

## **A Japanese *Macbeth*: Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and the Moral Problematic 2**

“Drama in the West takes its character from the psychology of men or circumstances; the Noh is different. First of all, the Noh has the mask, and while staring at it, the actor becomes the man whom the mask represents. The performance also has a defined style, and in devoting himself to it faithfully, the actor becomes possessed. Therefore, I showed each of the players a photograph of the mask of the Noh which came closest to the respective role; I told him that the mask was his own part. To Toshiro Mifune, who played the part of Taketoki Washizu (Macbeth), I showed him the mask named Heida. This was the mask of a warrior. In the scene in which Mifune is persuaded by his wife to kill his lord, he created for me just the same life-like expression as the mask did. To Isuzu Yamada, who acted the role of Asaji (Lady Macbeth), I showed the mask named Shakumi. This was the mask of a beauty no longer young, and represented the image of a woman about to go mad. The actress who wears the mask, when she gets angry, changes her mask for one the eyes of which are golden-colored. This mask represents the state of an unearthly feeling of tension and Lady Macbeth assumes the same state. For the warrior who was murdered by Macbeth and later reappears as an apparition, I considered the mask of the apparition of a nobleman of the name of Chujo. The witch in the wood was represented by the mask named Yamanba.”  
—Interview with Joan Mellen



### **Discussion Questions**

1. Why is the long shot (and medium long shot) important to Kurosawa's vision for this film?
2. How do such shots shape the emotions in the scenes?
3. How does a shame-based culture handle a guilt-based play like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*? Is treason the same thing in both contexts?
4. How would you characterize the witch's song?
5. How important is the supernatural to the meaning of the film?
6. How important are omens?
7. What does the film suggest about human nature? Should we be afraid of our desires? "Without ambition, man is not a man." True?
8. How would you characterize Asaji's acting as performed by Isuzu Yamada?

9. How significant is the forbidden (never opened) room to the overall meaning of the film?
10. What roles do blood play symbolically and visually in the film?
11. What is the meaning of Miki's horse's refusal to be saddled?
12. What are other predominant symbols in the film?
13. Does Washizu know that Miki has been assassinated?
14. How would you characterize Washizu's addressing of his troops?
15. Washizu's death scene has been considered one of the most famous and powerful death scenes? Do you agree? Why or why not?



Traditional Nōh Theater masks and  
their THRONE OF BLOOD counterparts

#### Pattern of the Typical Noh Play

##### *First Movement (The Introduction)*

- The *waki*, or sideman, proceeds down the bridge/runway and explains to the audience the context of the play, its setting, and theme.
- The chorus chants or sings a poem that restates the major theme
- The *waki* moves onto the stage proper, states his name and purpose
- He sings a travel song which represents the progress of his journey
- Once he reaches the end of the stage, he explains that he has arrived.

##### *Second Movement (The Exposition)*

- The *shite*, or main actor, appears on stage, often with his *tsure*, or companion.
- The *shite* sings an entrance song that describes his situation only partially.

- The *shite* meets the *waki*. The *waki* having newly arrived asks questions about the locale and identity of the *shite*
- The *shite* hedges on his identity as the *waki* tries to uncover it.
- The *shite* begins an agitated dance.
- The priest (often the *waki*) prays for the *shite*.
- The *shite* departs back up the bridge.

#### *Interlude – Backstory*

- Varies with each performance

#### *Third Movement (The Kyu or Climax)*

- The *waki* begins a waiting song, which prays for the deliverance of the *shite*.
- The *shite* reappears clothed differently; this represents his true self.
- After a time of moral struggle, the two join in a final dance.
- The chorus narrates the surprising reversal or new found understanding.

### **Other Elements of Noh**

1. Noh style acting is very slow, but also very physically tense.
2. Likewise, Noh plots move slowly. The dynamic is in the tension and resolution.
3. The musical accompaniment is meant to further increase the tension and release.
4. Song and dance are also tense and spare, assisting the emotional tension and focus of the art form.
5. Stage realism is not the issue per se, but there are still distinctions between “normal” life and the supernatural interaction. Ghost and vengeful supernatural figures are often important plot elements.