

An ancient Japanese art leaves home

Exhibit of Bugaku includes costumes, instruments, masks

By Hunter Drohojowska

The haunting whistle of the Japanese flutes — "hichiriki" and "ryuteki" — is punctuated by resounding claps from a variety of drums. The musicians sit in rows at the back of the stage, flanked by a pair of carved lacquer flames, 22 feet tall, one with dragons, another with phoenix birds, bearing between them an enormous 2-ton drum. Two identical dancers — wearing fierce dragon masks, and flowing tan robes over full, ballooning trousers — step and gesture slowly, choreographed by centuries of tradition.

Although their movements are thoroughly abstract, this is the dance of two frolicking dragons, usually performed as a congratulatory dance at sumo wrestling matches and horse races.

This is Bugaku, Japanese court ritual dance and music, virtually unchanged since the 11th century. Although it was introduced to Japan from China, India and Korea in the mid-fifth century, in those countries it has been forgotten. In Japan, it is still revered, for Bugaku is not just an entertainment — like Kabuki or Noh drama — but an elite art form traditionally performed only in the court of the Emperor, or in a shrine or temple.

Today, the chance to witness Bugaku is exceptionally rare, even for Japanese. The Kasuga Shrine Bugaku troupe has performed outside Japan only once before, and even on the island, they perform only during an annual festival or special occasions at the 8th century Kasuga Shrine in Nara. So this weekend's program of dances at the Japan America Theatre is truly exceptional. The opportunity is further enhanced by an unprecedented exhibition of robes, masks and instruments — "Bugaku: Treasures from the Kasuga Shrine" — on view in the adjacent George J. Doizaki Gallery.

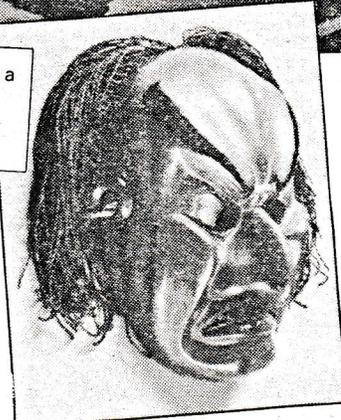
Miles Kubo, director of the gallery, watches the dancers and points out that everything, including the spectacular drums, has been brought from the shrine. The pair of drums represents the two-sided relationships inherent in Bugaku. "The dragons represent the male; the birds, the female. The drum that is blue represents dances from the right, which are from Korea. The drum that is red is for dances from the left, which are from China. The people who dance the dances of the right do not do the dances of the left."

This symmetry extends to the movements — the left style being grand and gallant, that of the right being more refined and elegant. This consciousness of duality in nature is a manifestation of Eastern religion, especially Buddhism. "You know, in Japan, things always change but these



Tou Kawana/Herald photographer

A "kasane" costume, above, and a fearsome mask are among "Treasures from the Kasuga Shrine" on view at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center through Aug. 26.



dances haven't changed much since the 11th century. The performers are really students, highly trained in the music and the dance. It's a scholarly approach. It's very rare that it's taken out of context and placed on a proscenium stage for the public."

The troupe and props, especially the drums, were brought "at great expense," says Kubo, "but it was important to keep everything honest."

Kubo directs a visitor to the gallery, dimly lit and air-conditioned, where robes, instruments and masks, anywhere from 200 to 700 years old, are displayed in cases. "The costumes they wear today are made to the exact standards of the old days," he says, gesturing to a "ho," a green outer robe, with appliques of crouching mice, from the 17th century. In the adjacent cabinet, a mannikin wears a new orange "ho" with the identical pattern. "These are worn today, but in 200 years, they, too, could be in a museum. There's a continuity. It's not like, 'Oh, now we have polyester so we can make a costume more easily.' That doesn't fit at all. It's timeless."

One red mask is carved in an expression like a wail or shout. "That's 'genjoraku', from a race of people who eat snakes. He does a dance of joy

because he's just found a snake." On the opposite side of the cabinet is an equally scary "Valiant General." Other masks are shaped like the heads of birds, or have exaggerated noses, whiskers and moving eyes.

"You can tell that the Chinese and the Koreans influenced the approach. When I first saw (the masks), I thought they didn't look Japanese at all. The fact that they were brought from Asia and kept in their pure form is important," says Kubo. "The Japanese government really wanted to make an effort with this project. It's risky because it's so obscure in a way. It's not like sending Grand Kabuki, where Tamasaburo would wow all the audiences. This

Where	Japan America Theatre 244 S. San Pedro St.
When	Performances: 3 and 7 p.m. today through Sun. Exhibition hours: 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tues-Sun
How much	\$10 (includes admission to exhibition in the adjacent George J. Doizaki Gallery, through Aug. 26. Exhibition only, \$2)
Info	628-2725, ext. 111

project is understated. We have to remember that it's coming from a shrine."

Because Bugaku is a vision into the past, still performed today, Kubo wonders about the reactions of a contemporary audience. "For most people, it's very slow. It's from the Kamakura period around the year 1200. I don't think that it will interest all people, even in Japan."

Back at the theater, several Japanese musicians, wearing traditional cropped "hakama" pants and wrapped white shirts, have gathered to take a lunch break. Towering above them, in the same Japanese garb, is a blue-eyed, curly-haired blond, Christopher Blasdel, from Texas.

Blasdel, who has lived in Tokyo for the past 12 years, plays "ryuteki" with the "gagaku" group at the Nara shrine. He first came to Japan in 1972 as a college student who played the flute, and went home after studying the "shakuhachi," a vertical bamboo flute, with a master, Yamaguchi Goro. "I wanted to do Japanese music," he explains, "and Tokyo is the best place to do it, of course."

Blasdel returned to Japan in 1975 to continue to study the instrument with his master. While getting his master's degree in ethnomusicology at Tokyo National University of Music and Fine Arts (Geidai), he began studying "gagaku" and met Fumiyo Koizumi. "He was the ethnomusicologist who was responsible for opening up the eyes of the Japanese to Asian music. Very few Japanese know anything about Japanese music. They are inundated with Western music from the time they start school. Since the Meiji period, the Japanese have felt they had to assimilate the West, to try to catch up and compete. They achieved that but they also left behind the music of Asia and Japan. It's not given any expression at all there."

"I was fascinated by the ethnic music. When I first heard the 'shakuhachi,' I felt happiness and wonder well up in me and I wanted to make that sense of excitement and wonder for other people. I felt the same way when I heard 'gagaku' for the first time."

Blasdel performs in Japan under the name of Yomei: "Mei comes from my teacher and Yo means someone who's come from far away." His only suggestion to Western viewers for Bugaku is to keep an open mind. "It's not necessary to know many literal aspects — the meanings of the dances, costumes and instruments — although that's good to know. People enjoy it as a visual and auditory experience. That's enough."