

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

RR-15

BUNRAKU

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28 Uguisudani-machi
Shibuya-ku, Tokyo

Mr. Richard Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10017

Dear Dick:

Now that technical sophistication in all forms of communication, including art, has grown so considerable (allowing us to achieve more impact with less immediate effort), the desirability of "doing more with less" has become a commonplace. The Japanese puppet art, Bunraku (named after the director of a particularly successful company, Uemura Bunrakken), is a marvelously anachronistic media that quite literally does less with more. Though puppetry began in Japan more than a thousand years ago, its codification into Bunraku did not occur until the beginning of the 19th century. As early as 1600, puppet performances were added to sung accounts of famous battles and sorrowful ladies as a means of underscoring the drift of things. And text - whether orally transmitted from one generation of reciters to the next, or written down by dramatists - has remained primary. Bunraku (文楽) literally means "the pleasure of the written word": 文 = literature, 楽 = pleasure, as ongaku (音楽) means music, "the pleasure of sound."

Each major character in the Bunraku theater absorbs the resources of four men in order to create its stylized, non-realistic image of human behaviour. Physically, each puppet (they are 2/3 life size) is operated by three men: the primary operator whose left hand supports the body frame while his right operates the the puppet's right hand; the left hand manipulator, who uses only his right hand; and the manipulator of the feet. This hierarchy, in reverse order, spells out the progress that an operator can hope to make. Ten years working the feet, ten years more on the left hand, and finally attaining primary operator status. Some are not so fortunate, as witness Yoshida Kanshi (1855 - 1930) who spent 40 years on feet.

Most surprising to a Western observer is the fact that the three operators are always clearly visible to the audience. Though they stand in a trough which obscures their legs, no attempt is made to conceal the upper half of their bodies. There are various dress conventions, ranging from the stiff, black, but porous hoods normally used (shown in accompanying photos), to brightly colored kimonos and bare heads in the case of particularly illustrious primary operators. The truth is that, after an initial period of adjustment, one tends to forget the operators almost completely. Because of the operators' impassive faces and minimal movements, it almost seems that the puppet is dragging the three hooded figures around after itself rather than being propelled by them.

Originating in 1734, the convention of three-man puppets has since accumulated an extremely specific set of movement categories, and the gestures for each play, down to the smallest detail, are prescribed by tradition.

The two broad classifications of movements are furi, stylized reproductions of human movements, and kata, which are not so much replicas of human actions as artful extensions of them. Lacking the means for precisely imitating mimicking human actions, the puppets capitalize on their capacity for performing graceful of gravity-defying feats which human actors could not duplicate.

The fourth man necessary to the puppet is the chanter (tayū). Seated at the right of the stage area (36 feet wide, 25 feet deep, and 15 feet high) before his already memorized text, he assumes the burden of projecting all the characters' voices as well as narrating additional materials not actually contained in the dialogue. His exhausting work - depending on exactly the sort of excesses unthinkable in Nō - is done in close collaboration with the shamisen player who sits at his left. While a Nō player expresses crying by touching his sleeve to his forehead, for example, the Bunraku narrator may indulge in a 5-minute crescendo of sobbing and wailing. The chanter's voice must cover an enormous range of pitch (well over two octaves), dynamic intensity, and inflection. He lives, with his face and upper body, the actions and emotions of the puppet whose words he projects, and it can be absorbing to watch the parallel movement of chanter and puppet.

Though the shamisen is not an immediately appealing instrument in terms of timbre and apparent flexibility, it is perfectly functional. In Bunraku, the performer has the responsibility of a conductor, leading the chanter, and cueing with brittle twangs and snaps the motions of the puppeteers twenty or thirty feet away. If his tempo falters or his articulation blurs, the whole performance may break down. Again, tradition dictates almost every action on his part, every inflection. He can, however, shift tempo slightly (relationships in the notation are all relative) or reiterate phrases, and even utter short exclamations himself if he feels that the chanter needs additional support.

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Most Bunraku plays now in use were written in the 18th century. As in the case of other traditional Japanese arts, modern attempts at adding to the repertoire seem doomed from the outset. Perhaps this suggests that age and honored authenticity are their only real strengths. Historically, Nō, Kabuki, and Bunraku all seem to have followed a developmental course to a point where a special flowering occurred. Thereafter, they remained frozen, restrained by jealous proponents from further evolution. Bunraku has been on the verge of collapse more than once, and would in all probability not exist now had not the Japanese government stepped into the picture both during the 30's and after World War II.

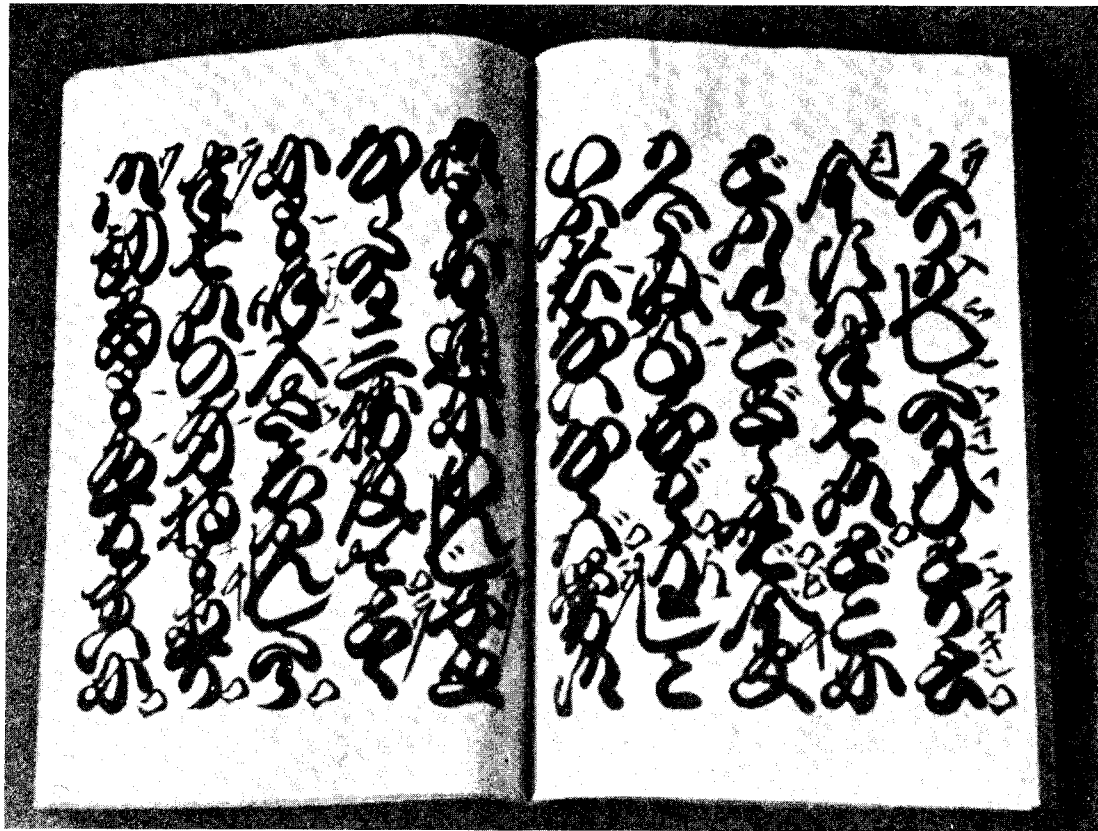
Texts for the dramas are convoluted and artificial to the point that - as Japanese commentators note - they are embarrassing to modern audiences. Foreign listeners are spared such discomfort in the same way that subtitles on "foreign films" (wherever one happens to be) allow one to fulfill to the best of his own capacities what is evoked in his own mind by the combination of images and a few printed words. In both cases, the uninitiated viewer may be in a position to avoid the commonplaces that the initiate must bear, and to create something of considerable personal moment. Even the written and spoken



Mojidayu Takemoto, narrator, and Katsutaro Nozawa, shamisen, performing Shibaroku Chugai ("Shibaroku's Loyalty"). This is one segment from Imoseyama Onna Teikin, a play of approximately 10 hours in length written by Hanji Chikamatsu and his assistants, and first staged in Osaka (where Bunraku has always been based) in 1771.

style of the texts is elaborate and unnatural to the average person, and one sees members of the audience running a finger down the printed columns in their programs throughout the performance. Most programs now include an act or two from several different plays in the course of their four to five-hour duration. This is not for the sake of variety but because of the length of the complete plays. As patient and meditative as the Oriental is supposed to be, the eleven hours consumed by one of the most popular plays, Chūshingura, for example, is asking too much.

At the beginning of each segment, the chanter raises the text to his forehead bowing in a gesture of respect. But, as has been suggested, respect is not universally accorded them. They are highly stylized and artificial things. The writer generally thought to be Japan's most important dramatist, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725), believed that it was stylization, not fidelity to life that audiences want. Though most of his plays were written for the puppet theater, they were conceived for a smaller, one-man doll which could move about much more quickly than the three-man version. As a result, his work is constantly subjected to revision and cutting ... a measure of the respect in which he is held (the desperation to obtain good material overcomes the inviolable nature of traditional things). His commitment to individuality (changeability) in his characters also is problematic technically.



A view of the elaborate calligraphy of the Bunraku texts. The smaller symbols to the right indicate pitch and inflection to the narrator.

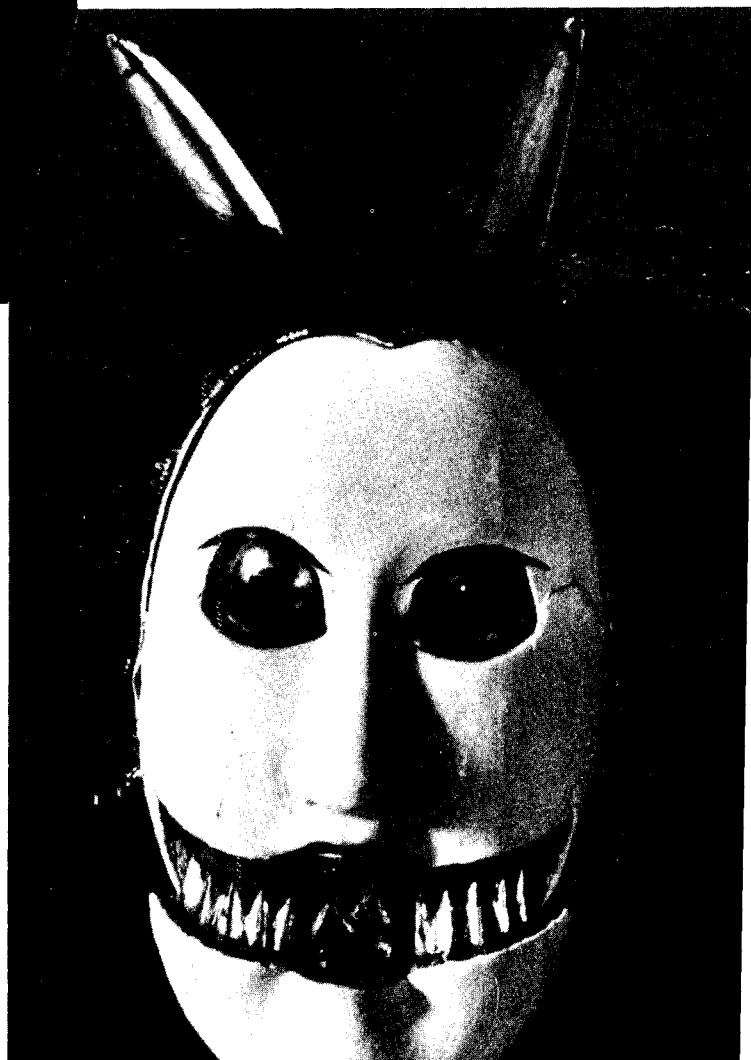


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Like so many other things in Japan, Bunraku is categorized thoroughly. There are a certain number of head types - male/female, old/young, good/bad - and each character in a play is assigned a head (with an appropriate wig to further specify age, status, etc.) for the duration of the play. Thus a good character invariably remains good throughout the drama, or bad. There are nine primary types of hands, some of which are hinged so as to be moveable in various ways, but 24 other types are available for special purposes such as shamisen or koto playing. Some of the heads also

An intriguing exception:
Above and to the right are the before and after versions of the same head known as Gabu. Though it appears to be the head of a beautiful young girl, it can be converted into a demon if the primary operator pulls a string. Of course, it could be argued that she was always a demon, but, nevertheless, the transformation is all the more astonishing because it is so atypical.



have moving parts that are controlled by the primary operator's left hand: eyes, eyebrows, mouth. There are numerous other subtleties of construction, of which I will mention a few. The puppet's left arm is considerably longer than the right because of the left hand operator's relatively greater distance from the doll. Female puppets are smaller than the males, and have no feet, since it is felt that greater grace and a more elegant line can be obtained by draping the folds of the kimono gracefully. The foot operator is also responsible for producing with his own feet any sounds which his puppet's actions suggest: stamping, or shuffling.

The contrasts of a Bunraku performance are engrossing. While the puppet operators work under an elaborate self-restraint notable even for Japan, the narrator is howling, jabbering, mocking, and whining in a cunningly contrived array of accents and moods. Sweating profusely, rocking back and forth from his waist, he pours out an exaggerated, embroidered tale while the slow-motion miming to his right shadows the actions he describes. Though the three-man teams, working in tandem in extremely close quarters with a heavily costumed puppet over four feet tall, would seem inevitably clumsy, the result of their efforts is pure elegance. One watches the puppets - albeit with the same sort of suspension of belief called for in Western Opera, or a Western Western - with hardly a thought for the complexities of the situation: the transference or projection of actions from artificially restricted members of an already inhibited society (the operators) to an even more stylized and restrained model (the puppets).

Sincerely,



Roger Reynolds

The photographs of the Bunraku text, and the Gabu head were taken from Donald Keene's superb book, Bunraku, published by Kodansha International, Ltd.

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The puppet Sansaku dances for the blind Emperor in Manzai ("Comical Ballad") also from Imoseyama Onna Teikin.
From right to left: left hand operator; foot manipulator; primary operator, Monya Kiritake.

