Learning to Kneel

The central position in Japanese Noh dance has the dancer kneeling, with her bottom resting on her feet, hands palm down on thighs, and head slightly bowed.

“It is torture,” says Carrie Preston.

Your knees begin to throb against the wood floor. Your feet fall asleep, then all feeling seeps out of your legs. Given her years of dancing in toe shoes for ballet, Preston is accustomed to being uncomfortable. Still, when she first attempted the kneeling position, called a *seiza*, she could hold it for only 15 minutes.

Preston, a College of Arts & Sciences assistant professor of English, endured the discomfort as part of her unconventional research for a book on how Noh dance influenced the Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats and other modernists at the beginning of the 20th century. Like any scholar, Preston spent days combing through archives. Unlike most scholars, she also spent hours learning to be a Noh dancer. Doing so, she says, gave her a deeper understanding of the dance form and its long tradition, which in turn gave her new insights into Yeats’ work, as well as how blending cultures can have a ripple effect.

As Preston, whose various awards include a Peter Paul Professorship, developed her Rutgers University doctoral dissertation on Isadora Duncan into the book *Modernist Solos and the Mythic Pose* (Oxford University Press, 2011), she kept coming across references to Japanese dancer Ito Michio, who worked with Yeats on his dance plays. Ito had trained as a modern dancer in Germany and was not trained in Noh, but had been dragged to performances by a relative.

Noh is a highly codified dance form that has changed little since it emerged in the 14th century. The plot is chanted, and performers often wear masks and hold a fan as they act out stories of spirits and ghosts using simple movements. They move stiffly in small, sliding steps.

Poet Ezra Pound introduced Noh and Ito Michio to Yeats in 1915, when he was the Irish writer’s secretary. At the time, Yeats was trying to make his plays less realistic and more symbolic, and Noh had the elements he needed. He created the first of his four dance plays, *At the Hawk’s Well*, using masks, chanting, and mythical characters. Ito performed the central role of the hawk in the play’s 1916 premiere in London.

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**CAS PROF RESEARCHES YEATS THROUGH TRADITIONAL JAPANESE DANCE**

**BY AMY SUTHERLAND**

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**WEB EXTRA**

Watch a video of Carrie Preston performing traditional Japanese Noh dance at bu.edu/bostonia.
Most scholars who have studied Yeats’ dance plays don’t study Noh, Preston says, because Yeats had at best secondhand knowledge of the dance form and borrowed only bits and pieces stylistically. Preston felt otherwise: that she could understand Yeats’ plays only if she studied Noh.

During summer 2008, Preston attended a three-week intensive workshop at the Noh Training Project, in Bloomsburg, Pa., one of the few places in this country that teach the Japanese dance. The following year, she went to Tokyo, where she dug through the Noh archives at Hosei University and studied dance privately with traditional Noh performer Furukawa Mitsuru.

Preston labored on with the seize, slowly working her way up to 45 minutes or so. Still, that was only half as long as her teacher, who had trained in Noh since he was a child, could kneel.

Most Western dance aims at the sky, with jumps, twirls, and high kicks, but the Noh tradition is deeply rooted to the ground. The performer’s posture is that of an old man, tipped forward, knees bent, a carriage that gave Preston backaches.

By learning to dance Noh, Preston started to understand the ideas and the culture that frames them. She began to see how Yeats not only borrowed stylistic touches from Noh, but tapped broader cultural ideas, even if unintentionally. For example, a sentiment often expressed in Noh dance is that we are not the master of our own fate—that many forces, such as spirits, act upon us. In At the Hawk’s Well, which alludes to the Irish struggle for independence, a warrior is bewitched by a spirit and lured to the battlefield. Yeats supported Irish independence, but was ambivalent about using violence to that end, and the play expresses that concern in symbolic ways, Preston says.

The cultural pollination that began with Yeats continued on, she says. Samuel Beckett was hugely influenced by Yeats’ dance plays. Pound went on to use Noh’s influences in his verse. Traditional Noh itself was ultimately transformed. The canon of Noh plays had remained the same for centuries, but that changed when Ito returned to Japan and presented At the Hawk’s Well there in 1939. It became the very first new Noh play since about the 14th century.

Preston has worked on a book about her experiences with Noh. She’s titled it, appropriately, Learning to Kneel.

Watching Climate Change from the Ground and the Heavens

BY RICH BARLOW

On average, “green emergence dates” are now occurring 17 days earlier than they did in Henry David Thoreau’s time.

arrives earlier today than it did then—a barometer of global warming. (He also checked photographs of leaf-out going back to the 1800s; those photos’ dates also indicate that spring came later in horse-and-buggy days.)

To corroborate his work, Primack has some eyes looking over his shoulder—from 438 miles up. He’s comparing his observations on the ground with images of vegetation generated by orbiting satellite sensors from NASA. BU colleague Crystal Schaaf is the principal investigator using the image-making technology. Both she and Primack “can identify the greening-up period, within a couple of days,” says Schaaf, a CAS research professor of geography and environment. “And we can see that these green emergence dates are occurring quite a bit earlier than in Thoreau’s time.”

On average, 17 days earlier, says Caroline Polgar (GRS’13), a postgraduate student working with Primack. He says that “it’s absolutely certain” that climate change, plus the urban furnace effect (Boston’s pavement and buildings absorbing heat, and the many cars in the area generating it) are the causes.