
Bunraku

The Birth of Three New Stars / Young Performers' Heroic Efforts

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054 The year 2022 was the third successive year that the theatre world was forced to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. The seats available for sale at each performance have returned to their pre-pandemic levels, but audiences have yet to come back to the theatres. Theatre audiences are traditionally older, and as had been feared, it will take some time to break the habits of the past few years and tempt these customers back to the theatres. Of course, it is not only bunraku that has been affected. From noh to kabuki, the entire traditional theatre world continues to suffer from the effects of the pandemic. Theatre workers become infected or are identified as close contacts, leading to frequent cancellations of performances and cast changes. It has proved extremely difficult to eradicate infection in the theatre environment entirely. While different policies have been trialled, including requiring cast members to vacate the theatre as soon as their performance is over, transmission can still occur during rehearsals and performances. COVID-19 has still not run its course.

In the middle of this ongoing crisis, however, there was a glimmer of good news. From the April performances at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka, three chanters were newly elevated to the rank of *kiriba gatari* – those chanters with sufficient talent to take on a play's key climactic act. The chanters in question were Toyotake Rodayu, Takemoto Shikorodayu, and Takemoto Chitosedayu. They were also the first new chanters to be accorded this honour in thirteen years since Living National Treasure Toyotake Sakitayu.

To mark the occasion, Rodayu performed the Gappo's House scene from *Sesshu Gappo ga Tsuji* (*The Tale of Tamate Gozen*) with Takezawa Seisuke on

shamisen. Shikorodayu, meanwhile, was accompanied by Takezawa Sosuke, on lead shamisen, as he chanted Shizuka Gozen in the Journey with a Drum scene from *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* (*Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees*). Chitosedayu was accompanied by Toyozawa Tomisuke in his performance of the Hyuga Island scene from *Musume Kagekiyo Yashima nikki* (*The Blind Kagekiyo in Exile*). The performance provided an ideal showcase for the differing characters of each chanter's art: Rodayu's passion and pure soulfulness, Shikorodayu's stirring brilliance, and Chitosedayu intimate approach to the fate of a proud, isolated warrior. Shikorodayu's scene was sung by five chanters (*kakeai*), so it wasn't a true *kiriba gatari* performance. However, in the special summer vacation performance in Osaka, he got the chance to shine alone in Kamiya Jihei's Home scene from *Shinju ten no Amijima* (*The Love Suicides at Amijima*). To the accompaniment of Sosuke's shamisen, Shikorodayu's chanting brought a profound depth to this contemporary life play. At the same show, Rodayu and Seisuke performed an energetic, impressive Shido Temple scene from *Hana no Ueno homare no ishibumi* (*The Self-Sacrifice of Otsuji*).

The August 20 *Bunraku sutoruri no kai* puppet-less performance at the National Bunraku Theatre featured the three new stars competing against each other in dramatic scenes from *jidaimono* history plays. Chitosedayu with Tomisuke on shamisen tackled the rarely performed Sakai Village scene from *Gotaiheiki shiraishi banashi* (*The Vendetta by Two Sisters*), while Rodayu and Seisuke performed the Sodehagi *saimon* scene from *Oshu Adachigahara* (*The Rebellion of the Abe Clan*), and Shikorodayu with Tsuruzawa Tozo tackled the Kurosuke's House scene from *Genpei nunobiki no taki* (*The Nunobiki Waterfall*). The three stars performed together again in another puppet-less performance at the National Theatre in Tokyo in October. The scenes were different, but audiences got to experience the grit and determination of these chanters who will lead bunraku in the years to come.

Unfortunately, chanter and Living National Treasure Toyotake Sakitayu struggled with his health this year and was unable to perform for several months. Fans were worried when he missed both the latter half of the April (April 18 onwards) programme in Osaka and the whole May programme in Tokyo,

performances that were supposed to celebrate his being named a Person of Cultural Merit last autumn. However, fears were allayed somewhat when Sakitayu made a strong return at the summer vacation performance in Osaka. He performed the Yamatoya scene from *Shinju ten no Amijima*, and his rich, exquisite chanting was quite the thing to behold. His presence can really make all the difference to the impact of a performance. At the moment his chanting is truly exquisite, bringing together the highest levels of technique and dignity with an unerring sense of theatre. So it was worrying that he was again absent during the November shows, but we hope that he will make a return to the stage sometime in 2023.

In Sakitayu's absence, it was his pupil Takemoto Oritayu who stepped into the breach, standing in for his teacher's scenes and demonstrating his own skill. He added those scenes to the ones that had originally been allocated to him, so it must have been exhausting but we can hope that it can also fuel his growth as a performer. The best example of what he was able to accomplish was his Benkei in *Kanjincho* (*The Subscription List*) in the November programme in Osaka. To be honest, I always feel that the bunraku *Kanjincho* plays somewhat flat in comparison to the drama that kabuki's human actors can invoke in the same play. To make things even more challenging, this bunraku version was being performed at the same time as a kabuki version was being staged at the Kabuki-za in Tokyo, starring Ichikawa Ebizo in the Benkei role as part of the name-taking ceremonies for his succession to Ichikawa Danjuro XIII Hakuen. Two versions of *Kanjincho* in the same month signalled a true competition between bunraku and kabuki. The bunraku version normally uses the title *Narhibiku Ataka no shinseki* (*The New Barrier Gate at Ataka*), but for this performance it was titled *Kanjincho*, hinting at the dimension of competition from the bunraku side.

However, this version of *Kanjincho* was a real triumph. The cast included some of the spirited young mainstays of the theatre, with Oritayu as Benkei, Toyotake Yasutayu as Togashi, and Takemoto Kosumidayu as Yoshitsune. On the puppets, Benkei was manipulated by Yoshida Tamasuke, Togashi by Yoshida Tamashi, and Yoshitsune by Kiritake Montomi. Normally, it is only the chief puppeteer who shows his face, but for this performance the puppeteers who

controlled Benkei's left arm and feet also went unmasked and provided a deeply committed performance. The chanters, musicians, and puppeteers all put their heart and soul into it, creating a performance that blazed with a new heat and light. Especially notable was Oritayu, who in addition to this play stood in for his teacher Sakitayu in the comical *Wakigahama hobiki* scene from *Ichinotani futaba gunki* (*Chronicles of the Battle of Ichinotani*). Yasutayu dug his teeth into the lines that Oritayu threw at him, and listening to his chanting was like watching sparks fly. Tamasuke was making his first attempt at Benkei, a role that he had long dreamed of. The force that he brought to the role was frightening, truly inhabiting Benkei's desperate extremity of loyalty. The theatre also acted decisively in reducing the price of the most expensive seats for the *Kanjincho* section of the programme to 2500 yen halfway through the run. Those seats are normally sold at 5500 yen, so it was an excellent bargain for customers new to bunraku or those returning to the theatre. Osaka audiences have always been primarily drawn by word of mouth, with numbers increasing towards the end of the run, and this was definitely the case with *Kanjincho*. Everyone can admire the art of veteran performers, but spirited performances like this by younger stars will draw in new audiences.

Many other performances linger in the memory. In November's *Shinju yoigoshin* (*Love Suicides on the Eve of the Koshin Festival*), Chitosedayu and Tomisuke performed the Ueda Village scene and Toyotake Rosetayu and Tsuruzawa Seiji the Greengrocer scene. It was a high-quality performance, with the chanters creating a nuanced portrayal of the characters' wavering emotions, while puppeteers Yoshida Tamao as Hanbei and Kiritake Kanjuro as Ochiyo created a pair of beautiful lovers.

The quality of Tamao's work over the past few years has been eye opening. He manipulated Matsuomaru in the Village School scene from *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami* (*Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*) at the New Year's performances, and Shunkan in *Heike nyogo no shima* (*The Priest in Exile*) in February, and both were performances of grace and scale that succeeded magnificently in presenting the characters' inner pain and loneliness. Amongst the other puppeteers, Yoshida Kazuo's performances of Tamate Gozen in *Sesshu Gappo ga Tsuji*

in February in Tokyo, and Osan in *Shinju ten no Amijima* breathed life into roles that his master, the late Yoshida Bunjaku, had excelled in. Kiritake Kanjuro's Oharu in *Shinjuten no Amijima* and his Sodehagi in *Oshu Adachigahara* in the September show in Tokyo demonstrated outstanding talent in their presentation of the characters' inner lives.

Kanjuro is well known for the breadth of his talents and has long designed the illustrations used on the stamps available at bunraku performances. This year he both wrote and directed a new play for the summer vacation programme called *Suzu no ne (The Tinkle of a Bell)*. It was a charming, simple story about a *kappa* water sprite and a fox that delighted children who were seeing bunraku for the first time.

There were a string of independent shows put on by the younger performers in spite of the dangers created by the pandemic. In particular, I'd like to draw attention to the performances put on by the chanters, which were less about their own artistic growth and more about shrinking the distance with the audience to let them experience the full power of live *gidayubushi* chanting. I didn't manage to make it to all of these shows, but the list included Toyotake Yoshihodayu and Tsuruzawa Enjiro performing the Amagasaki scene from *Ehon taikoki (A Picture Book of the Taiko Hideyoshi)*, Minorikai, April 29 at Sennichitei, Osaka, and May 4 at the Nago no kai in Tokyo); Toyotake Yasutayu and Tsuruzawa Seiko performing the Kurosuke's House scene from *Genpei nunobiki no taki* (July 3 at Art Hall Timbre in Nara); and Kosumidayu and Seiko performing the Skylight scene from *Futatsu chocho kuruwa nikki (Diary of Two Butterflies in the Pleasure Quarters)*, October 21, small hall at the National Bunraku Theatre). This final performance was part of a double bill with the rakugo comedian Shofukutei Shikaku. These were all strong attempts at plays that these young chanters only get to perform at these kinds of events.

We must not forget the second annual *Bunraku muso keishoden (Bunraku Dreams: A Tale of Succession)* event, which was organized by mid-rank performers and held on August 6 at the National Bunraku Theatre. It began last year at puppeteer Yoshida Tamasho's instigation and involved something that could never happen at a regular performance: master puppeteers and their young

students, all of whom had around ten years of training under their belts, performing equal roles. The first event in 2021 attracted a lot of attention and was a huge success. Building on their experiences the previous year, in 2022 the younger performers again pooled their talents to create the programmes and think up the returns for the crowdfunding campaign for the show. This year saw the students playing the lead puppeteer roles (i.e. the head and right arm), while their teachers and senior students took on the left arm and feet respectively. This was something you would never see at a regular performance and it attracted large crowds.

There was another really fascinating performance in February at the Nakanoshima Museum of Art in Osaka. It was a collaboration between the contemporary artist Morimura Yasumasa and the puppeteer Kanjuro under the title *Ningen joruri (Human Joruri)*. During the performance, Morimura became a puppet and was manipulated by Kanjuro. Morimura is best known for his self-portraits where he dresses up as historical figures or subjects of famous paintings by artists, such as Van Gogh, and this time he became a bunraku puppet. For the performance, a new play called *Shin kyoeikitan (New Strange Tale of a Mirror Reflection)* was written. It is about a master dollmaker called Kyojuro and a *kyo ningyo* doll that he creates by reflecting the body of a beautiful woman in a mirror. Morimura played the *kyo ningyo* reflected in the mirror, and after the performance he declared that he didn't understand the need for any dividing line between contemporary art and classical performance. The performance itself opened new expressive possibilities for bunraku.

The year 2022 marked the 150th anniversary of the naming of the Bunraku-za troupe. Performances at the National Bunraku Theatre and the National Theatre in Tokyo from April onwards all carried a special commemorative text. The name the company now uses was originally the name of a playhouse in Osaka, which was taken in turn from Uemura Bunrakuken I, an entrepreneur who ran a puppet theatre troupe. On March 1, the performers attended a memorial service at Enjo-in Temple in Osaka's Tennoji district which houses Bunrakuken's grave. As well as praying for the success of the upcoming performances, Shikorodayu and Tsuruzawa Enza performed a puppet-less version of a section of the

Retirement Cottage of the Old Bamboo Cutter scene from the revival of *Yamato-uta taketori monogatari* (A Japanese Poem of the Tale of the Bamboo Cutter), a play originally written by Bunrakuo.

Finally, it was announced that the National Theatre in Tokyo, bunraku's home away from home, will close at the end of next October for reconstruction. A brand new theatre on the site is due to open in 2029. Bunraku has begun a series of performances to bid farewell to Japan's first national theatre. During the six years before the new National Theatre opens, the plan is to stage bunraku performances at various theatres around the capital.

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(Translation: Alan Cummings)