

Bunraku: The Greatest Puppet Drama in the World!

By **TAKAGI Hideki**

All photos possessed by National Theatre of Japan

1. Puppet Theater for Adults

Many people think that puppet theater is always for children. But when the *Bunraku* puppet theater troupe performed in America, there was an interesting incident. A young mother took her children to see it because she heard that it was Japanese puppet theater. But when she got to the theater, she learned that the play was a “love suicide,” that is, the story of a young couple who could not be united in life and decide to commit suicide together. This is the play, “*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*,” a masterpiece by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, known as the “Shakespeare of Japan.” The mother probably thought that puppet theater meant fairy tales and other stories suitable for children. When she found out what *Bunraku* really was, she was shocked and said this isn’t the sort of thing you show children, took her children and rushed out of the theater.

Along with *noh* and *kabuki*, *Bunraku* is one of the highly developed traditional performing arts of Japan. It has already been 400 years since *Bunraku* took a form close to that in which it exists today. Unlike *noh* and *kabuki* in which live actors perform dramas, *Bunraku* is performed with puppets. Today, in many parts of the world, puppet theater is aimed at children, but from the beginning, *Bunraku* was created as a theater for adults.

Originally *Bunraku* was called “*ningyo joruri*” (*ningyo* = “puppet” or “doll,” *joruri* = “musical storytelling”). Puppet plays and musical ballads were two separate art forms. Originally puppet theater was performed with

the puppeteers speaking the roles or moving the puppets to the accompaniment of flutes and drums. *Joruri* were tales of adventure and romance, which were sung and recited, first to the accompaniment of the *biwa* lute and later to the three-stringed *shamisen*. Finally, puppet theater and narrative music were combined to become the art form now known as *Bunraku* (Photo 1).



PHOTO 1: The *Bunraku* stage today: On stage the puppets act out the play. To the right are the musicians, the “*tayu*” narrator and the “*shamisen*” player.

The people that enjoyed *ningyo joruri* were not court aristocrats or *samurai* lords; they were very ordinary commoners. They went to the theater just as we do today and watched *ningyo joruri* or *Bunraku* for entertainment. Japanese people 400 years ago had all kinds of hopes and dreams, many of which we share today. They especially liked love stories, but in the feudal society of the time ruled by the Tokugawa *shogun*, people could not love freely. The wishes of your lord or of your parents largely determined who you would marry. So the commoners of the time went to the theater to see passionate love stories act out the dreams not possible in their real lives. *Bunraku* became a puppet theater that presented these kinds of stories for adults.

2. Highly Developed Puppetry Techniques

Probably anyone watching *Bunraku* for the first time will be surprised by the way the puppets are manipulated. One of the most striking features of *Bunraku* is that there are three puppeteers for each puppet. When *Bunraku* first developed at the beginning of the 18th century, there was only one puppeteer for each puppet. But after a period of trial and error, in the mid-18th century, some 270 years ago, the technique of three puppeteers for one puppet developed.

Having three puppeteers has all kinds of advantages. First, it allows the puppets to be very large. When there was only one puppeteer, the puppets were at most 50–60 cm tall. These puppets could not be seen well in a large theater. With three puppeteers, the puppets could be an average of 140 cm tall, about the size of a human child. This allowed performances in bigger theaters, to bigger audiences.

But the more important advantage is that three puppeteers allowed a great advance in the range and sensitivity of physical expression possible. Here is what the three puppeteers do (Photo 2).



PHOTO 2: Three puppeteers for one puppet make *Bunraku* unique. The main puppeteer shows his face, but the other two puppeteers wear black hoods.

The leader of the team is called the “*omo-zukai*” or “lead puppeteer.” He operates the head and right hand of the puppet. The second puppeteer operates the left hand of the puppet with a rod, which he holds in his right hand. The third puppeteer operates the feet.

Often people are so impressed with the precise and sensitive movements of *Bunraku* puppets that they say they are almost like living human beings. But the true power of the puppet technique is not just in this realism. After all, if the movements of living human beings were the only aim, it would be much cheaper to have one actor rather than three puppeteers.

At the same time that puppets should look as realistic as possible, puppeteers aim at creating expressions that are not possible with live actors, things that go beyond what a human being can do. It is difficult to convey this with words, but one example is when a female character bends her torso forward to draw attention to the nape of the neck. In Japanese culture, the nape of a woman’s neck is felt to be very alluring. If an actress took the exact same pose, it would be a little too raw. The filter of the puppets in *Bunraku* preserves the beauty of the pose without the unwanted reality of a human body.

3. Overcoming Differences of Language

As I said before, *Bunraku* exists together with *noh* and *kabuki* as examples of traditional performing arts. *Noh* is the oldest, with a history of some 600 years. *Bunraku* and *kabuki* were both created at about the same time during the Edo Period (1603–1867) and have a history of about 400 years.

Kabuki is very dramatic today, but when it began, rather than spoken plays, it was a kind of dance show. When *Bunraku* began, it emphasized highly sophisticated drama and it soon became more popular than *kabuki*. In return, *kabuki* started taking the plays of *Bunraku* and transferring them to *kabuki*, so the roles performed by puppets were played by actors. In this regard, *Bunraku* can be considered the “mother of *kabuki*.” In the current *kabuki* repertory, roughly 30% of the plays originally were *Bunraku* plays. “*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*” mentioned before and “*Chushingura: The Treasury of Loyal Retainers*” both were originally puppet plays that were adapted to *kabuki*. “*Chushingura*” is based on an actual vendetta that took place about 300 years ago and seems to so perfectly embody the values of Japanese society that even today, it is one of the most popular plays in the theater.

But how is a play different when it is performed in *Bunraku* and *kabuki*. After all, the scripts are almost identical and the story remains the same. The biggest difference between the two is the effect the music creates.

Kabuki is an actor’s art. The individual qualities of the star actors come out strongly on stage. In *Bunraku*, by contrast, the puppets themselves are not necessarily the heart of the art form. The most important position is taken by the *tayu* or narrator, and the *shamisen* player (Photo 3). The narrator speaks for all the roles, and describes the scene and the emotions of the characters. He does this with a combination of speech and song, supported and punctuated by the music of *shamisen*. The puppeteers are always working to embody the drama created by the musical storytelling. If the music is

not good, then the audience will not be moved by the performance even if a puppeteer is a “Living National Treasure.”



PHOTO 3: On the left is the “*tayu*” or narrator. On the right is the “*shamisen*” player who doesn’t look at a score and has the words and music memorized.

This is because originally the narrative music was created separate from the puppets and already could stand on its own as drama without the puppets. It was highly developed and could be appreciated as an art form to listen to. The puppets were then added to this drama to give it concrete form and it is the composite art form that is *Bunraku*.

The music of *Bunraku* is not singing. The word “*kataru*” or “narrate” is used. That is because a narrator does not just use a beautiful voice or sing beautiful melodies; he has to make the words and the emotions of the text come to life.

The language of *Bunraku* is very old and often even modern Japanese have trouble understanding it. For non-Japanese this language is probably almost impossible. But the narrator of *Bunraku* is expressing the hearts and souls of human beings. This emotional drama is then given visual form by the puppets. Even though the words are so important to *Bunraku*, this drama is so powerful that it can move audiences from different cultures as well. ■

(Translated by Mark OSHIMA)

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