



*In celebration of the*  
**Japanese American Cultural and Community Center's 27<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

**Bunraku: The National Puppet Theatre of Japan**

Aratani/Japan America Theatre  
Los Angeles, October 18, 19 & 20, 2007

*An Intangible Cultural Asset of Japan.  
One of the world's great theatrical traditions.*

Internationally-acclaimed **Bunraku: The National Puppet Theatre of Japan** returns to the United States for the first time in nearly two decades with two classic masterworks *Date Musume Koi no Higanoko* (Oshichi's Burning Love) and *Tsubosaka Kannon Reigenki* (Miracle at the Tsubosaka Kannon Temple).

The 32-member company of master puppeteers, musicians and narrators will present two dramatic tales of love, passion and devotion with visually spectacular sets, lavish costumes and breathtaking movement.

Bunraku traces its origins to 17<sup>th</sup> century Japan when the three distinct and highly refined artistic disciplines of *yoruri*, or ballad narration, *shamisen* instrumental music, and *ningyo tsukai*, or the art of puppet manipulation, were brought together. Its true magic is revealed when the three independent components of movement, words, and music come together creating a great theatrical experience evoking deep emotion and wonder.

***The Program***

**Bunraku: The National Puppet Theatre of Japan** will present the full-length dramatic masterwork, *Tsubosaka Kannon Reigenki* (Miracle at the Tsubosaka Kannon Temple), and the highly spirited dance piece *Date Musume Koi no Higanoko* – (Oshichi's Burning Love).

***Tsubosaka Kannon Reigenki*** – Miracle at the Tsubosaka Kannon Temple, was written by Kako Chika and first performed in 1879. A dramatic work in three acts, it chronicles the story of the blind Sawaichi, his devoted wife, Osato, and their salvation through the intercession of the Goddess of Mercy, Kannon.

***Date Musume Koi no Higanoko*** – Oshichi's Burning Love is the true tale of a merchant's young daughter, Oshichi, who through a 1681 love-crime, became Japan's most famous arsonist.

Each performance will be accompanied by *An Introduction to Bunraku*, with the leading American Japanese film and theater scholar, Mr. Peter Grilli.

## ***About the JACCC***

The Japanese American Cultural & Community Center (JACCC) is one of the largest ethnic arts and cultural centers in the United States, presenting a wide array of traditional and contemporary performing arts, visual arts and community programs aimed at children, youth and families, as well as general arts audiences throughout Southern California.

Founded in 1971 as a California non-profit corporation and opened to the public in 1980, the JACCC is located in the Little Tokyo district of downtown Los Angeles. The mission of the JACCC is to present, perpetuate, transmit, and promote Japanese and Japanese American arts and culture to diverse audiences, and to provide a center to enhance community programs.

The JACCC's Aratani/Japan America Theatre opened in 1983 with sold-out performances of The Grand Kabuki of Japan and over the past 24 years has presented more traditional and contemporary Japanese performing arts events than any other theater outside of Japan.

## ***About Bunraku***

Bunraku is a highly refined form of puppet theatre combining three distinct artistic disciplines: *yoruri* or ballad narration, *shamisen* instrumental music and *ningyo tsukai* or the art of puppet manipulation. Each of these art forms take years of training to master. But the true magic of Bunraku is the unity achieved when the three independent components of movement, words and music come together.

Bunraku has often been described as an art of threes and this combination of interlocking "triangles" is what continues to fascinate audiences. The spellbinding coordination of three puppeteers manipulating one doll; the unity achieved by the three independent components of movement, words and music; and the intersecting lines of communication -- between puppeteer and narrator, narrator and *shamisen* player, musician and puppet - offer complexities not found in any other theater in the world.

## ***About the Puppets***

Bunraku puppets are about half to two-thirds life size and weigh anywhere from 10 to 50 pounds. Their eyes move, their eyebrows rise in surprise, their mouths open and shut, and their hands and arms gesture gracefully and realistically.

Each puppet requires three operators who need to work in unison. The puppeteers carry the dolls on to the stage and are visible throughout the play. The chief manipulator wears high wooden straw-soled stage clogs so he can work above his two assistants and slide quietly across the stage.

At the start of each run, the master puppeteer is responsible for the creation of the puppets that he will operate on stage. A doll head which best suits the character is selected from a group of more than 300. Its hair is dressed in a style befitting the role and an appropriate costume is sewn around the basic framework of the doll. Leading puppeteers often have personal favorites which will vary subtly in such details as the line of the chin, the length of the nose and the furrow of the brow.

The chief operator holds the puppet from the back with his left hand by a special grip in the doll's chest and directs the puppet's right arm with his right hand. The second operator is responsible for the movement of the puppet's left arm, and the third moves the

legs. In the case of female dolls, the third operator moves its skirt in such a way as to create an illusion of moving legs.

### ***About the Narration***

The *yoruri* narrator sits on an auxiliary stage with the musician. He sets the scene, describes the emotions of the characters, delivers the narrative, and recites all the dialogue. The narrator referred to as the "*tayu*" has great tonal and expressive range, and his voice can change instantly from a suggestive whisper to rage, from bass to soprano, from melody to conversational chatter.

A senior *tayu* may take as many as 14 roles in a single scene. When the narrative reaches a crescendo, he will often rise on his knees and gesticulate. Stamina and expressiveness are considered the *tayu*'s most important attributes.

### ***About the Music***

The musician sits on the narrator's left playing the *futazao* (wide-necked) *shamisen*, notable for its resonant tone and deep notes.

The music of Bunraku has many complex changes of tempo and consists mostly of stylized motifs and fixed musical phrases, chords or single notes. Occasional melodic sections of greater length are used to establish atmosphere or to accompany a lament, song or dance.

The notes of the *shamisen* precede or conclude action by the puppets, provide musical decoration for the *tayu*'s words, accentuate and guide movement on stage, and increase or ease tension. The music sets the atmosphere and tempo for the performance; it does not compete with the voice, but adds punctuation and italics. When there is a pause in the narrative, the *shamisen* provides a musical bridge for the continuing action of the puppets.

### ***About the Bunraku Theatre***

The birth of Bunraku dates to 1684, when Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714), a famous master of *yoruri* narration, established the Takemoto-za theatre in Osaka. But the name most closely associated with Bunraku is that of the playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), who cooperated with Takemoto Gidayu to produce numerous masterpieces of puppet theatre.

Chikamatsu's plays portray human emotion in a tragic but admirable light. *Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, for example, depicts the dilemma of star-crossed lovers who, faced with a choice between love and duty, choose to die together.

During the first half of the eighteenth century, Bunraku surpassed even Kabuki in popularity, but in the nineteenth century it slipped into a decline from which it only began to recover about two decades ago. In fact, in the period directly following World War II, it came perilously close to extinction, hanging on only with the help of government subsidies and a small coterie of enthusiasts.

### ***About the National Bunraku Theatre***

In 1963, the Bunraku Kyokai (Bunraku Association) was formed to oversee Bunraku. Then, through the cooperative efforts of the Bunraku Kyokai, Osaka Prefecture, Osaka City and the Kansai Economic Association, the National Bunraku Theatre was opened in 1984 in Osaka to commemorate Bunraku's 300th anniversary. Since then, programs have been performed nine months out of each year, alternating between the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka and the National Theatre in Tokyo. The surge in popularity has been particularly dramatic in Tokyo, where tickets to Bunraku performances are difficult to secure.

Nonetheless, the number of people directly involved in these performances is less than 100, including narrators, *shamisen* players, and puppeteers. Unlike Kabuki actors, who inherit their craft and position from their fathers, Bunraku performers need no pedigree, only skill. However, the acquisition of that skill is a lifetime undertaking. Novice puppeteers concentrate on the puppets' legs alone for about 10 years, after which they may progress to the left arm and hand. It is said to take at least 25 years to attain the status of *omozukai*, the main puppet master who controls the right arm and head.

In addition to the performers who appear on stage, the company includes numerous unseen "people of the back" (*urakata*): the off-stage musicians, the wig masters, keepers of the heads, the prop masters, stage assistants and costumers.

The National Bunraku Theatre Company has been designated an "Important Cultural Asset of Japan." It is the only full-time, professional repertory puppet troupe operating in the country.

In 2003, Bunraku was declared a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The National Bunraku Theatre Company includes four "Living National Treasures" who have been recognized for their artistic mastery and have been entrusted with transmitting their knowledge to the next generation of artists.