitive interplay between the flute and the Madwoman, the impassioned viola, and the ethereal sounds of the harp added layers to what over the course of the evening became ever richer. Another "first" was that *Sumidagawa* and *Curlew River* gave audiences a chance to see the same role (Madwoman) performed first by a woman and then by a man, surrounded by a women's and later a men's chorus. A "first" for *Curlew River* was that the half masks used in the production were crafted by Kitazawa Hideta, who also made the *shakumi* (middle-aged woman) mask used by Oshima in *Sumida River*.

The three parts of *Where Rivers Meet*—*Sumidagawa*, *Song of the Yanaguana*, and *Curlew River*—complemented and commented on each other. Together they offered opportunities for links across perfor-

mance styles and cultures. Zeami wrote about the audience embarking on a journey, and *Where Rivers Meet* felt like a realization of that concept. Although the project met the usual problems of how to contextualize previously unknown art forms and films for an audience, it helped expose people in South Texas to those forms on a high level, lighting some sparks. It certainly hit the high-water mark.

#### NOTES

1. Recent works include Deborah Brevoort and Richard Emmert's *Blue Moon over Memphis*, a *nō* about Elvis, and Carrie Preston and David Crandall's *Zahdi Dates and Poppies*, a *nō* that touches on the war in Iraq and PTSD and had its premiere in Boston in March 2016.

2. Funders were the Marcia and Otto Koehler Foundation, the Tokyo Club, the Tobin Theatre Arts Fund, and the Nathalie and Gladys Dalkowitz Charitable Trust, among others.

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