

Classic Rakugo Art Finds a New Audience

By Kurosawa Tsuneo

THE traditional Japanese art of sit-down comic storytelling, *rakugo*, is once again in the spotlight. Japanese showbiz is taking a fresh look at this seemingly forgotten art, giving a boost to the revival of the former king of pop entertainment. Tokyo hosted a big rakugo festival last summer. The number of young people going to traditional rakugo theaters is now increasing.

Style Unchanged Since Ancient Times

Rakugo is a solo show, and the performer is known as *rakugo-ka* (a rakugo actor) or *hanashi-ka* (a storyteller). The rakugo storyteller traditionally performs while seated on a cushion at the center of the stage, wearing the traditional outfit that has been unchanged for centuries – a plain kimono with a half-coat called *haori*. For props, the rakugo-ka comes on the stage with a folding fan and a hand towel (although this is not often used during the performance). Rakugo-ka portrays various characters story by story using voice and gestures, and the program consists of brief original jokes of the day and a repertoire ranging from comics to gripping love stories and horror tales.

Most rakugo-ka are men. They play the roles of young women as well as elderly men. They can become carpenters or lords or commoners, just by changing their voices with gestures. They perform only on a tiny cushion, with a versatility that has endeared generations of rakugo lovers.

Rakugo has a long history, dating back to the late 17th century in the Edo period (1603-1867). It sprang up in major cities such as Edo (the present Tokyo), Osaka and Kyoto, and was staged in small



Photo: Katsura Utawaka

Rakugo-ka portrays various characters story by story using voice and gestures

theaters and public bathhouses. It was in the late 18th century that theaters designed mainly for rakugo, known as *yose*, were first built. In time, there were regular rakugo shows every evening and it became the most popular form of entertainment for the populace.

Dwindling Number of Yose Theaters

About 200 years ago, there were some 700 yose theaters in Edo alone, and they numbered more than 200 even 100 years ago. Today, there are just four yose theaters in Tokyo. As rakugo comic dialogues can no longer financially count on yose theaters, many of them perform on radio or TV programs.

In a surprising turn of fortune, rakugo has become the talk of the town recently. Last July, the Great Rakugo Festival was held in Tokyo's Ginza district. During the three-day event, seven theaters in Ginza that usually show plays or movies hosted nearly 100 rakugo-ka. The festival attracted nearly 20,000 spectators, and all the tickets were sold out as soon as they went on sale.

According to a private research agency, the theater and live entertainment industry in Japan had ¥102 billion in revenues in 2004, a 5.4% increase from the previous year. Surely, the rakugo boom was part of the story.

A Bargain Deal

What is behind the current rakugo revival? To find out, I went to Suehiro-tei, a yose theater in Shinjuku. For four hours, the spectators were treated to 17 or 18 programs of rakugo and *manzai*, another narrative art where two entertainers exchange rapid-fire comic dialogues, and the ticket is only ¥2,700, less than the cost of two movies. This must surely be a bargain in Tokyo.

Of course, the price is not all. I think the real secret of the renewed interest in rakugo lies in its rhythm and tempo. Most rakugo stories are based on Edo-period anecdotes. To create the right ambiance of those old days, a feeling of "ma" or comfortable intervals is needed. At the same time, as the rakugo storyteller must single-handedly play various characters, there is an obvious constraint of time on the speed of the story.

As a matter of fact, this very rhythm and tempo was at one time the reason why people stayed away from rakugo in the fast-paced, pressure-cooker way of life in Japan. However, the aura of a take-it-easy lifestyle which rakugo creates has apparently touched the chord of a new generation of Japanese. This, I guess, is why rakugo has found a new lease of life in Japanese showbiz. **JS**

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