

Saturday, October 13, 2007, 8pm
Sunday, October 14, 2007, 3pm
Zellerbach Hall

Bunraku

The National Puppet Theatre of Japan



Bunraku Kyokai

Bunraku—The National Puppet Theatre of Japan is produced by Bunraku Kyokai.

The U.S. Tour is produced by the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center.

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PROGRAM

Datemusume Koi no Higanoko—Hinomi Yagura no Dan (*Oshichi's Burning Love—The Fire Watchtower*)

*Written by Suga Sensuke, Matsuda Wakichi and Wakatake Fuemi.
First performed at the Kitahorie-no-shibai Theater, Osaka, in 1773.*

Chanters Toyotake Rosetayu
Takemoto Aikodayu

Shamisen Musicians Toyosawa Tomisuke
Takezawa Dango
Toyosawa Ryouji

Puppeteer Yoshida Seizaburo

Background

In 1657, a great fire destroyed more than half of the Japan's capital city, Edo (now Tokyo). It lasted for three days, and is estimated to have claimed more than 100,000 lives.

This Bunraku play is based on a real-life incident that took place in the days following the great conflagration.

Oshichi, is the 16-year-old daughter of a greengrocer whose family business was destroyed in the fire. While taking refuge at the Kissho-in Temple, she falls in love with a handsome youth, Kichisaburo. Even after the family's home is rebuilt, she continues to meet her lover in secret.

As the opportunities to see him become more infrequent, Oshichi's infatuation grows. Thinking that she could move back to the temple if another fire swept through the city, she sets fire to a neighbor's house. She is arrested for arson and burned at the stake.

Oshichi's plight was immortalized in Ihara Saikaku's novel *Five Women Who Loved Love*, and became the subject of numerous dramatizations.

Synopsis

In this version of the story, Oshichi is portrayed as a duty-bound heroine who chooses to sacrifice her own life in order to save that of her lover.

Kichisaburo has lost a treasured heirloom and is sentenced to die. Oshichi has recovered the family sword, but cannot leave the city because of the night curfew. In a desperate attempt to reach him, she climbs the fire tower to sound a false alarm, knowing that her actions will lead to her own demise.

Program

Text

Love is like a leaping flame, blazing where it will. Consuming all before it, leaving ash. No snow or ice can stop its burning path.

News, at last! Her lover's missing heirloom sword is found! Her friends now have it. She must bring it to him by dawn...or else his life is forfeit, and his name and honor gone!

But the curfew gates are shut! The whole city is under night lockdown. No one can get through till daylight. What can she do?

He will not know! At dawn he will take his life in atonement...unless she gets the sword to him, gets them to raise the gates! She is desperate. She is frenzied. She rails against the Fates.

The fire tower is her only hope. On top is the fire alarm! Sound it, and all the curfew gates are opened for the fire brigades to pass. Can she do it? She will have to! Although it means her life!

A false alarm is a capital crime, everybody knows. And execution is by fire. But her lover is a warrior and must go back to his people. They can have no future...that is fate. How can she live without him? She would rather turn to ashes...than to live a hell on earth!

Her courage ignited by the flames of her love. She begins the perilous climb! The snow flies, and ice coats the ladder. She cannot grip, she slips and slides, she strains and struggles. Until at last the fire bell is in her grasp. It echoes through the frozen town. The guards wake from their doze.

"A fire! A fire! Open the gates!" And all at once, the streets are free. Now she can reach him! She can give her life for his. She races off on her final journey...and into legend!

An Introduction to Bunraku

Chanter Toyotake Rosetayu

Shamisen Musician Toyosawa Tomisuke

Puppeteers Yoshida Kazuo
Yoshida Tamame

Program Commentary Peter Grilli

INTERMISSION

Tsubosaka Kannon Reigenki—Sawaichi Uchi Yori Yama (*Miracle at the Tsubosaka Kannon Temple— Sawaichi's House and the Mountain*)

*Written by Kako Chika.
First performed at the Hikorokuza Theater, Osaka, in 1887.*

Chanter Takemoto Tsukomadayu

Shamisen Musicians Takezawa Danshichi
Takezawa Dango

Puppeteers Yoshida Kazuo
Osato—The Wife

Yoshida Tamame
Sawaichi—The Husband

Percussion Mochizuki Tamenari Ensemble

Synopsis

Noticing that Osato never fails to slip out of the house before dawn, Sawaichi suspects that his wife is having an affair. When he pleads with her to tell him the truth, Osato is shocked by his accusation. She explains that she visits the Tsubosaka Temple each morning to pray to Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, so her husband's sight might be restored.

Greatly moved by her loving devotion, Sawaichi agrees to go with her to the Tsubosaka Temple to undergo religious austerities. Osato leads Sawaichi to the temple.

As they offer prayers, Sawaichi proposes to stay at the temple for three days of fasting. He orders Osato to return home to put things in order. Before she leaves, she warns Sawaichi never to go up the slope lest he slip into the valley below.

Sawaichi has decided that he has become too much of a burden on Osato and wants to end his life. He climbs to the top of the cliff and throws himself into the valley below.

Sensing something dreadful has happened to her husband, Osato hurries back to the temple. When she finds he is not there, she goes to the top of the cliff and discovers his walking stick and sandals.

Looking down into the valley, she sees Sawaichi's lifeless body.

In despair, she leaps to her death.

Program

Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy, is so moved by the couple's devotion that she brings them back to life and restores Sawaichi's eyesight.

The play ends happily with the couple dancing with joy, expressing their gratitude to the benevolent Kannon.

Text

"Is it just a dream of life or are we really living?" goes the song he sings.

Here deep in the mountains, by the temple to Kannon, Goddess of Mercy. The humble home of the blind man Sawaichi, and his lovely wife Osato. Sawaichi earns a little teaching music to the local children.

Osato takes in sewing, on top of keeping house and taking care of him. She does not mind their poverty. Where would he be without her? As she does her sewing, he sings a love song about the joys of yesterday.

"Sawaichi, that sounds fine! You must be in good spirits today."

"Think so, do you, wife? A lot you know about it! You are quite mistaken. And the trouble is all your fault! Come here, I've got something to say. It's been on my mind a long time. We've been married three years now, and we grew up together, too. You think you can keep any secrets from me? Out with it! I'm waiting!"

"Whatever do you mean? When have I hidden anything from you?"

"You're going to make me say it, are you?"

"Please do!"

"Then listen, I may be blind, but there's nothing wrong with my ears. I hear you creep out every night and not come back till morning. Do you think I don't know you've got a lover? I can't be much to look at, scarred by the disease that blinded me. Everybody says how beautiful you are, it's natural you would find a lover. I'm resigned to it. I won't be angry, as long as you tell me the truth."

How much it costs him to keep his dignity, as his heart is breaking.

Osato is outraged by the accusation.

"Oh, you are too cruel! How could I ever betray you with another? How could you even think such a thing! You're all the family I have, your parents took me in when mine died. You were my big brother. How I wept when the horrible pox took your sight! Through any kind of hardship, through fire or flood or famine. You will always be my husband, in this life and the next! Every day before dawn, I climb the hard path to the temple and pray. I pray to the Goddess



Bunraku Kyokai

of Mercy to restore your sight! In three years now, I have never missed a day, and so I hope she will hear me. And you know my heart so little, as to think such evil things of me!”

Sawaichi is moved to tears.

“Yes, I am a man of little faith. Not worth the notice of gods or buddhas. I must have sinned greatly in my past life, to be such a wretch as I am. But good wife, give me your hand! We shall go to the Goddess together! And perhaps she will answer our prayers!”

Up the steep and rocky paths they climb, Osato leading the way. Bound for the famous temple of the merciful Kannon, who cures all ills. On this very spot, beneath this very waterfall, a great priest prayed for 107 days and nights, and the sight of the Emperor himself was restored! The bountiful mercy of Kannon still brings the pilgrims, singing hymns. And the pilgrims Osato and Sawaichi make their way to the holy shrine.

“Sawaichi, here we are. Just up there is the temple.”

“Then I’d better pray! Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, have mercy—”

Program

“No, we need to sing a proper hymn to the goddess. Come on now.”

And they sing.

“Praise be to the merciful Kannon, in her shrine above the sacred falls!”

“Ah, but Osato, you can’t believe she hears us. How can I ever be cured?”

“You must have faith! You must! If you only have faith, she’ll listen!”

How truly Osato believes, and how she loves him. So he goes along.

“You’re right. I’ll do a prayer vigil here, how’s that? I’ll fast and pray.”

“How wonderful! I’ll just go home and fetch a few things, then join you. But Sawaichi, do be careful and don’t wander off! There’s a cliff there just above us that drops into a deep ravine.”

“Wander off? Where would I go? There’s nothing to do here!”

And she hurries off into the gathering mist... little knowing that it is their final parting. When he hears her go, Sawaichi can hold back his feelings no longer.

“My darling wife, how happy you have made me! I am so grateful! Cursed as I am, a useless wretch, you love and comfort me devotedly. You spend each moment in my service, and get nothing in return!”

And he weeps bitter tears of shame and regret.

“My gratitude is boundless, and I must repay my debt. All I can give you is your freedom, so you can have a better life without me. I shall end my life, so that you might live and prosper. That deep ravine will be my resting place, here on holy ground. And perhaps I shall have better luck in the next life.”

He follows the sound of rushing water in the ravine to find the cliff. Reaching the end of solid ground, he leaves his stick behind and prays. Halfway home, Osato was seized by a premonition, and comes rushing back. Out of breath, she slips and stumbles up the path in a panic.

“Where is he? Sawaichi! Sawaichi!”

What is that? His stick! In the pale moonlight, she looks into the ravine and sees him lying still.

“But why? Oh why, oh why? All this time, I prayed so hard, the goddess would have helped us, I know! How can I go on now, all alone? How can I? Oh how can I! I never should have brought you here. Forgive me. Oh forgive me!”

From darkness into darkness he has gone. With nobody to take his hand, he will wander a lost spirit, never at peace. The tears of her lamenting swell the rushing falls.

“But there is no use in grieving. Our destinies have been determined. I must go now to join him. I must go to find him and give him back his stick. Oh Buddha, show me the way!”

At the bottom of the deep ravine, the dark mists part to emit dazzling light. And in the radiance, unearthly music, like a chorus of heavenly beings. The goddess Kannon reveals herself, in the form of a beautiful maiden. Her voice rings out like golden bells.

“Sawaichi! Sins in your past life took your sight and caused your suffering. But the devotion of your wife Osato has purified your fate and saved you. I grant you long life here on earth in order to perfect your spirits...and to sing the praises far and wide of the glorious mercy of the Buddha. Osato! Sawaichi! I call you back!”

And with the dawn of a new day, they both awake from darkness.

“Sawaichi! Your eyes! Can you see?”

“I can! I can see! By the mercy of Kannon! Oh praise be! And madam, who are you?”

“I’m your wife!”

“Oh, wife, I’m so happy to see you!”

“Was I dreaming? I threw myself off the cliff! But then I saw the goddess. She said I would be spared!”

“And I jumped, too. But look, there’s not a scratch on us! And you can see!”

“I heard her calling my name, I would swear to it! And now we will go on pilgrimage, to give thanks for this miracle!”

Truly the merciful Kannon opens our eyes to miracles. She gives us back our lives. We come from darkness into light. Let there be rejoicing! Give thanks to the power of the Buddha’s word...to the glorious Law of the Buddha!

Bunraku—The National Puppet Theatre of Japan

Tour Chairman Shimomura Susumu

Chanters Takemoto Tsukomadayu
Toyotake Rosetayu
Takemoto Aikodayu

Shamisen Musicians Takezawa Danshichi
Toyosawa Tomisuke
Takezawa Dango
Toyosawa Ryouji

Puppeteers Yoshida Kazuo
Yoshida Tamame
Yoshida Seizaburo
Yoshida Kazusuke
Yoshida Tamaka
Kiritake Monhide
Yoshida Tamasho
Yoshida Tamayo

Percussion Mochizuki Tamenari Ensemble

Staff

Technical Director Nakatani Yoshihiro

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Technical Staff Yamazoe Toshito
Arayama Ryousei
Ido Yasumasa

Lighting Design Ishino Akira

Wigs Ishii Kyoichi

Properties Morinaga Shin

Personal Assistant Kubo Hiroshi

Administrator Tsukamoto Katsuhiko

Program Commentary Peter Grilli

Japanese names are listed in traditional order with last names appearing first.

Cast

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Company Manager Yoko Ito

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Yuki Nakamura

Graphic Designer Koji Takei

Photographs Bunraku Kyokai



Bunraku Kyokai

The Puppets

Bunraku puppets are about half to two-thirds life size and weigh anywhere from 10 to 50 pounds. Their eyes move, their eyebrows rise in surprise, their mouths open and shut, and their hands and arms gesture gracefully and realistically.

Each puppet requires three operators who need to work in unison. The puppeteers carry the dolls on to the stage and are visible throughout the play. The chief manipulator wears high wooden straw-soled stage clogs so he can work above his two assistants and slide quietly across the stage.

At the start of each run, the master puppeteer is responsible for the creation of the puppets that he will operate on stage. A doll head which best suits the character is selected from a group of more than 300. Its hair is dressed in a style befitting the role and an appropriate costume is sewn around the basic framework of the doll. Leading puppeteers often have personal favorites which will vary subtly in such details as the line of the chin, the length of the nose and the furrow of the brow.

The chief operator holds the puppet from the back with his left hand by a special grip in the doll's chest and directs the puppet's right arm with his right hand. The second operator is responsible for the movement of the puppet's left arm, and the third moves the legs. In the case of female dolls, the third operator moves its skirt in such a way as to create an illusion of moving legs.

Introduction to Bunraku

Bunraku is a highly refined form of puppet theater combining three distinct artistic disciplines: *yoruri* or ballad narration, *shamisen* instrumental music and *ningyo tsukai* or the art of puppet manipulation. Each of these art forms takes years of training to master. But the true magic of the Bunraku is the unity achieved when the three independent components of movement, words and music come together.

Bunraku has often been described as an art of threes and this combination of interlocking “triangles” is what continues to fascinate audiences. The spellbinding coordination of three puppeteers manipulating one doll; the unity achieved by the three independent components of movement, words and music; and the intersecting lines of communication—between puppeteer and narrator, narrator and *shamisen* player, musician and puppet—offer complexities not found in any other theater in the world.

The Narration

The *yoruri* narrator sits on an auxiliary stage with the musician. He sets the scene, describes the emotions of the characters, delivers the narrative, and recites all the dialogue. The narrator referred to as the “*tayu*” has great tonal and expressive range, and his voice can change instantly from a suggestive whisper to rage, from bass to soprano, from melody to conversational chatter.

A senior *tayu* may take as many as 14 roles in a single scene. When the narrative reaches a crescendo, he will often rise on his knees and gesticulate. Stamina and expressiveness are considered the *tayu*'s most important attributes.

The Music

The musician sits on the narrator's left playing the *futazao* (wide-necked) *shamisen*, notable for its resonant tone and deep notes.

The music of Bunraku has many complex changes of tempo and consists mostly of stylized motifs and fixed musical phrases, chords or single notes. Occasional melodic sections of greater length are used to establish atmosphere or to accompany a lament, song or dance.

The notes of the *shamisen* precede or conclude action by the puppets, provide musical decoration for the *tayu's* words, accentuate and guide movement on stage, and increase or ease tension. The music sets the atmosphere and tempo for the performance; it does not compete with the voice, but adds punctuation and italics. When there is a pause in the narrative, the *shamisen* provides a musical bridge for the continuing action of the puppets.

About the Bunraku Theatre

The birth of Bunraku dates to 1684, when Takemoto Gidayu (1651–1714), a famous master of *joururi* narration, established the Takemoto-za theater in Osaka. But the name most closely associated with Bunraku is that of the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724), who cooperated with Takemoto Gidayu to produce numerous masterpieces of puppet theater.

Chikamatsu's plays portray human emotion in a tragic but admirable light. *Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, for example, depicts the dilemma of star-crossed lovers who, faced with a choice between love and duty, choose to die together.

During the first half of the 18th century, Bunraku surpassed even Kabuki in popularity, but in the 19th century it slipped into a decline from which it only began to recover about two decades ago. In fact, in the period directly following World War II, it came perilously close to extinction, hanging on only with the help of government subsidies and a small coterie of enthusiasts.

The National Bunraku Theatre

In 1963, the Bunraku Kyokai (Bunraku Association) was formed to oversee Bunraku. Then, through the cooperative efforts of the Bunraku Kyokai, Osaka Prefecture, Osaka City and the Kansai Economic Association, the National Bunraku Theatre was opened in 1984 in Osaka to commemorate Bunraku's 300th anniversary. Since then, programs have been performed nine months out of each year, alternating between the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka and the National Theatre in Tokyo. The surge in popularity has been particularly dramatic in Tokyo, where tickets to Bunraku performances are difficult to secure.

Nonetheless, the number of people directly involved in these performances is less than 100, including narrators, *shamisen* players, and puppeteers. Unlike Kabuki actors, who inherit their craft and position from their fathers, Bunraku performers need no pedigree, only skill. However, the acquisition of that skill is a lifetime undertaking. Novice puppeteers concentrate on the puppets' legs alone for about 10 years, after which they may progress to the left arm and hand. It is said to take at least 25 years to attain the status of *omozukai*, the main puppet master who controls the right arm and head.

In addition to the performers who appear on stage, the company includes numerous unseen "people of the back" (*urakata*): the off-stage musicians, the wig masters, keepers of the heads, the prop masters, stage assistants and costumers.

The National Bunraku Theatre Company has been designated an "Important Cultural Asset of Japan." It is the only full-time, professional repertory puppet troupe operating in the country.

In 2003, Bunraku was declared a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The National Bunraku Theatre Company includes four "Living National Treasures" who have been recognized for their artistic mastery and have been entrusted with transmitting their knowledge to the next generation of artists.