8. Noh Desires and

The Others

All characters onstage and onscreen are, in a sense, ghosts. They are phantom limb figures and spectral personalities projected from numerous neuronal mappings of Self and Other in the intersubjective, yet alienated, human brains of writers, directors, actors, technicians, and spectators—through the creative sharing of specific plots and embodiments on the stage or screen. In ordinary life, science has freed modern culture from many prior superstitions. But our brains continue to be haunted by the primal experience of key figures, especially in childhood, and by innate animal drives. These internalized spirits and unconscious zombies involve particular, repeated patterns of concepts, emotions, and motives that have been sculpted and encoded in our material brain structures. Stage and screen dramas are extensions of the theatre within the brain, as considered in prior chapters here. Yet theatre and cinema are also mechanisms of evolution, from nature to culture, as humans not only adapt to a natural environment but also radically transform it—replaying the past changes and future possibilities, onstage or onscreen.

How do communal brain-sculpting and personal neural patterning, through the cultural extensions of human higher-order consciousness, appear not only in the classical and Shakespearean dramas considered thus far in this book, but also in non-Western theatre? I briefly referred to the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of The Oresteia in chapter 2, applying Nietzsche’s nineteenth-century theory about ancient Greek theatre to the prefrontal-lobe superego and limbic id. The Apollonian/Dionysian dialectic also arises through the distinct lateralization of the human neocortex: with the
left hemisphere’s orientation toward linear, executive, Apollonian logic, involving the superego control of communal norms, in contrast to the right’s holistic, Dionysian anxieties, tied to limbic system emotions and the brainstem’s internal body regulations. Of course, there were many more gods in ancient Greece than just Apollo and Dionysus. There are also many complex subsystems in the human brain. Yet, the Apollonian/Dionysian shorthand (or top and bottom, left- and right-brain dichotomy) provides a way to understand, at least from a Western, neurotheatrical viewpoint, the Noh drama of Japan, arising in a very different culture on the other side of the globe in the fourteenth century—influenced by two thousand years of Buddhist theories of consciousness from India and China. Since Japanese writers, actors, and spectators (or Buddhist philosophers), then and now, have the same basic brain anatomy as Westerners after millions of years of human evolution, the distinctive ideological context and performance tradition of Noh illuminates further aspects of the diverse, yet related, cultural evolution of the human brain’s ghost theatres.

RIGHT AS PINE WIND, LEFT AS AUTUMN RAIN

Unlike the Christian doctrine of the soul traveling and suffering through one lifetime toward eternal punishment or reward, Buddhism explains human suffering in this life as the reincarnation of desires from prior lives, as the karmic repetition compulsion in successive lifetimes until enlightenment is reached. The afterlife is this life, repeated through multiple reincarnations until the transcendent consciousness of nirvana is attained. (While the Freudian version of the repetition compulsion involves a Judeo-Christian sense of a single lifetime, it also involves the reincarnation of symptomatic traumas and their effects in succeeding generations.) In the Noh play, Matsukaze, written by Zeami in the fourteenth century, a traveling Buddhist priest (in the waki role) meets two poor women, sisters from a fishing village, who turn out to be ghosts (as shite and tsure). First, the Priest introduces himself to the audience and mentions the setting on the empty Noh stage as being “the Bay of Suma in Settsu Province” (Tyler, Twenty 21). Then the Priest sees a lone pine tree on