



A scene from *Imoseyama Onna Teikin*

## The National Bunraku



## Theatre of Japan

**BUNRAKU** is one of Japan's representative traditional performing arts, designated a World Intangible Heritage by UNESCO in 2003. It is a closely collaborative form which synchronizes narrative recitation, shamisen music and puppetry in performance. The origins of present-day bunraku date back to the seventeenth century, when older puppet shows (*ayatsuri ningyo*) were integrated with the medieval narratives (*yoruri*) and called *ningyo yoruri*, "puppet narrative." Its popularity peaked with the works of playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon and narrator Takemoto Gidayu, and the founding of the Takemoto Theatre in Osaka in 1684 ushered in a golden age. The Toyotake Theatre and others later joined the field. They had varying success until in the mid-nineteenth century a native of Awaji named Uemura Bunrakuken opened a theatre which became the toast of Osaka. His dominance was such that his name became synonymous with the art form, which we still call bunraku today.

## Narrator & Shamisen

The narrator (*Tayu*) and the shamisen player, in their twin positions, seem each to be trying to top the other in artistry as they bring the dramatic narrative to life. But in fact they are in perfect unison; neither leads and neither follows. Their remarkable synchronization is vital to the art, and involves sophisticated techniques of breath control.



### The Recitation

The narrator performs in the *gidayu-bushi* style of epic balladry. His solo artistry encompasses not only the telling of the tale, but also setting the scenes, providing story background, and speaking the characters' words. This last entails more than just the skillful creation of separate voices for the different puppet men and women, young and old, so that they sound believable and real. He must also penetrate to the very heart of each character, revealing its nature and feelings. For this he gives voice to the full spectrum of human emotion.



Bookstand (*Kendai*)

### Libretto (*Yukahon*)

This is the narrator's most valued possession, the script he uses onstage. Each book contains one scene, written five lines to a page. The tradition is for the narrator personally to copy out each libretto he uses in performance, but he might prefer to use one inherited from his teacher. There are also professional copyists.



## The Shamisen

The bunraku shamisen unites with the narrator to articulate the passion of the drama. Shamisen are classified by the thickness of their necks into narrow, medium and broad sizes. The broadest and heaviest of these is the bunraku shamisen, which also uses thicker strings and a larger plectrum than other types. This makes for a rich and sonorous tone ideal for bunraku narrative with its sharp focus on the human condition. Even just one note has the surprising power to set a mood or express an emotion.



Bridges (*Koma*)

Broad-necked shamisen

Plectrum (*Bachi*)

### History of the Shamisen

The first shamisen are thought to have come through the port of Sakai in Osaka from the Ryukyu Islands around the 1560s. They were three-stringed instruments covered in snakeskin. This was soon replaced by more common dog or cat skin, to deepen the tone and volume. The body was enlarged to the size we see today, and the plectrum adopted, under the influence of the popular *biwa* lute. Further developments in the Edo Period (1603-1868) were products of the artistic sensibility and creative spirit peculiar to the Japanese. They included the perfection of a vibrato style, a cryptomeria wood body for increased resonance, and the unusual folding shamisen with its three-part jointed neck. Shamisen were introduced into time-honored vocal traditions to produce new string music for *nagauta* ballads, lyrical *kouta* and *jiuta*, and the *gidayu-bushi* narratives of bunraku.

## Bunraku Scripts



The "full book" libretto containing all scenes of the drama is called *maruhon* in bunraku. These were always produced whenever a new play was staged. Most of them have seven lines to a page, but there are also examples with eight lines or ten.

## The Bunraku Puppets

Three puppeteers are required to operate a bunraku doll, making it unique in world puppetry. It is not surprising, then, that its subtle movements are capable of richly nuanced expression, making it every bit as appealing and sympathetic as an actor of flesh and blood, if not more so. Dolls are stored in pieces, with their heads and costumes all kept separately. For each production, the doll is rebuilt. Limbs are attached to torsos, props and costumes fitted, and hair affixed and styled. It is the puppeteer's job to assemble his doll for the role assigned to him.



### The Heads(Kashira)

Genda



Bunraku faces are many and varied. Except for some rare heads made for one special character, every doll head is meant for a certain basic role type and is used for all characters of the type. Representative types like "Bunshichi" (epic hero), "Genda" (handsome young man), "Musume" (maiden) or "Fukeyoyama"(matron) are customized to individual roles by different hairstyles or even by a bit of repainting.

Musume



Thus may the same head take on a variety of faces, according to its character's personality and circumstances in each play.

### The Wigs

Bunraku characters do not just get a hair restyling for each role, they get a whole new head of hair. Plaited hair is sewn onto a copper base which forms a hairline suitable to the head and role. This is nailed directly to the head and styled. Dolls normally have human hair, but when extra thickness is required, yak tail switch is used instead. Pomade cannot be used to dress the hair, as oils can damage the wooden heads.

### Bunraku Costumes

The costumes in bunraku are smaller than life-size and have openings in back where the puppeteer inserts his hand. Everything except the lightest summer wear has cotton padding to stiffen it, as there is no flesh and bone to give shape to the garments. Costume design is suited to the role type, but is geared more to theatrical effectiveness than to strict historical accuracy. Though the bunraku wardrobe overall is somewhat plainer than kabuki costume, aristocratic dolls in period plays (*jidaimono*) are dressed very opulently. The clothes in contemporary plays (*sewamono*) are more realistic. Onstage the costumes paint a pretty picture. Examined more closely, they reveal fine detail, and patterns symbolic of the characters wearing them.



Osome's costume in *Shimpan Utazaimon*

### Bunraku Props

Under this heading come stage furnishings as well as the things the characters carry about them, like swords, fans and umbrellas. Personal props in bunraku are specially fitted with handles so the puppeteers can hold them. Most are made in a slightly reduced size for the dolls, but some are deliberately oversized for dramatic effect.

