



Title	Translating Kyôgen into Czech
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Citation	演劇学論叢. 2008, 9, p. 201-211
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/97493
rights	
Note	

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TRANSLATING KYÔGEN INTO CZECH

Ondřej HÝBL and Pavel DRÁBEK

Kyôgen has served as a source of inspiration for the Western theatre. Its unique form requires specific approaches when it comes to translation. This essay is a report on the experience of several years of performing kyôgen in translation. Ondřej Hýbl has translated eight kyôgen scripts into Czech and founded a semi-professional kyôgen theatre group in the Czech Republic. He is a doctoral student of traditional Japanese theatre at the Osaka University, Japan, and practices kyôgen acting with the Shigeyama Sengorô family. Pavel Drábek is a lecturer at the Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, and specializing in Elizabethan drama and translation; he holds a PhD from Charles University, Prague. He has acted in and helped translate kyôgen into Czech.

A Brief History of Kyôgen in the Czech Lands

The first *kyôgen* to appear in Czech was *Hanago* (Visiting Hanago), translated by Vlasta Hilská, in her history of Japanese theatre (Hilská 1947).¹ Three decades later, Miroslav Novák published his translations of *Chidori* (Catching Plovers), *Futari Bakama* (Two People in One Hakama), and *Hige Yagura* (The Fortified Beard); the texts appeared alongside several translations of *nô* plays, and were accompanied with an inspiring commentary by the translator and Dana Kalvodová (Kalvodová and Novák 1975).

The first professional attempts at staging *kyôgen* in Czech came in early 1982; Czech dramatist, director and actor Hubert Krejčí translated three *kyôgen* texts from Russian and reconstructed their stage form. The three farces, *Hanatorizumô* (Nose-Pulling Sumô), *Kawakami* (Blindness, Sight, and Blindness Again), and *Koshi Inori* (The Back-Straightening Prayer), were performed by professional actors under the title of *Hry a Hříčky* (Plays and Playlets), and were accompanied with two original dramatic etudes inspired by *nô* and based on the stories of two folk tales (Pavčík 2004, 7). Krejčí's erudition, talent and brilliant command of the Czech language managed to create a form that was more than a piece of exotic drama. His versions were—necessarily—stage adaptations as he had no direct contact with the Japanese actors of those respective genres; all was reconstructed on the basis of written accounts, a few photographs and records, and with the help of the above-mentioned outstanding theatrologist specializing on Asian theatre Kalvodová.

From the point of translation, Krejčí's *kyôgens* are special cases as they were translated from Russian; thus the direct correlation between the source and the target languages is looser. However, one cannot truly speak of an adaptation as Krejčí took pains to approximate the cadence and other idiosyncrasies of the Japanese text. At the same time, he never disassociated the scripts from the stage action, he even published his version of *Koshi Inori* with the movement script of his production (Krejčí 1999). The words are fashioned to the actor and the gesture, which is a requirement vital for the success of a theatrical translation. His versions were created with what the founder of Theatrical semiotics Otokar Zich terms *theatrical acoustics* in mind. Without wishing to mince the quality of what that entails, Krejčí's translations are measured to the dramatic action. The translations have proven their vitality on the stage, and have been produced several times. In 1990, Krejčí translated *Hone Kawa* (The Mixed-up Acolyte); its occasional productions in the late 1990s, as well as Krejčí's other theatre activities inspired by *kyôgen* and Asian theatre, resulted in what may be called a generation of actors and theatrologists specializing in Japanese studies and *kyôgen*.²

These activities led to inviting Shigeyama Shime, a professional Kyoto-based *kyôgen* actor of the Ôkura School to the Czech Republic.³ The first *kyôgen* workshop was held in Prague in 2000, during which a group of actors and amateurs practiced *Kaki Yamabushi* (The Persimmon Thief); in Czech, translated by Ondřej Hýbl. Upon Master Shigeyama Shime's initiative and kind support, the *Malé divadlo kjôgenu* (*The Little Kyogen Theatre*, なごみ狂言会チェコ) Theatre Company was founded, performing *Kaki Yamabushi* and the older translations and inspirations by Krejčí.⁴ In June 2004, a second workshop with Shigeyama Shime was held in Prague (Figure 1), this time rehearsing and translating *Kuchi Mane* (The Mimic) in a text translated by Ondřej Hýbl and Pavel Drábek. Over the past six years *kyôgen* have been performed to Czech audiences on tours and festivals; leading to a number of realizations about the nature of the translated text in relation to the original scenic form and the original movement scheme. Hubert Krejčí has been essential in shaping both the translation of the *kyôgen* plays and more general principles of performing them in Czech.⁵



Figure 1. Legend: *Kyôgen* workshop with Shigeyama Shime, Prague, June 2004. Left to right: Miroslava Čechová, Shigeyama Shime, Igor Dostálek, Radek Odehnal, and Biljana Golubović (bottom).
Photo: Pavel Drábek.

Movement, the *Kata*, and Costumes

In keeping with Zeami's precept *Hana wa kokoro, tane wa waza naru beshi* [The heart is the Flower; the skill, the seed] (Zeami, *Fûshikaden*, ch. 7; our translation; Rimer reverses the sense), in adapting and "appropriating" *kyôgen*, we have found great support in its acting techniques and skills. As a starting point, the movement pattern of each script has served as a matrix for adopting the play to our language. The pivotal pattern is the minutely elaborated way of walking on the stage—the *jô-ha-kyû*: *jô* (slow start)—*ha* (faster middle)—*kyû* (culminating finish) trajectory, and the gliding gait that divides the body into the mobile lower half (from the waist down) and the static/expressive upper half. This enables body then moves without an up-and-down motion which might diminish the audience's attention. We have relied on this kind of walking together with the other set movements, the *kata*—patterns of posture, lateral movement and gesture, laughter, weeping, drinking or eating—and the stylization ways of using the fan as the universal prop, representing chopsticks, a saw, a brush, or a cup. Our performances have shown that these conventional techniques and gestures were generally comprehensible (just like ballet or the Western opera are in the East), and were understood as fresh and imaginative ways of expression, or simply *beautiful movement* as such, rather than stale tradition.⁶

Costumes in *kyôgen* are similarly essential for the visual esthetic effect on the audience.⁷ From the perspective of a modern audience, the original costumes of figures bear little significance; as signs they have a small semantic value. The costumed mountain priest *yamabushi* or the aristocratic feudal lord *Daimyô* fall into the same set of virtually unidentifiable personae of the Japanese past. What communicates is not so much specific information about character or status, but rather the sumptuousness of the costumes and the overall esthetic of their appearance. Moreover, *kata* – patterns of movements, postures and gestures, all these were esthetically designed for body wearing a classical costume with long sleeves. Omitting *kimono*'s long sleeves, *hakama*, would fatally influence this aesthetical aspect and make most of *kata* and *kamae* almost useless. Considering this point, usage of the classical shape costumes seems to be a matter of a big importance even *kyôgen* is performed by foreigners outside of Japan. The actor is not intended to be a realistic representation; the thick-padded under-costume *dôgi* is worn both to prevent damage to the outer costumes from sweat, as well as enlarge the appearance of the body. Such padding complies with the general Japanese beauty ideal of proportionately smaller head to the body. This phenomenon is markedly visible with the *Bunraku* marionettes, where the ration of the size of the head to the body is approximately 1 to 9; with European marionettes, the ratio is generally 1 to 7, which is closer to human ratio. A non-

Japanese audience will perhaps fail to appreciate the physical proportions to the same extent; however, on the *nô-kyôgen* stage as well as on the Western end-on stage, an enlarged figure is never a drawback.

Our production of *kyôgen* uses original costumes, kindly donated by Shigeyama family or their copies; We thus are trying to approximate the Japanese physical forms and bring the foreign tradition to life on our stage, rather than adopt and modify it to the tastes of the home audiences. We have discovered that the *kata* structures work universally despite their seeming cultural specificity.

The Text and Its Sound, Voice Techniques

A more sensitive and problematic issue is the translation of the words and sounds of *kyôgen*. In rehearsing *kyôgen* with Shigeyama Shime, the starting point was getting acquainted with the sound and rhythm of the Japanese text—despite the fact that most of the workshop participants spoke no Japanese. An auxiliary crucial issue was the technique used in vocal production. Japanese theatre uses abdominal resonance for voice; the Western theatrical traditions use the headvoice, while *bel canto* combines head resonance for higher registers with chest resonance for lower registers. The difference is in the resonance quality is not only volume but also stylization and esthetic effect; abdominal technique affects intonation and cadence of speech as well. We found that the problem stemmed from the fact that there is no tradition of verbal communication of this kind in the Western culture. Speaking with the abdominal resonance tends to sound unnatural and obtrusive. Even if a suitable quality is achieved, it quickly is in great danger of becoming monotonous and potentially counterproductive.

Vocal stylization has been for us the most important and problematic issue in performing *kyôgen*. The Japanese tradition has fixed the pronunciation, the voice techniques as well as cadence, rhythm and intonation (and one might add also the interpretation). In doing so, it has achieved a perfection in yoking the movement with phrases of certain length, and, tailored to the nature of the Japanese language and to the actor's breathing and acting. These, however, cannot be transferred slavishly into another language. The prosody of each language, the tonal patterns, the sentence cadence and rhythm, the intonation — are different. For us, one source of inspiration was the oral art of old Czech folk marionette actors. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century recordings of the traditional marionette plays have given us a possible direction. The puppeteers' highly stylized delivery of the dramatic text is an existent local tradition, though virtually extinct and no longer living, chanting form. These techniques have helped us realize the acoustic nature of Czech in relation to an non-realistic onstage action. The puppeteers' vocal techniques could serve as a possible

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inspiration as well. However, we have taken pains to secure that our speaking is not recognizable as derivative of the puppeteers' technique, which would raise undesirable associations.

Translating the Script

The translations of both the *kyôgen* plays practiced at the workshops, *Kaki Yamabushi* and *Kuchi Mane*, were made communally on the basis of a literal translation. In fashioning the Czech text for the stage action we have been guided by the ideal of *having an analogical effect* on the stage. First, we attempted to maintain the rhythm of the original to the extent that Czech allowed it. Where the Japanese words are closely connected to the action, we tried to retain the number of syllables in the clauses. By the performance at the end of the workshops, we had managed to create a text that fit the movement structure, communicated the story well, and may well work as a literary translation—although those versions were not the final as subsequent performance necessitated further shifts and adaptations.

Formulaic Language

One of the problems of translating *kyôgen* scripts is the question of formulaic expressions. Virtually every *kyôgen* starts with the ready-made, self-introductory (*nanori*) phrase: *Kore wa kono atari ni sumai itasu mono de gozaru* [*lit.*: the person in front of you is one local person]. It belongs to the oral elements of the scripts, like the fairy-tale formula *Once upon a time*. On the one hand, this is a recognizable turn of phrase; on the other, its dramatic function is merely *phatic*, establishing the context of the events to come. Similarly, upon appearing, the ubiquitous trickster servant Tarô Kaja, always replies formulaically to his master *Omae ni orimasuru* [*lit.*: right in front of you]. These and other formulaic expressions are a special problem to the translator. Their function in the original is not so much communicative as *connective*, establishing and keeping up the communication; they are *verbomotoric*—to use the term applied to oral cultures (Ong 1967). Like translating the Shakespearean interjection *How now*, the *kyôgen* formulas simply have little or no specific significance. To the Japanese ear those familiar with *kyôgen*, these formulae sound familiar, and a translation can never truly achieve a comparable effect. Translating them into local turns of phrase means cheating the audience; they are *not* watching a Czech play and the translation therefore has to maintain a certain tension between local phraseology and the imported one. Besides, *kyôgen* scripts are imaginative not run-of-the-mill texts.⁸ While translating and revising our translations, we have been led by an ideal that

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oscillates between the two—the native Czech formula and the phraseological neologism.

Style and Word Choice

Another more general issue is the style to be used, including the measure of formality and informality of language (especially in the talk of the lower characters), class and hierarchical distinctions (or more specifically, cultural differences), and expressiveness. This has been an even more challenging issue than formulaic language, since the Japanese registers do not parallel our standard uses. We have cautiously avoided translating *into* our cultural milieu and any coincidental topicality. Bearing in mind that *kyôgen* means literally *foolish words*, we have tried not to burden its lightheartedness with alien connotations.

We have been careful to select words that are neither stylistically marked nor sound too *modern*. For instance, in *Kuchi Mane* (The Mimic), we have avoided using the word *imitovat* (to imitate), because it is a foreign loan, dating from only a century ago, although it is now a standard word of everyday Czech. At the same time, we have used the word *imitátor* (imitator), in the script of *Kaki Yamabushi* (The Persimmon Thief), where the orchard owner comments jocularly in an aside directed to the audience when the trespassing Yamabushi, who pretends to be an monkey. There the word strikes as somehow peculiar, regularly getting a laugh; being spoken in an aside, it may appear to be a funny *ad lib*, as if stepping outside the play itself.

Interjections

Conventional *kyôgen* exclamations—such as the expletives *mâzu* and *iya*, and the onomatopoeic expression *aum aum* of eating, *sore sore* of pouring, *zuka zuka* of sawing, or the expression of effort *ei ei yattôna*—are among the most idiosyncratic and, at the same time, important for the rhythm of the entire play. These have been often a bone of contention in translating the scripts.

Japanese in general makes use of an incomparably large amount of sound repetitions to convey physical action, many of which have no equivalents in either English or Czech: *Ame ga zâzâ* (it rains heavily); *Ame ga shitoshito* (it rains heavily but silently); *Ame ga potsupotsu* (it rains lightly). Sometimes it may even seem strange to a non-Japanese why an interjection or an onomatopoeic expression is used: *Kami ga bosabosa* (to be disheveled); *Hito ha barabara* (an unordered crowd of people); *Karada ga boroboro* (to be washed-out, physically exhausted); *Karada ga pinpin* (to be physically fit). These expressions are normally translated by an adjective or a verb, not by a comparable onomatopoeic expression. In *kyôgen*, the

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interjections co-create the indispensable sound structure, differentiating it from a standard play text.

For the purposes of translation, we may divide *kyôgen* interjections into the following three categories: (a) expressions that convey meaning; (b) onomatopoeic imitations of sounds and voices, and (c) expressions that serve as a sound “prop”, without conveying any special meaning.

The first category covers feelings of the character (heat, cold, exhaustion, anger, joy, etc.), which must be translated so as to communicate the feeling and convey the story. For example, in *Kaki Yamabushi*, the mountain priest, eating sweet persimmons on a tree, expresses the tastiness of the fruit by the interjection “*amu*”, which is the Japanese rendering of smacking or munching. At first, we were trying to replace the word with the Czech equivalent, *mňam* (mnyiam); however, the reactions of the actors as well as the audience of the workshop were rather uneasy. When we had the Yamabushi retain the Japanese smacking, the gag worked immediately. Similarly, Yamabushi’s ensuing fall off the tree accompanied with a cry of pain, was better received when the original exclamation *aita aita* had been kept. When translating *Kuchi Mane*, we followed suit, and had Tarô Kaja and the Guest, who are beaten, cry *aita aita*, not *ouch ouch* (in Czech, *au au*).

A clear explanation why the audiences reacted better to the Japanese interjections than to the “exact” Czech equivalents is perhaps impossible. One of the keys to the answer may be the high level of stylization in *kyôgen*. Situations where Japanese characters on the stage use the interjections of a Czech child, do not function as particularly natural. To absorb them would be against the notion of a play as a *play*; somewhat tongue-in-cheek. A different way of looking at the question may be the issue of the playfulness of the situation. The familiar expressions are not imaginative enough; they come to the audience as trite, banal. The audience naturally accepts the use of Japanese interjections in places where the dramatic situation is clear; they become part of the play, as if a vista opened on the playful world of *kyôgen*.

The situation with onomatopoeic expressions is surprisingly analogous to above. In *Kaki Yamabushi (The Persimon Thief)*, the Yamabushi poaches fruit and is forced to imitate a crow, a monkey, and a kite, when caught in the tree by the owner. Since there are no monkeys in Central Europe, we had of necessity to use the Japanese *kyia* sound for the monkey, lacking an interjection in Czech. Though there are kites in the region, there is no associated onomatopoeic expression for their sound, so we used the Japanese *Pi yoroyoroyoro*. With the crow, we first used the Czech *krá* sound as an equivalent of the Japanese *kokâ*. However, just as with the “*amu*” sound of eating, the audience response was better with the Japanese onomatopoeia (the local sound seemed somehow out of place and

impure in terms of style).

The translation was more complex in the case of rhythmic exclamations. These expressions could be replaced by the expletives such as “well”, “look” or “now”. Or they could be retained in the original and grouped with the other aesthetic elements, the costumes, the characters and the contexts of the story; in other words, to incorporate them in the translation as specifically Japanese cultural phenomena.

In the case of *Kaki Yamabushi* and *Kuchi Mane*, these rhythmic interjections are *māzu* (a loose equivalent of *well, so, now*) or *iya* (*look*, or Shakespeare *lo* or *behold*), or the interjections of physical effort *ei ei yattona*. We decided to retain the original Japanese in our translations. Czech equivalents, with respect to rhythm and especially style, were simply not available. They seemed to work in Czech the way they should, and maintained the atmosphere, without distracting the audience or being disturbing in any way. However, after some twenty performances of *Kuchi Mane*, we felt the need to revise them. In this script, the characters use the rhythmic “props” more than in the other *kyōgens* we perform. The sounds of *māzu* and *iya* somehow seemed to us in a number of cases obtrusive, in Czech their overuse started to feel *cliché* or certain type of monotony. We reduced the number, sometimes applying the Czech equivalent; somewhere omitting the interjection altogether and perhaps stressing the new rhythmic unit with a change in the word order, sometimes word choice, or simply with an emphasis in the intonation. The revisions of the translations of the two *kyōgen* we practiced and translated during the workshops with Shigeyama Shime, have tended to reduce the number of Japanese formulaic interjections in favor of a more consistent Czech libretto.

Ideal of a Theatrical Translation?

As Cynthia Rodriguez-Badendyck notes in her discussion of the stylized drama of Lope de Vega—“language is never the most important thing that is going on; it is irradiated by the dramatic situation, and is merely, as it were, ‘the vehicle of the soul’” (Rodriguez-Badendyck 1985, 22). Similarly, a *kyōgen* is not the text but a certain “soul” behind these “*fancy words*”. In his treatises on *nō*, Zeami stresses the predominance of the word (chant) over the physical action. It is an inherent quality of the works of oral cultures that the continuity is maintained by the words as their flow determines both time and existence. However, it would be mistaken to identify the *kyōgen* performance as merely a combination of the words and the movement. *Nō* theatre is spiritual in many senses of the word. The play is a *representation*, not a *materialization* of the story. Zeami himself talks of the Flower (*hana*), one of the most pervasively elusive metaphors a

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metaphysical term describing the beauty of a theatre performance. It seems that these attributes are identically applicable to the lighter genre of the *kyôgen* as well. The physical appearance—sound included—cannot be an end in itself.

In translating *kyôgen* into another language, it is helpful to bear in mind that the scripts—as we know them now—are not the products of an individual author, as is the case of *nô* plays. They have come to perfection by gradual shifts and modifications, done in many cases over some six centuries. This time scope and an infinite number of stage performances in multiple context have yielded highly refined *kyôgen* scripts. It is with a tacit expression of respect for the generations of nameless actors who have weeded out all the deadwood and tuned the scripts to their modern shape, that *kyôgen* scripts are never cited with the names of their author, although many of the original authors are known. The *kyôgen* script can then be taken for a well-rounded dramatic shape, capable of holding attention from start to finish. Analogously, the work on the translation of a *kyôgen* is not likely to be the work of an individual; it will rather take its ideal shape on the basis of the experience of numerous repetitions in a given language.

Kyôgen seems to be prosaic; however, the qualities of the text are closer to verse and—even more perhaps—to a libretto. Translating the words to match the orchestration (the set movements) as well as the spirit of the play means creating a poem that scintillates in the target language as it does in Japanese. At the same time, as non-Japanese actors and audiences, we have an opportunity which was to a certain extent lost on the original audiences. *Kyôgen* in Japan is formalized to such an extent that may tend to lose its liveliness. Contrastingly, for foreign exponents, *kyôgen* may be a positive and new inspiration; it has the potential of becoming a source of pure and fresh energy, beauty and imagination. In keeping with this idealistic chimera, we believe that *kyôgen* should be translated as an instance of universal theatre, not as a presentation of something *merely* exotic and outlandish. We assume that the success we have had with *kyôgen* is a result of its universal understandability and appeal rather than a fascination for a display of otherness.



Figure 2. Legend: Performing *Kuchi Mane* in Czech (Malé divadlo kjôgenu—Nagomi Kyogenkai Czech Republic Theatre Company); CED Theatre, Brno, Czech Republic, June 2004. Left to right: Pavel Drábek, Radek Odehnal, Martin Pšenička. Photo: Igor Dostálek.

Notes

- 1 All the English titles of the *kyôgens* are taken from Don Kenny's *A Guide to Kyogen* (Tokyo, 1968).
- 2 Hubert Krejčí directed two scripts inspired by *commedia dell'arte*. One was *The Two Disguised Gypsies*, based on Flaminio Scala's scenario, (The Thirty-Second Day of *Il teatro delle favole rappresentative*, 1611 (see Salerno 1967). Script was by Igor Dostálek, Hubert Krejčí, and Lenka Vlčková and produced by the Janáček Academy of Performing Arts, Brno, Czech Republic; opened at Marta Theatre on September 27, 1993. The other production was *Arlekino the Duke of Brittany, or King Leyr and His Three Daughters, alias The Petrified Prince*, a *commedia dell'arte* adaptation-pastiche of William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the anonymous *A True Chronicle History of King Leir and His Three Daughters*. Script by Pavel Drábek, Hubert Krejčí et al. and produced by Eva Tálská's Studio Dům Theatre Company at the Centre of Experimental Theatre, Brno; opened at Husa na provázku Theatre on November 4, 1996. Both scripts are available in Krejčí 1999. Several actors participating in these two productions later formed the first specialized *kyôgen* company, Malé divadlo kjôgenu—Nagomi Kyogenkai Czech Republic. (see footnote 4)
- 3 The contacts with Shigeyama Shime were established thanks to Ctibor Turba, a mime who invited the Shigeyamas to perform in Prague in 1998. Among his activities have been productions inspired by the techniques of *kyôgen*.
- 4 *Malé divadlo kjôgenu—Nagomi Kyogenkai Czech Republic* Theatre Company was founded by Ondřej Hýbl in 2001. Its active members are: Igor Dostálek, Pavel Drábek, Ondřej Havlík, Tomáš Pavčík, and Martin Pšenička. Hubert Krejčí is an in-house consultant.
- 5 Igor Dostálek, a member of the above *kyôgen* theatre group has helped substantially in finding convenient theatrical means of expression. He is currently working on a Ph.D. thesis on the techniques of *kyôgen*. Another *kyôgen* workshop with Shigeyama Shime was held in Prague in 2007.
- 6 One potential trouble may be the disproportion between an Asian human and a Euro-American, especially the proportion of height to length of legs, which may appear obtrusive in the *kômai* dances, which are part of the *kyôgen* genre.
- 7 Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, in their *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*, point out the difference of gestures made in a T-shirt or a kimono.
- 8 Rudolf Pannwitz (in *The Crisis in European Culture*) has claimed that the source text should always invade and enrich the target text (quoted in Lukeš 2004).
- 9 These versions are known as *Torahiro Bon* (1792), *Toramitsu Bon* (1817), *Shigeyama Masatora Bon* (1840, an unpublished manuscript), *Yamamoto Tōjirō Bon* (c1860), *Ikari Tatsuyoshi Bon* (c1910, an unpublished manuscript in Shigeyama Sengoro family possession), *Shigeyama Shinichi Bon* (1935–1974), and *Shigeyama Chūzaburō Bon* (c1977, nonprofessional actor manuscript).

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