

Puppet Theatre - Bunraku in Japan

KULATILAKA KUMARASINGHE

The typical classic puppet plays of Japan are called *Bunraku*. But originally it was called *Ningyō Jōruri*. *Ningyō* means doll or puppet, *jōruri* means, recitation or narration. *Bunraku* is derived from a puppeteer named *Uemura Bunrakuen* (1737-1810). He built his own theatre for *Ningyō Jōruri* in Osaka in 1805. In 1872 a manager for *Bunrakuen's* theatre, named *Ōkura*, established a rival theatre in the gay Quarters of Osaka, and called it *Bunraku-za*.¹ *Ningyō Jōruri* and the *Bunrakuza* became synonymous, until *Bunraku* came to be used for the drama itself.¹

Puppets were introduced to Japan in the 9th century. As their handlers were foreigners, the social status of puppeteers for a long period of history was, officially, that of outcasts. Puppets were of the punch- and - judy type manipulated by hand. For centuries their function was limited to simple stories² to amuse children and occasional performances at festivals. *Bunraku's* three components are the narrative singing, (*gidayūbūshi*), the playing of the *samisen*; and the manipulation of the puppets.³

The narrator uses a *gidayū* text, kept open in front of him. It has both the words and the intonation. This book is called *Maruhon* in Japanese.⁴ Towards the end of the 16th century in the two cities of Osaka and Kyoto, a *samisen* player called *Menukiya Chozaburo* and a puppeteer named *Hikita* joined forces. They created a new kind of

theatrical entertainment in which the puppets were used to perform actions described by the musical story.

The stage is about as long as the Kabuki stage. But there is no *hanamichi* or revolving stage. As the puppets are smaller than life, the stage settings are correspondingly scaled down. At the part of the stage nearest the audience is a low balustrade. To the right of the audience, at the side of the stage, is the dais (*yuka*) for the *gidayū* narrators and the *samisen* players. Narrators usually sit to the left of the stage. The *samisen* players sit to the right.⁵

The *tayū* is a narrator of a type of dramatic and descriptive poetry. He recites the *gidayū bushi*. There are also some other types that belong to the category of the *jōruri*. In *Bunraku's* early days, there was considerable variety. The names of narrators were made into the names of styles of the texts. However since 1685, *Bunraku* has been performed exclusively in the *gidayū* style. The dramas *Chūshingura*, *Terakoya* and *Kokusenya kassen* (the Great General's Battle) were all written for *gidayū* performance. Concerning the technique of narrating *jōruri* there are several schools. *Bunraku* text consists of two types.⁶ (A) The depiction of lyrical situations, development of the story, and the explanation of the underlying psychology, which is depicted in the third person. (B) The words (*serifu*) of the characters, expressed in the first person. Playing the *samisen* provides the melody. The *samisen* musician is sometimes a composer as well as a performer. He also plays a vital role in the transmission of the art. The musicians are accompanists, in the background, of the puppets and narrators. But they are essential for the continued transmission of the dramatic form.⁷

The two characteristics of *Bunraku* are the puppets and the techniques whereby they are manipulated. A puppet consists of a head, body, arms and legs. But since in the past women's *kimonos* were so long as to entirely conceal their legs, puppets representing women are

¹ Ino Ura, Yoshinobu - Kawatake, Toshio (1998), *The Traditional Theatre of Japan*, John Weatherhill Co. - P. 146

² J.T. - P. 33

³ T.T.T.J. - P. 147

⁴ T.T.T.J. - P. 147

⁵ T.T.T.J. - P. 148

⁶ Ibid. - P. 148

⁷ T.T.T.J. - P. 149

made without legs. Head, arms and legs are detachable, and the pole on which the head rests is inserted through the puppet's torso. A more complicated puppet is capable of opening or closing its eyes, rolling them, raising or lowering its eyebrows, and opening or closing its mouth, at the discretion of the puppeteer.⁸

However, one person would not suffice to manipulate such a precisely devised puppet. Because of this, *Bunraku* uses the technique of having three men work in unison to operate one puppet. The mainstay of the three is called the chief puppeteer (*omozukai*). He inserts his left hand through the clothing on the puppet's back in order to grasp the body. The life of a puppet depends upon the puppeteer's left hand. The puppeteer's right hand controls the puppet's right arm and hand. The second puppeteer handles only the left arm and hand of the puppet. The third puppeteer handles only the legs.

Although female puppet's no lack legs, since it is necessary for it to appear as if there are legs within *Kimono*. The puppets are called *tsume ningyō* or simply *tsume*. But the puppets used for the main roles are all handled by three men. In the case of puppets such as those representing courtesans, they sport combs and hair ornaments that are no different from actual ones except in size. This entire weight must be borne by the left hand of the chief puppeteer for a long duration. That the three men must even breathe in unison is the most vital point in *Bunraku*. The puppeteer responsible for moving the left arm and other responsible for moving the legs when the puppets manipulated technique used by the chief puppeteer. If somebody wants to become a chief puppeteer, twenty years of training are required.⁹

At the time of *Chikamatsu Monzaemon*, when *Bunraku* had first been devised; just one person manipulated each puppet by holding it up while standing behind the partition at the front of the stage. If only the puppets are visible, it would be proper to call it a puppet play. However, in 1734 the three-man system was perfected. Later, puppet sizes were

⁸ T.T.T.J. - P. 150

⁹ T.T.T.J. - P. 149

standardized at about half human scale. For the present, all the puppeteers should be clothed entirely in black with gauze-like hoods that cover their heads. Today, the chief puppeteer can perform without a black hood. Then following announcement is usually made before the curtain is opened. "Ladies and gentlemen! Today the chief puppeteer performs without a hood".¹⁰

The chief puppeteer, at one with the role he plays, should feel joyous or sad or angry as he manipulates his puppet. One of the greatest puppeteers said, "Because of the audience watching, I am obliged not to express my feeling in tears. It is difficult to conceal my emotions."¹¹ Something that might be called either super - puppets or super human, this is the unique world of *Bunraku*.¹²

Another unique characteristic is the fact that these puppet plays have been created for adults and depict the world of adults.¹³

Bunraku's literary content is that of *jōruri*. The writers of *Bunraku* plays were a step advanced with respect to the literary quality of their work. In *Kabuki*, the actor is foremost, and the playwrights therefore wrote to exploit the talents of the actors. In contrast to this, in *Bunraku*, plays were written for performance by puppets and narrators who performed virtually just as the playwright intended. The playwright was thus free to express and develop his abilities as poet and dramatist. *Gidayū jōruri* is broadly divided into two categories according to the 'world' to which the hero belongs and the type of society.

1. Historical plays (*jidai jōruri*) dealing with the brave deeds of warriors and aristocrats
2. *Sewa* plays (*sewa jōruri*) depicting the life of the general public, especially of the merchant class and farmers.

¹⁰ T.T.T.J. - P. 152

¹¹ Ibid. - P. 153

¹² Ibid. - P. 154

¹³ Ibid. - P. 154

Historical plays refer to a period in the past, and almost all the plays draw upon narrative and other early literary works already well known. These stories may be categorized into the *Sugawara* cycle and the *Ise* cycle. The former is dealing with the story of the exile of *Sugawara michizane*. The later, dealing with the romantic adventures of a hero poet, *Ariwara Narihira*. The *Genji* and *Heike* cycle represented by several epic stories such as *Heike monogatari Gempei Seisui* and *Taiheiki*. The *taikō* generally called *Taikōki*.¹⁴ The leading characters of the historical plays were therefore persons of historical or literary fame and persons close to them. *Sewa* plays indicates the popular subjects; for example love affairs, double suicides, robbery and murder, success, gang wars, demonstrations and riots by farmers.

Historical plays are further subdivided into Dynasty plays (*ōchōmono*). Historical plays and Family feuds (*oiemono*).¹⁵

A renowned *jōruri* chanter *Setsuma Jo-un*, originated a new style of recitation. It was characterized by violence and bombast. He chose as his central character, *Kimpira* a legendary hero of bald and fierce nature whose supernatural exploits demanded a most vigorous declamation and singing. Later, this style of singing, when combined with the puppets, came to be known as *kimpira jōruri*.¹⁶

Bunraku is a puppet theatre for adults. *Bunraku* began with "sacred dolls" and was in time elevated to the plane of human drama.

The three elements fused to form *bunraku* - the *jōruri* narration, the *samisen* music, and the manipulation of puppets - originated and developed independently of one another. First, it was about the year 1480 that the *jōruri* recitation accompanied by the *biwa* and *ogi-byoshi* - in the latter the fingers were used to make a sound by striking the ribs of a fan (*ogi*) - was originated. Then around 1560, the Japanese made *samisen* a modification of the *jabisen* introduced from *okinawa* came

¹⁴ T.T.T.J. - P. 157

¹⁵ Ibid. - p. 158

¹⁶ J.T. - P. 33

into use to provide the musical accompaniment. Around 1600 the primitive puppet drama was combined with these to form so-called *Ningyō Jōruri*, or puppet recitation.¹⁷

Puppeteering originated in remote antiquity. In ancient Japan the use of Puppets - manipulated by virgin girls and others in attendance at shrines - served for religious purposes.¹⁸

The style of narrative recitation known as *heikyoku* is said to have been the precursor of *jōruri*. Singing of a story was already very popular by the end of the *Heian* period as a performing art. Most popular among the presentations were those that were accompanied by *biwa* or *ōgi-byōshi*. The melody was based upon a method of reciting Buddhist scriptures called *Tendai Shōmyō*.¹⁹ The name *jōruri* was taken from a twelve part composition for *biwa* performance titled 'the tales of princess *Jōruri*'.²⁰ The snake skin - covered *jabisen* was introduced from *okinawa*. This instrument is lighter than the *biwa*. But in the later, on behalf of the snake - skin, the use of cat skin was adopted. The first person to use a *samisen* and recite *jōruri* was *Sawazumi kengyo of kyoto*.²¹

Soon after the puppet plays became popular in the *Kansai* district they were introduced to the area of Tokyo. *Hanimanojos* style was vigorous and colorful and not quite in keeping with the refined, graceful style that had become the standard.²² In contrast the style of *Kaganajo* was that of Ōsaka and Kyōto area. *Takemoto Gidayū* created his own style by adopting that of *Harimanojō*.²³

In 1685, *Takemoto Gidayū* invited *Chikamatsu* to become the *Takemotoza's* star writer. The first work by *Chikamatsu* for his new

¹⁷ T.T.T.J. - P. 172

¹⁸ Ibid. - p. 173

¹⁹ T.T.T.J. - P. 174

²⁰ Ibid. - p. 175

²¹ Ibid. - p. 176

²² T.T.T.J. - P. 177

²³ Ibid. - p. 178

employer was *Shusse Kagekiyo*. This was a turning point in the history of *Bunraku*. Some creative works before it are termed old *jōruri*, and works created after it are called new *jōruri* or *gidayu jōruri*.

There were many types and varieties of plays occupied with love stories, family conflicts and human problems. *Chikamatsu* brought the development to perfection. The basic form of the *Tokugawa* tragedy was established after performing of *Shussē Kagekiyo*. This play is a historical play consisting of five acts. Moreover *Chikamatsu*, with his *Sonezaki Shinyū*, created the first social tragedy. Because of the works of *Chikamatsu* and *Gidayū*, the puppet theatre was made into a truly popular theatre.²⁴

Ten years after *Chikamatsu's* death, in 1724, the master puppeteer *Yoshida Bunzaburo* (-1760) perfected the system of using three men to manipulate a single puppet. He was outstanding as a puppeteer. For the next two decades, *Bunraku* was so popular that *Kabuki*, in comparison seemed not to exist. It was the golden age of *Bunraku*.²⁵ In this period, the dramatic content of the plays was becoming more and more realistic. Among *Bunraku* dramas, *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* (1746), *Yoshitsune Sembōzakura* (1747) and *Kanadehon Chushingura* (1748) were three master pieces. Among the *Bunraku* writers, the most powerful was *Namiki Sōsuke*. He wrote a stirring drama of a *Midsummer Murder* (*natsu matsuri naniwa kagami*). After that *Namiki* wrote another *Bunraku* drama called *Kumagai Jinya* which was his last work. After his death *Bunraku* declined rapidly. During next half century, because of lack of interest in *Bunraku* producers had to be a closed down the puppet theatres. After that, several smaller puppet theatres were built, but all failed. Several years later, in 1805, the small theatre of *Uemura Bunrakuken* was opened.²⁶ This was the only theatre devoted exclusively to *Bunraku* performances since the *Meiji* era and through the present is the *Bunrakuza*. After several years, it was re-

²⁴ T.T.T.J. - P. 179

²⁵ T.T.T.J. - P. 180

²⁶ T.T.T.J. - P. 181

named the *Asahiza*, in Osaka. For a while after the Second World War, *Bunraku* was split into two factions. In 1963, these two factions were united. After this, because of the cooperation of the Japanese government, the *Bunraku* Association was established.

