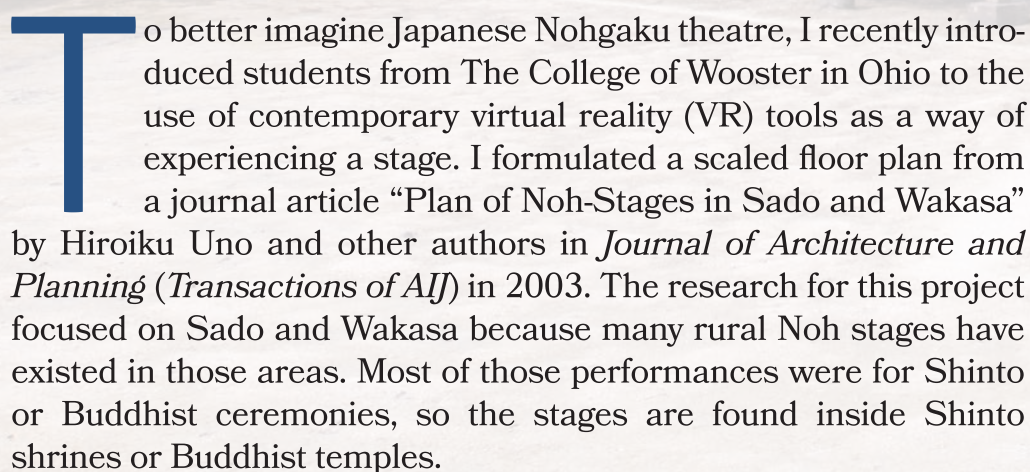
Experiencing the Japanese Nohgaku Theatre

Students and faculty build a VR experience to bring Japanese theatre, and its rich history, closer to home

BY NAOKO I. SKALA



To better imagine Japanese Nohgaku theatre, I recently introduced students from The College of Wooster in Ohio to the use of contemporary virtual reality (VR) tools as a way of experiencing a stage. I formulated a scaled floor plan from a journal article "Plan of Noh-Stages in Sado and Wakasa" by Hiroiku Uno and other authors in *Journal of Architecture and Planning* (*Transactions of AIJ*) in 2003. The research for this project focused on Sado and Wakasa because many rural Noh stages have existed in those areas. Most of those performances were for Shinto or Buddhist ceremonies, so the stages are found inside Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples.

Itsukushima Jingu Noh stage | © hacksss23. Adobe Stock #60920193 Extended License.

The back panel of the main stage area usually displays a painted pine tree | © satoko*. Adobe Stock #307274170 Extended License.

Traditional Japanese architecture, Japanese religions, and Japanese theatre architecture and design are closely aligned. To assist students with understanding this space, I created a virtual 3D model of the Nohgaku Theatre for a 3D printer and VR environment. The model files introduced the architectural details and provided students the experience of a walk-through without visiting Japan, creating an opportunity to fully experience and understand a Nohgaku theatre space.

This project is the result of multiple pedagogical challenges, including the experience of teaching classes online. This type of project offers an excellent tool for understanding the performance spaces in different venues, and benefits both design and non-design students. Giving students the experience of walking through a physical space in a virtual reality space allows them to get a sense of being in the theatre. At a time when they couldn't travel due to the global pandemic, students were able put their minds elsewhere—to a Nohgaku theatre.

Exploring a Historic Art Form

Considered one of the oldest theatre forms globally, Noh theatre, or Nohgaku theatre, is a well-known Japanese traditional art form. Nohgaku combines the performance traditions of both Noh and Kyogen. Noh is a masked musical dance-drama that originates from popular entertainment associated with various ritual dances during the 8th century to the 12th century; Noh emerged during the early 14th century. In *A History of Japanese Theatre*, Shinko Kagaya and Hiroko Miura describe Noh as "scripts of great poetic force tell of the spirits of unrequited lovers, fallen warriors, mothers who have lost children to slave traders, and hunters paying for their sin of killing sentient beings" (Kagaya and Miura 2016, 24).

The origin of Noh is called San-Gaku, an entertainment style that contains music, song, dance, impersonation, and acrobatics that came from China in the 8th century. During the Heian Period (794–1185), San-Gaku was banned by the government. However, the performers were spread to the various regions, performing in religious festivals and ceremonies. Some groups became the traveling performing groups, and some Buddhist or Shinto temples supported other performing groups. People started calling San-Gaku "Saru-Gaku" because of the impersonation in the performance. Saru-Gaku, literally "monkey entertainment," became the comedic satire play and developed as Kyogen later. The name Saru (monkey) came from Saru-Mane (monkey impersonation), which is interpreted as impersonating others without thinking.

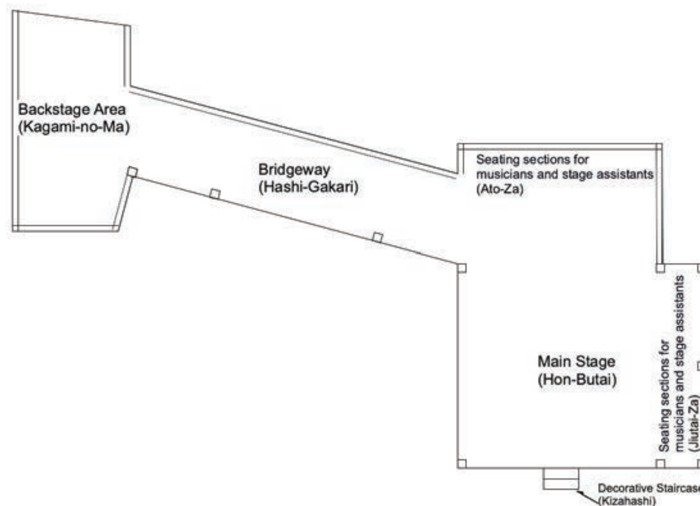
In the late 14th century, Kannami transformed the Saru-Gaku to Noh's fine art form with music, song, and dance. A multi-talented playwright and performer, Kannami received support from General Ashikaga Yoshimitsu. Kannami's son, Zeami, polished the performance, and Noh became a graceful performing art form. Zeami's passion for theorizing Noh are still influential to today's Noh theatre (nohgaku.or.jp).

Kyogen is a short comedic play that also developed from San-Gaku. By the early 14th century, these performers employed regional folktales and popular songs in their performance. Their plays were satire, physical comedy, dark comedy, and Noh parody. By the middle of

the 15th century, Kyogen was performed with Noh (Salz, 68).

Nohgaku invokes Noh and Kyogen and sometimes includes Okina or Shiki-Sanban (the formal term), which is performed for celebratory occasions or to celebrate the new year. Okina's performance is for praying for the peace and security of Japan and a bountiful harvest, which contains the essence of the Shinto ritual. When they perform Okina, all the performers (including musicians) must purify before the performance. According to the website *the-NOH.com*, "The term Nohgaku took root in 1881 when members of the nobility established Nohgakusha, a support group for Nohgaku. In this period, the indoor Noh theatre style was led by a new Noh stage built by Nohgakusha, called Momijiyama Noh Theatre in Shiba Park, or Shiba Noh Theatre" (db2.the-noh.com). Because Noh and Kyogen were developed from Saru-Gaku, it is natural to use Nohgaku as the term for both performances when they started being performed together; Kyogen contains strong elements of the Saru-Gaku entertainment's essence. Some people still call the art form Noh, but calling it Nohgaku better represents both components.

The Nohgaku stages were originally outdoors or inside of the temples' properties. Many Shinto temples have Kagura-den, which is the stage for religious dance and ceremonies. The architecture style and structure of Kagura-den are very similar to the basic structure of the Nohgaku theatre, which uses a minimal number of columns and walls in an open-aired, raised platform architectural style. In *The Japanese Taste in Architectural Style of Modern Noh Theatre*, Shinichiro Tsuji notes that the audience area has changed throughout the years. However, the style of the Noh theatre stage has not changed since medieval times (circa 14th century) in Japan (Tsuji 2020, 921). Understanding the traditional Japanese architecture might help create a better understanding of the virtual Noh theatre stage, especially for the materials and colors of the stage. Additionally, understanding traditional Japanese architecture and how religious ideas influence Japanese architecture can help students better understand the relationship between Noh plays and major religions in Japan.



Nohgaku Theatre floor plan with definitions | Courtesy Naoko Skala.

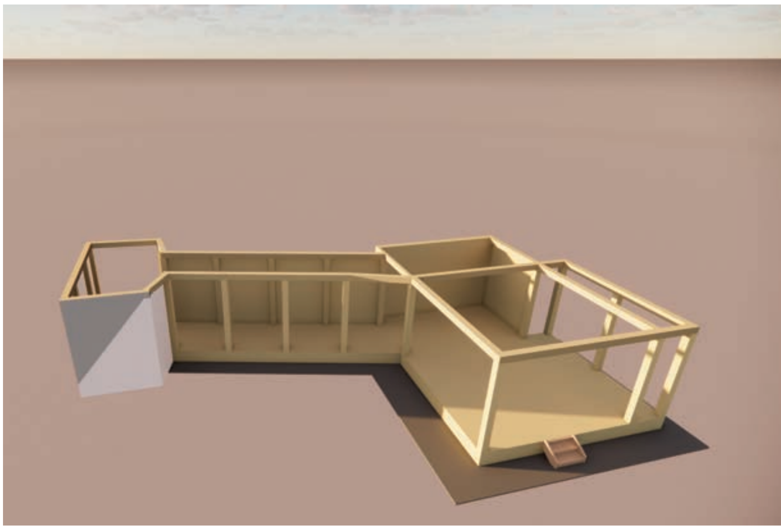
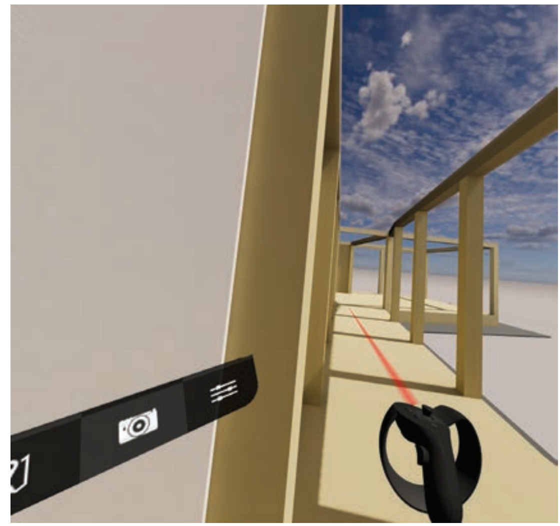
Connecting Theatre and Religion

Noh and Japanese religion, especially Japanese Buddhism, are deeply connected, and the development of Japanese traditional architecture and major Japanese religions are influenced by each other. Understanding the relationship between architectural history and religion is essential for learning Noh plays and Nohgaku theatre. Shintoism and Buddhism are the two major religions in Japan today, yet most Japanese religions are not categorized clearly. For Japanese people, religion "means the religion that each family has had since ancient times for the purpose of worshipping their ancestors has stayed with the household" (Kodansha International 2000, 195-196). *The Japanese Yearbook of Religions by the Agency for Cultural Affairs* (2020) shows that among Japanese religious believers or followers, about 49 percent follow Shintoism, while 46 percent follow Buddhism.

Shintoism in Japan developed alongside Buddhism, building upon various existing belief systems that were not considered identifiable or formed religions. These beliefs and the idea that all natural objects and phenomena are considered deities is called Yaoyorozu-no-kami (8 million deities). In *Shinto, Nature, and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests*, Aike Rots describes Shinto "as Japan's 'indigenous religion and portrayed as an ancient tradition, closely related to Japanese culture and society, which has successfully adapted itself to changing historical circumstances, while its essence has remained more or less unchanged since prehistoric times" (Rots 2017, 25).

In The *Genius of Japanese Carpentry: Secrets of an Ancient Craft*, Azby Brown also explains that "as a form of animism, Shinto ascribes consciousness and personality to natural forces, geological formations, and non-human living things. Certain mountains are held sacred, as are parts of forests and even particular trees. The presence and will of these deities, or Kami (Shinto god), pervaded everything" (Brown 2014, 24). Because using wood for a building is the idea of natural endowments, when Japanese people build something, many tend to invite a Shinto priest and pray for peace and security for the building and the people who use the building.

According to *Talking about Japan* Updated Q&A (2000), Buddhism reached Japan in 538 via China and Korea. However, Dale Saunders (1964) argues in *Buddhism in Japan* that the introduction of Buddhism to Japan from Korea was in 552 AD, but "there is no doubt, however, that the Japanese Court, at least, must have had cognizance of the religion before then" (Saunders 1964, 91). Some conflicts of acceptance in the Japanese court for Buddhism caused arguments between scholars about the year of Buddhism's arrival. "Some felt that the polite thing was for the Japanese, after the example of other civilized countries, to adopt the new religion, but

Rendered views from Enscape and Oculus Quest 2 headset | Courtesy Naoko Skala.

others expressed concern lest the native divinities be offended by the importation of new gods" (93). The ultimate decision of this first council was to approve the worship of the Buddhist image as a kind of temporary experiment, meaning "that it took into account the native cult and its provincial traditions, which had little or nothing in common with the universality of legitimate Buddhism" (93 and 98). Shintoism and Buddhism thus developed together. The mainstream Japanese religion was shaped as the merging of two belief systems for worshipping their ancestors.

Over time, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism influenced Shintoism, and later became ideologized. After World War II, religion was separated from the state, and Shintoism became one of many religions in Japan.

Studying Religion's Influence on Architecture

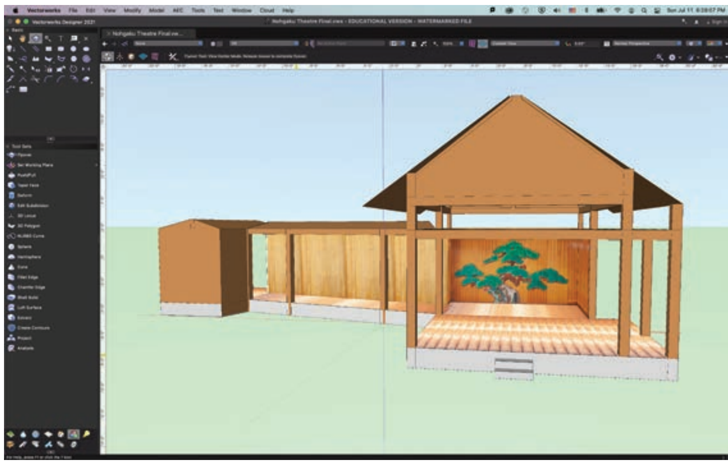
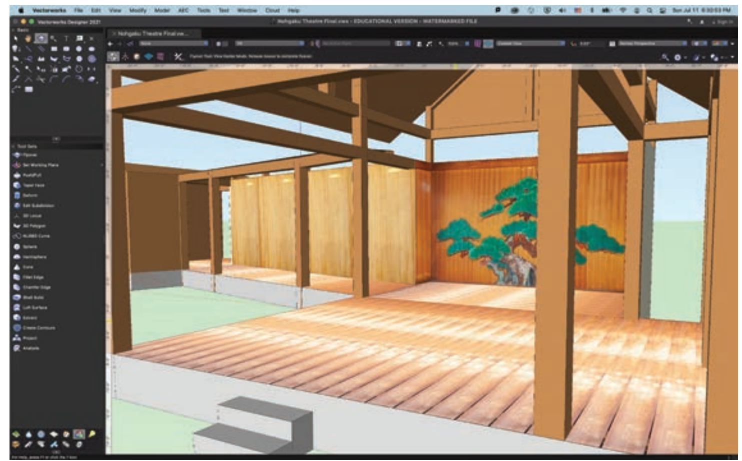
The introduction of Buddhism also influenced the development of traditional architecture in the 6th century. In *The Genius of Japanese Carpentry*, Azby Brown notes that geographic isolation from the Asian mainland caused a different pace of technological development from other countries because of a barrier to migration and disseminating ideas. However, during religious development, technology was also developed evolutionally (Brown 2014, 17). In the 7th century, the two most important pieces of architecture in history were built in Japan, Ise Jingu and Horyu-Ji. Both of them influence most of the Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples.

Ise Jingu, a shrine dedicated to the guarding deity of the Japanese imperial family, unified Shinto's animism–the idea that all-natural objects and phenomena are considered to have deities. The spirit of the ancestors of the imperial family set the stage for an impressive building. Jingu means shrine in Japanese, usually referring to the Shinto gods' residence. According to *A Global History of Architecture* by Francis Ching, "Every 20 years for the last 1,500 years, the shrine has been rebuilt, identical to the one before, but with virgin old-growth timber. The Ise Jingu that stands in Japan today was built in 2013. In a sense, then, it is practically new. Yet, at the same time, it can be dated to the year 690" (Ching 2017, 297).

Many Japanese royals preferred Korean architecture before the 7th century. However, after the mid 7th century, they grew to prefer Chinese culture and architecture rather than Korean. That preference was reflected in Horyu-Ji, built at Nara in the late 7th century (301). Ji means temple in Japanese, usually referring to a Buddhist temple.

Ching describes how the Itsukushima Jingu shows the merged ideas of Shintoism and Buddhism as an architecture style. "The original shrine dating back to the 6th century, CE was rebuilt on a grand scale in 1168. In the main sanctuary, Taira no Kiyomori (a military leader of the early 12th century in Japan) presented 33 illustrated scrolls of the Buddhist Lotus Sutra to the shrine, making Itsukushima a seamless blend of Shinto and Buddhist practices and architecture" (423). Thus, even though Buddhist ideas seemed to overpower Japanese religions, Shintoism was not weakened when Itsukushima Jingu was rebuilt in the 12th century. Brown also indicates that throughout the Buddhist temple construction in the 6th century, Japanese construction technology developed tremendously because of the new tools and techniques also introduced at the time, and "this technology was quickly canonized as emblematic of the new political regime, which sponsored its development and the education of new generations of craftsmen" (23, 24). The Hinoki tree, a type of cypress, is very valuable today because "it is not only strong and resistant to decay, but is easily workable, and has a fine grain, delicate color, and pleasant aroma" (25).

Because significant harvesting of Hinoki forests occurred during the middle of the 20th century, Japanese wooden construction now uses different kinds of trees for various purposes, including Akamatsu (red pine), Sugi (cedar), Tsuga (brown spruce), Kashi (Japanese oak), Kuwa (mulberry), Komatsu (black pine), and Asunaro (cypress). As a result, modern temple carpenters use the wood that looks good and matches the existing wood used for these historic temples. One such carpenter is Tsunekazu Nishioka, who works repairing Horyu-Ji. The construction traditions were passed down orally because Nishioka's family have been carpenters for Horyu-Ji and temples for about six generations (Brown 2014, 31-32). Nishioka mentioned that the original builders of Horyuj-Ji used their Hinoki from the mountains in the region surrounding Nara (Horyu-Ji's

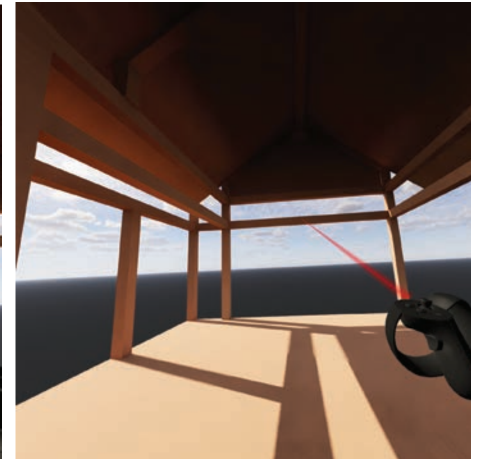
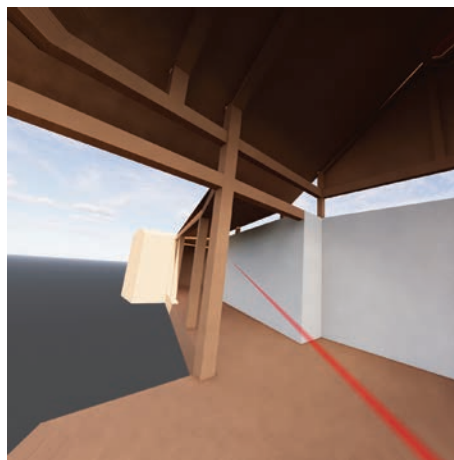
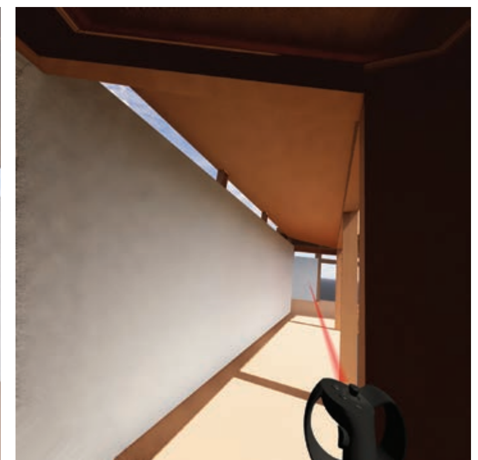



Noh stage with details | Courtesy Naoko Skala.

prefecture) and matched the tree's natural qualities because the trees from different mountains make different wood (Brown 2014, 31-32).

Just as architecture and religion came to include the blended traditions of Buddhism and its temples, Shintoism and its shrines, and earlier religions and architecture, so did the theatrical forms draw on these traditions as well as earlier performance styles.

An ancient shamanistic religion, which differed according to region, existed before Shintoism was shaped as a religion in the 6th century and influenced the development of the performing arts. This regional religion was similar to Shintoism. A medium called Miko received messages from the spirits of natural objects or phenomenon. The religion used the chanted narrative, song, dance with a drum, or some simple musical instruments available in the region. Shintoism adopted the ritual activity to pray, give offerings, entertain for good weather and bountiful harvests, or exorcise evil spirits, illness, crop diseases, and any negative incidence in the community. That ritual also developed as one of the origins of performing arts after Chinese and Korean arts were introduced in Japan during the 7th century.

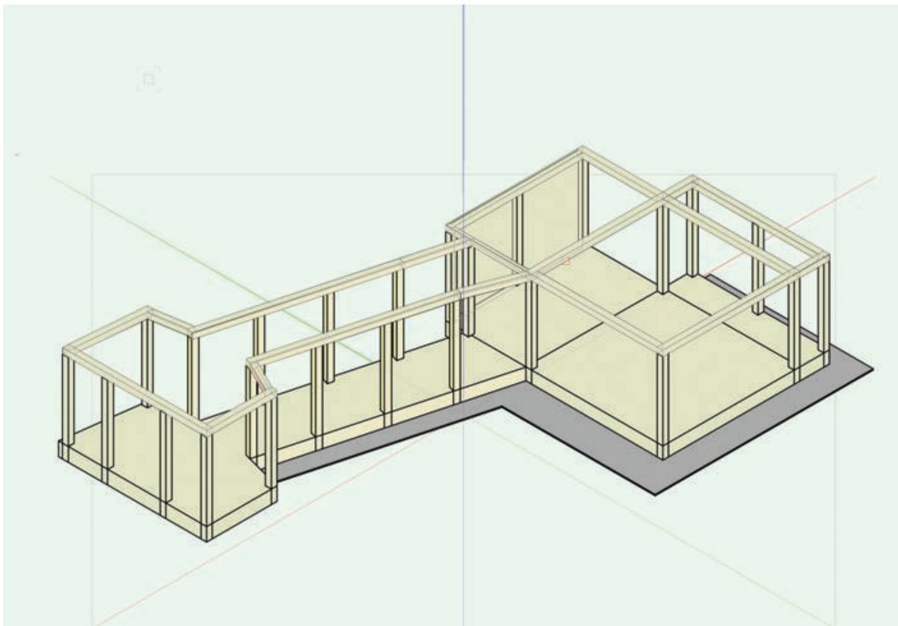




VR view from Oculus Quest 2 headset | Courtesy Naoko Skala.

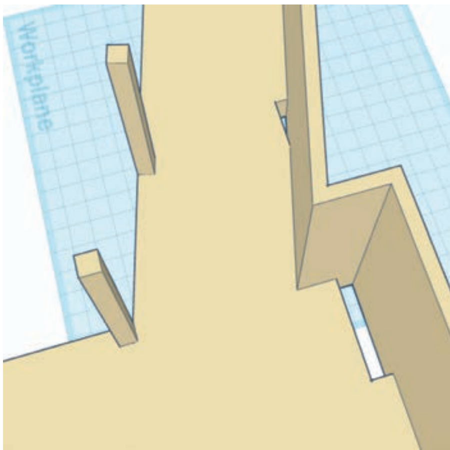
Additionally, three performing arts are considered origins of Noh and Kyogen: Gigaku, masked performance, Sangaku, acrobatic entertainment, and Bugaku, dance performance accompanied by elegant music (Gagaku). They mainly were performed for Buddhist ceremonies or rituals (Terauchi 2016, 4-7).

Shinto and Buddhist ideas, motifs, symbols, and themes are found in many Noh plays. In *Shinto Ideas as Seen in the Noh Plays*, Masaharu Anesaki (1942) asserts, "This is technically due to the nature of the Noh performance centered on dance, but at the same time ideationally due to the sense of the nearness of the spiritual world or of the affinity of the spirit of nature with human life" (Anesaki 1942, 328). However, most of the stories are based on the regional myths and legends, and some of them are a combination of Shintoism and Buddhism religious ideas, but none of them convey the pure concept of Shinto or Buddhism "because they are not religious rites or treatises, but art" (Tyler 1952, 39).

Noh and religion, especially Japanese Buddhism, have deep connections on sponsorship, philosophy, and plots. Saru-Gaku was performed at major temples because Saru-Gaku was good entertainment for collecting donations for the temples. Their performance includes



Vectorworks extruded floor plan | Courtesy Naoko Skala.



3D print STL file with error | Courtesy Naoko Skala.

Buddhist folk tales to teach and introduce Buddhist ideas to the audience. In *A History of Japanese Theatre*, Kagaya and Miura mention that "Buddhism is also evident in plays depicting the suffering of sinners fallen into hell or the world of Asura (warrior purgatory), featuring the Buddhism of song and dance, illustrating the efficacy of chanting prayers to the Amitabha Buddha, or directly proselytizing religious doctrine" (Kagaya and Miura, 45).

Creating the Virtual Stage

The Noh stage is constructed from Hinoki, a type of cypress. The main stage (Hon-Butai) is usually square-shaped and has one column at each corner. The main stage area is 5.4 meters per side, or roughly 18 feet. There are four columns in the main stage, such as Shite-Bashira (located upstage right), Sumi-Bashira (located downstage right), Waki-Bashira (located downstage left), and Fue-Bashira (located upstage left). Sumi-Bashira is especially important for Shite (main character) because the masked performers gauge their location on stage by the column. That is why Sumi-Bashira is also called Metsuke-Bashira (watch column).

Behind the main stage is a rectangular-shaped space (Ato-za) that serves as seating sections for musicians and stage assistants. On the left side of the stage, another rectangular-shaped space (Jiutai-za) serves the same purpose. The Auto-za is connected to a Bridgeway (Hashi-Gakari). At the end of the Bridgeway, a curtain masks the entrance to the backstage area (Kagami-no-ma). The back panel of the main stage area usually displays a painted pine tree (Kagami-ita) (see p. 22). In front of the main stage is the decorative staircase (Kizahashi) (see p. 23).

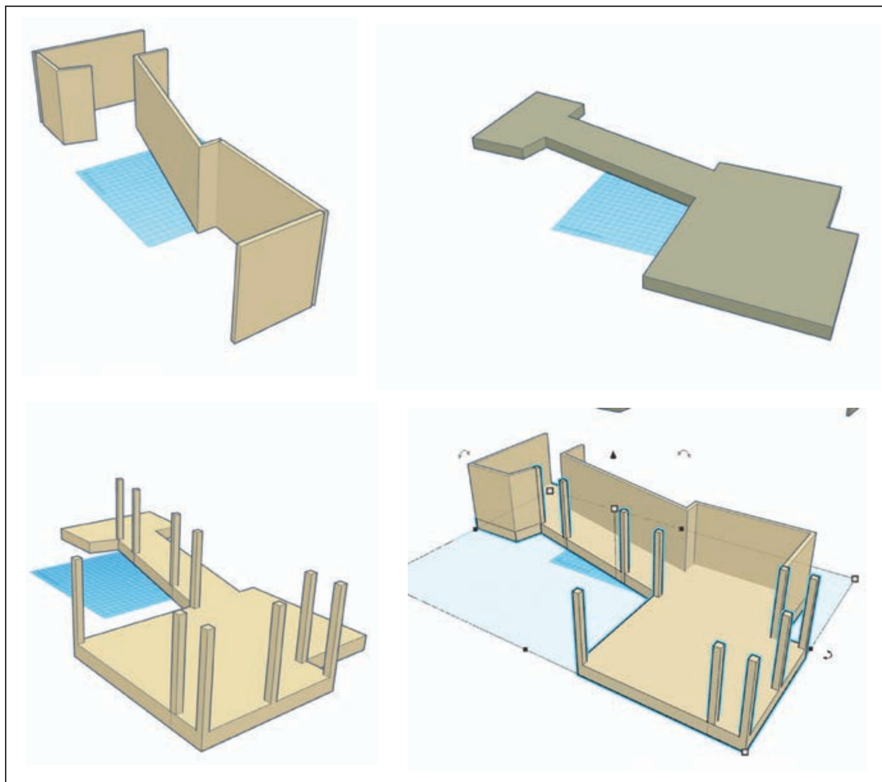
In *A History of Japanese Theatre*, Shinko Kagaya and Hiroko Miura note that "the dimensions, nomenclature, and use of the noh stage achieved their current standard by the end of the 16th century. Previously, Shinto shrine and Buddhism temple stages were used, or temporary structures built to similar dimensions" (Kagaya and Miura 2016, 26).

Contemporary virtual reality tools were used to help students and scholars better imagine Nohgaku theatre as it developed from these religious traditions. For modeling the stage, a formulated scaled floor plan from a journal article "Plan of Noh-Stages in Sado and Wakasa" by Hiroiku Uno and other authors in 2003 was used for this project. Their research focused on Sado and Wakasa because many rural Noh stages have existed in those areas. Most of their performances are for Shinto or Buddhist ceremonies, so the stages are inside Shinto shrines or Buddhist temples.

The VR file was created with Vectorworks, CAD software, Enscape, a rendering, and a virtual reality plug-in. The scale was 1/4" =1'-0" for theatre designers and engineers interested in printing the drawings on paper or opening the CAD file for educational purposes. The Enscape plug-in was released in 2015 and worked with Vectorworks to render the VR file seamlessly (see p. 24). This plug-in required a Windows system to operate, so Apple computer users were able to use Boot Camp software to install the Windows operating system. That helped this research tremendously because Oculus Quest 2, a VR headset, also requires a Windows system to connect the Enscape rendering and operation of the examination of the VR file. Although a pine tree painting image and some wooden floor images were imported in the Vectorworks file, they did not render with the Enscape rendering (see p. 25).

The 3D printing file was created with Vectorworks and Autodesk TinkerCAD, a browser-based 3D design software that makes it easy to edit the 3D printing file from Vectorworks. Typically, we would create the two-dimensional floor plan with Vectorworks, extrude the objects, or use the Wall Tool (see image above left). When it exports to STL or OBJ files, which are the file format for 3D printing, it often has strange holes. Some objects are exported as inaccurate shapes because the file has too much data and information (see "file error" image above left). TinkerCAD is a helpful software to make sure the STL file is printable to avoid those issues. All 3D objects are created with the 3D Polygon Tool and exported separately for this project. When all the objects are exported together, it still has some strange holes in the middle of the object. Even though the hole is quickly filled with Tinker CAD, exporting separately and assembling it on the TinkerCAD is more efficient for printing the 3D model smoothly (see above).

Modeling the traditional Japanese theatre is a helpful process to understand



3D printing files | Courtesy Naoko Skala.

how to provide experiences in space virtually, and even though it is a virtual environment, walking through the Bridgeway and looking around the stage from inside of the building helps to understand the space and how the Nohgaku performers use the space effectively. The experience can also help the viewers feel as though they are in a place outside of the United States, providing an escape during the pandemic and the experience of a traditional space without requiring travel overseas.

This project can also serve as a model to benefit faculty members who are unable to conduct travel-based research due to the pandemic. Perhaps this project may inspire readers to conduct and share similar projects and to find ways to make more of the world's theatres available to us all.

Naoko I. Skala is a scenic designer, scenic artist, props artisan and educator, who was raised in Japan. She joined The College of Wooster as an assistant professor of theatre design in Fall 2020. Previously, Skala worked as an assistant professor of practice in scenic and properties design and technology at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff. Formerly, Skala worked as a properties coordinator at Arizona Opera. She also taught a scene painting class at Arizona State University as a faculty associate and worked as a freelance scene designer/scenic artist/props artisan in Mankato, MN, Hilton Head, SC, and Phoenix. Skala received her MFA in scene design from Minnesota State University, Mankato. She also received her BFA in theatre from Emporia State University in Kansas, and her BA in Japanese literature from Sagami Women's University, Japan. Learn more at www.naokoskala.com.

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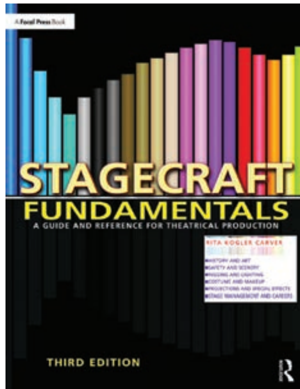

Stagecraft Fundamentals: Third Edition
By Rita Kogler Carver
Routledge, 2019, 545 pages
Hardcover, $160; Paperback, $62.95; eBook $62.95

Reviewed by Naoko I. Skala

Educators assigned to teach a stagecraft class may wonder where to start or how much they should cover in 16 weeks. Rita Kogler Carver's *Stagecraft Fundamentals 3rd Edition* is one of the few textbooks that reduces that headache for theatre educators, especially if the department offers the class for non-theatre majors. Carver is an award-nominated lighting designer who has worked for Broadway, regional theatre, dance, and opera in the U.S. and Europe.

The book has 20 chapters categorized into six parts: History and Art, Safety and Scenery, Rigging and Lighting, Costume and Makeup, Projections and Special Effects, and Stage Management and Careers. In this third edition, Sound Design is in the Rigging and Lighting section. Projections are included in the Special Effects section. Many current educational theatre productions accept projection design and technology as that area plays an increasingly significant role in telling a story today.

This edition includes Student Learning Outcomes at the beginning of each chapter, which helps readers quickly understand the chapter's goals, and some instructors might use it to develop their syllabi. At the end of each chapter are Emerging Trends and Discussion Questions based on Carver's discussions with current professionals in each area. The Discussion Questions may be a helpful resource for readers to review the chapters constructively, and might be helpful for actual class discussions, quizzes, or exam questions.

Many images in this third edition are more practical than in previous editions. For instance, in the earlier editions are examples of work clothing where a person poses wearing only two types of clothing as good or bad examples. In the third edition are images of multiple good examples, and the person is also presented working on a project, with detailed explanations of why people are advised to wear certain clothes for specific tasks. These pictures give students a better understanding of what to wear and why when working in the scene shop, which is usually a challenging part of teaching college students who are not interested in working in a scene shop as their career.

In most theatre history classes, theatre architecture and technologies are mentioned briefly, but it is usually not the main topic of the course. In part one of this book, Carver addresses theatre history from the perspective of architecture and technologies, which may help readers understand how these areas were developed throughout history. Each chapter also has "Theatre Traditions" and comparative quotations that encourage readers' curiosity; those fun facts or quotations were usually passed along orally, providing insights into the production side of theatre cultures.

Carver uses a conversational writing style, which may give some readers pause. However, most theatre design and technology classes usually provide hands-on experience, and the students learn from reading and writing while working in a shop on a theatre production. Carver's writing style is an efficient way to introduce stagecraft without alienating readers and to encourage theatre practitioners in early-career or people who have no idea what stagecraft is to learn further.

The chapters are edited thoughtfully and seem more accessible and easier to follow in this third edition than in previous editions. For instance, earlier editions have one highly detailed table of contents. The third edition also includes a more generalized table of contents, which may help readers find big picture topics more easily. It may also help theatre educators who use this book to structure and create their class presentation content and course organization.

The tone of this book is very welcoming to anyone interested in the production side of theatre. Many of today's theatre educators are required to teach a class for non-theatre students with an interdisciplinary approach. *Stagecraft Fundamentals* is a resourceful and practical book for stagecraft class, and this third edition is the excellent introductory book for theatre learners and practitioners.

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