

BUNRAKU

Puppet theater brings old Japan to life

The puppet theater stage

The *bunraku* (puppet theater) stage is specially constructed to accommodate three-person puppets. The puppeteers operate from a pit behind a railing at the front of the stage. (Photo courtesy of National Theater / Bunrakuza)



Bunraku is Japan's professional puppet theater. Developed primarily in the 17th and 18th centuries, it is one of the four forms of Japanese classical theater, the others being *kabuki*, *noh*, and *kyogen*. The term *bunraku* comes from *Bunrakuza*, the name of the only commercial *bunraku* theater to survive into the modern era. *Bunraku* is also called *ningyo joruri*, a name that points to its origins and essence. *Ningyo* means "doll" or "puppet," and *joruri* is the name of a style of dramatic narrative chanting accompanied by the three-stringed *shamisen*.

Together with *kabuki*, *bunraku* developed as part of the vibrant merchant culture of the Edo period (1603–1868). Despite the use of puppets, it is not a children's theater. Many of its most famous plays were written by Japan's greatest dramatist, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1724), and the great skill of the operators make the puppet characters and their stories come alive on stage.

History of *Bunraku*

Already in the Heian period (794–1185), itinerant puppeteers known as *kugutsumawashi* traveled around Japan playing door-to-door for donations. In this form of street entertainment, which continued up through the Edo period, the puppeteer manipulated two hand puppets on a stage that consisted of a box suspended from his neck. A number of the *kugutsumawashi* are thought to have settled at Nishinomiya and on the island of Awaji, both near present-day Kobe. In the 16th century, puppeteers from these groups were called to Kyoto to perform for the imperial family and military leaders. It was around this time that puppetry was combined with the art of *joruri*.

A precursor of *joruri* can be found in the blind itinerant performers, called *biwa hoshi*,

who chanted *The Tale of the Heike*, a military epic depicting the Taira-Minamoto War, while accompanying themselves on the *biwa*, a kind of lute. In the 16th century, the *shamisen* replaced the *biwa* as the instrument of choice, and the *yoruri* style developed. The name *yoruri* came from one of the earliest and most popular works chanted in this style, the legend of a romance between warrior Minamoto no Yoshitsune and the beautiful Lady Joruri.

The art of puppetry combined with chanting and *shamisen* accompaniment grew in popularity in the early 17th century in Edo (now Tokyo), where it received the patronage of the *shogun* and other military leaders. Many of the plays at this time presented the adventures of Kimpira, a legendary hero renowned for his bold, outlandish exploits. It was in the merchant city of Osaka, however, that the golden age of *ningyo yoruri* was inaugurated through the talents of two men: *tayu* (chanter) Takemoto Gidayu (1651–1714) and the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

After he opened the Takemotoza puppet theater in Osaka in 1684, Gidayu's powerful chanting style, called *gidayu-bushi*, came to dominate *yoruri*. Chikamatsu began writing historical dramas (*jidai-mono*) for Gidayu in 1685. Later he spent more than a decade writing mostly for *kabuki*, but in 1703 Chikamatsu returned to the Takemotoza, and from 1705 to the end of his life he wrote exclusively for the puppet theater. There has been much debate as to why Chikamatsu turned to writing for *kabuki* and then returned to *bunraku*, but this may have been the result of dissatisfaction with the relative position of the playwright and actor in *kabuki*. Famous *kabuki* actors of the day considered the play raw material to be molded to better display their own talents.

In 1703, Chikamatsu pioneered a new kind of puppet play, the domestic drama (*sewa-mono*), which brought new prosperity to the Takemotoza. Only one month after a shop clerk and a courtesan committed double suicide, Chikamatsu dramatized the incident in *Sonezaki shinju* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*). The conflict between social obligations (*gin*) and human feelings (*ninjo*) found in this play greatly moved audiences of the time and became a central theme for *bunraku*.

Domestic dramas such as Chikamatsu's series of love-suicide plays became a favorite subject for the puppet theater. Historical dramas, however, also continued to be popular and became more sophisticated as audiences came to expect the psychological depth found in the domestic plays. One example of this is *Kanadehon Chushingura*, perhaps the most famous *bunraku* play. Based on the true story of the 47 *ronin* (masterless *samurai*) incident of 1701–1703, it was first staged 47 years later in 1748. After drawing his sword in Edo castle in response to insults by the Tokugawa *shogun's* chief of protocol (Kira Yoshinaka), the feudal lord Asano Naganori was forced to commit suicide and his clan was disbanded. The 47 loyal retainers carefully plotted and carried out their revenge by killing Kira nearly two years later. Even though many years had elapsed since the incident, playwrights still changed the time, location, and character names in order to avoid offending the Tokugawa *shogun*. This popular play was soon adapted to the *kabuki* stage and continues to be an important part of both repertoires.

Throughout the 18th century, *bunraku* developed in both a competitive and cooperative relationship with *kabuki*. At the individual role level, *kabuki* actors imitated the distinctive movements of *bunraku* puppets and the chanting style of the *tayu*, while puppeteers adapted the stylistic flourishes of famous *kabuki* actors to their own performances. At the play level, many *bunraku* works, especially those of Chikamatsu, were adapted for *kabuki*, while lavish *kabuki*-style productions were staged as *bunraku*.

Gradually eclipsed in popularity by *kabuki*, from the late 18th century *bunraku* went into commercial decline and theaters closed one by one until only the Bunrakuza was left. Since World War II, *bunraku* has had to depend on government support for its survival, although its popularity has been increasing in recent years. Under the auspices of the Bunraku Association, regular performances are held today at the National Theater in Tokyo and the National Bunraku Theater in Osaka. *Bunraku* performance tours have been enthusiastically received in cities around the world.

Three-person puppet

Three people manipulate a single puppet. The lead puppeteer (at left) supports the puppet with his left hand and operates the puppet's right hand with his right hand. One assistant operates the left hand and the other, the legs. (Photo courtesy of National Theater / Bunrakuza)

Puppets and Performance

One-half to two-thirds life-size, *bunraku* puppets are assembled from several components: wooden head, shoulder board, trunk, arms, legs, and costume. The head has a grip with control strings to move the eyes, mouth, and eyebrows. This grip is inserted into a hole in the center of the shoulder board. Arms and legs are hung from the shoulder board with strings, and the costume fits over the shoulder board and trunk, from which a bamboo hoop is hung to form the hips. Female puppets often have immovable faces, and, since their long kimono completely cover the lower half of their bodies, most do not need to have legs.

There are about 70 different puppet heads in use. Classified into various categories, such as young unmarried woman or young man of great strength, each head is usually used for a number of different characters, although they are often referred to by the name of the role in which they first appeared.

The *omozukai* (principal operator) inserts his left hand through an opening in the back of the costume and holds the head grip. With his right hand he moves the puppet's right arm. Holding a large warrior puppet can be an exercise in endurance since they weigh up to 20 kilograms. The left arm is operated by the *hidarizukai* (first assistant), and the legs are operated by the *ashizukai* (second assistant), who also stamps his feet for sound effects and to punctuate the *shamisen* rhythm. For female puppets, the *ashizukai* manipulates the lower part of the *kimono* to simulate leg movement.

In Chikamatsu's day, puppets were operated by one person; the three-man puppet was not introduced until 1734. Originally this single operator was not seen on stage, but for *Sonezaki shinju* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*), master puppeteer Tatsumatsu Hachirobei became the first to work in full view of the audience.

Today all three puppeteers are out on stage in full view. The operators usually wear black suits and hoods that make them symbolically invisible. A celebrity in the *bunraku* world, the principal operator often



works without the black hood and in some cases even wears a brilliant white silk robe.

Like the puppeteers, the *tayu* and the *shamisen* player were originally hidden from the audience but, in a new play in 1705, Takemoto Gidayu chanted in full view of the audience, and in 1715 both the *tayu* and *shamisen* player began performing on a special elevated platform at the right of the stage, where they appear today. The *tayu* has traditionally had the highest status in a *bunraku* troupe. As narrator, he creates the atmosphere of the play, and he must voice all parts, from a rough bass for men to a high falsetto for women and children.

The *shamisen* player does not merely accompany the *tayu*. Since the puppeteers, *tayu*, and *shamisen* player do not watch each other during the performance, it is up to the *shamisen* player to set the pace of the play with his rhythmic strumming. In some large-scale *bunraku* plays and extravaganzas adapted from *kabuki*, multiple *tayu-shamisen* pairs and *shamisen* ensembles are used.

A Bunraku Play: *Sonezaki shinju* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*)

This masterpiece of Chikamatsu Monzaemon was the first of the new genre of domestic drama (*sewa-mono*) plays focusing on the conflicts between human emotions and the severe restrictions and obligations of contemporary society. The great success of this play led to many more dramas on the tragic love affairs of merchants and

Sonezaki shinju (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki)

A scene from this famous play by Chikamatsu Monzaemon. (Photo courtesy of National Theater / Bunrakuza)

courtesans, and it is also said to have spawned a string of copycat love suicides.

Scene 1: Making the rounds of his customers, Tokubei, clerk at a soy sauce dealer, meets his beloved, the courtesan Ohatsu, by chance at Ikutama Shrine in Osaka. Weeping, she criticizes him for neglecting to write or visit. Tokubei explains that he has had some problems, and at her urging he tells the whole story.

Tokubei's uncle, the owner of the soy sauce business, had asked him to marry his wife's niece, but Tokubei refused because of his love for Ohatsu. However, Tokubei's stepmother agreed to the marriage behind his back and took the large dowry with her to the country. When Tokubei again refused the marriage, his angry uncle demanded the return of the dowry money. After finally managing to get the money from his stepmother, Tokubei lent it to his good friend Kuheiji, who is late paying it back.

Just then a drunken Kuheiji arrives at the shrine with a couple of friends. When Tokubei urges him to return the money, Kuheiji denies borrowing it, and he and his friends beat up Tokubei.

When Kuheiji has gone, Tokubei proclaims his innocence to bystanders and hints that he will make amends by killing himself.

Scene 2: It is the evening of the same day and Ohatsu is back at Temma House, the brothel where she works. Still distraught at what has happened, she slips outside after catching a glimpse of Tokubei. They weep and he tells her that the only option left for him is suicide.

Ohatsu helps Tokubei hide under the porch on which she sits, and soon Kuheiji and his friends arrive. Kuheiji continues to proclaim Tokubei's guilt, but Ohatsu says she knows he is innocent. Then, as if talking to herself, she asks if Tokubei is resolved to die. Unseen by the others, he answers by drawing her foot across his neck. (Since female puppets do not have legs, a specially made foot is used for this scene.)

Kuheiji says that if Tokubei kills himself he will take care of Ohatsu, but she rebukes him, calling him a thief and a liar. She says she is sure that Tokubei intends to die with her as she does with him. Overwhelmed by her love,



Tokubei responds by touching her foot to his forehead.

Once Kuheiji has left and the house is quiet, Ohatsu manages to slip out.

Scene 3: On their journey to Sonezaki Wood, Tokubei and Ohatsu speak of their love, and a lyrical passage spoken by the narrator comments on the transience of life. Hearing revelers in a roadside teahouse singing about an earlier love suicide, Tokubei wonders if he and Ohatsu will be the subject of such songs.

After reaching Sonezaki Wood, Ohatsu cuts her sash and they use it to bind themselves together so they will be beautiful in death. Tokubei apologizes to his uncle, and Ohatsu to her parents, for the trouble they are causing. Chanting an invocation to Amida Buddha, he stabs her and then himself.