

# POSTCARDS FROM JAPAN

By Kay Yasugi from Pupperoos

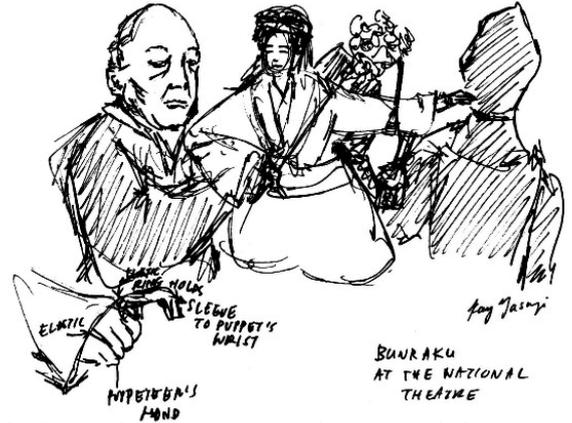
## POST CARD

October 2010

Dear Readers,  
Last month I spent two and a half weeks in Japan, during which time I had the wonderful opportunity to see some fine Japanese puppetry. Like a Japanese bento lunch box, I was able to sample a bit of almost everything and it was a 'delicious' affair!

Here is a brief report of my puppetry adventures abroad exploring traditional Bunraku puppetry. Enjoy!

Cheers, Kay



Sketch of Bunraku puppeteers at the National Theatre of Japan, Tokyo (drawn during performance) by Kay Yasugi

### Baby-Snatching Eagles and Sardine Love: Bunraku at the National Theatre of Japan, Tokyo

My first stop was to see a performance of Bunraku puppetry in Tokyo (and I was very fortunate to do so, as the troupe usually performs at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka). The original and more accurate term for this form of puppetry is *Ningyo Joruri*, which means "puppets (dolls) and chanted stories". *Bunraku* is the modern name for this art form, which developed in the Kansai region (particularly Osaka) in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The name *Bunraku* was derived from Uemura Bunraku-ken who opened a theatre, the Bunraku-za, in Osaka in 1872.

The puppetry itself is a marvel to see. Each puppet is operated by three puppeteers: one for the feet, one for the left arm, and one for the head and right arm (which is the role of greatest privilege). Although all the performers are visible on stage, only the chief puppeteers are allowed to show their faces. In stark contrast to the youthful, smiley faces of many theatre performers, most of these master puppeteers are in their seventies with faces that show no emotion, but instead channel all their energy into the puppet (which is a discipline that I am far from mastering). The only visible emotion on stage comes from the *tayu*, the narrators. These men provide all the characters' voices (male and female) while contorting their faces with incredible energy and animation to display the various personalities and emotions. They are also accompanied by shamisen players, whose three-stringed instruments create the mood in each scene and ranges from the subtle, delicate or jovial to the violent and dramatic.

The show I saw was comprised of two plays, running for a total of four hours (it seems that the audience as well as the performers require some stamina to last out the show. Thankfully, English 'earphone guides' were available for hire which provided extensive commentary and translations throughout the performance). The first play was *Roben Sugi No Yurai* ("The Story of the Priest Roben"), which tells the story of how the priest Roben (one of the founders of the great Todaiji temple in Nara) was snatched by a giant eagle as

a baby. The play focuses on his mother's desperate search to find him as she travels far and wide and descends into madness from her grief. Thirty years later, she is finally reunited with her son who has become a Buddhist priest.

While watching this play, I was amazed by the changes in pace, from the dynamic eagle-swooping episode to the long sequences of quiet stillness and deep contemplation. It is hard to imagine how the puppeteers can remain so still while holding these puppets, some of which weigh more than 10kg each. Listening to the commentary, I learned that many aspects of this style of puppetry involve great discipline, patience and persistence. Operating the feet alone takes 10 years of training, and an additional 10 years is required to master the left arm. Seeing the unveiled faces of the master puppeteers, I kept thinking about the connotations of visible puppetry, and how for them it is an immense privilege and responsibility earned by decades of strict training and discipline.



Kay Yasugi holding a Bunraku puppet with Master puppeteer Yoshida Seizaburo and Tayu (narrator) Takemoto Tsukomadayu

The show was not all serious, however, for there were a few 'lighter' moments as well. One puppet blew soap bubbles out of a bamboo straw, another could balance an umbrella on his head, and another pair could throw and catch long spear-like

rods (which is impressive considering the puppeteers were wearing head coverings).

This lightness in mood was more prevalent in the second play, *Iwashiuri Koi No Hikami* ("The Princess and the Sardine Seller). This play was originally a modern kabuki dance play written by the novelist Mishima Yukio, and is a popular story for kabuki lovers. It tells the tale of a sardine seller who is famous for his energetic chanting and one day falls in love with a beautiful courtesan. He disguises himself as a wealthy patron, only to discover that she is actually a princess that ran away from her family after falling in love with the call of a sardine seller. This romantic comedy was also very well received by the crowd.



*Sketch of Bunraku puppeteers operating the "Roben" priest puppet (Sketch by Kay Yasugi).*

One final treat awaited me as I sat on the cushioned seats with my sketchbook and snacks. It so happened that the lady sitting next to me is a friend of one of the *tayu* narrators, and during our 4 hours of sitting next to each other and sharing a pair of binoculars, we got better acquainted (despite my broken conversational Japanese which was in great need of revision). She very kindly invited me to meet her friend after the performance (unlike the chief puppeteers on stage, my excitement was clearly visible on my face!). That is how I was introduced to Mr. Takemoto Tsukomadayu, a very friendly and cheerful man in his sixties with a strong baritone voice. He in turn introduced me to Mr. Yoshida Seizaburo, one of the chief puppeteers. He very generously gave us a mini tour backstage to show us the puppets. It was an incredible experience to hold one of the beautiful puppets while trying on the special wooden '*geta*' platform sandals (which raise the puppeteers to the required height for the stage).

### **Love, Revenge and Serpents: Seiwa Bunraku in Kumamoto, Kyushu**

After seeing the Bunraku performance in Tokyo, I was soon heading south to my next puppet stop. Three train rides, two bento lunch boxes and nine hours later, I arrived in beautiful Kyushu. I instantly fell in love with its tall green cedar trees (each with perfectly 'coiffed' peaks) and towering bamboo

trees which sway like ostrich plumes and bow politely as you drive by (very Japanese). I was keen to see Seiwa Bunraku, which is located in a small agricultural village in Kumamoto prefecture. I was intrigued by the history of this puppetry style, which originated at the end of the Edo period in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Apparently when a touring troupe of Bunraku puppeteers performed a show for the local villagers (who had very little entertainment around), the people loved it so much that they begged the puppeteers to let them buy the puppets. 160 years later, Seiwa Bunraku is still being performed in the area with about 200 shows every year. The performers practice between their farm work and are incredibly committed to their craft. The excerpt they performed was the ferry scene from a play called *Hidakagawa Iriai Zakura* ("The Cherry Trees Along the Hidaka River"). It was a very dramatic performance about a woman who falls in love with a Prince, who runs away with another woman. In her jealous rage, she transforms into a river serpent as she hurls herself into the river to pursue the Prince and his lover.

This performance was infused with a very lively energy, and although the puppeteers were perhaps less restrained or disciplined in their movements compared to the professional Osaka Bunraku troupe, their enthusiasm for the art form was magnetic. Another noticeable difference was that some of the performers are female (in traditional Bunraku theatre, only men are allowed to perform), and I could not help but smile when I saw them working hard beside their male counterparts.



*Kay having a go at holding one of the Seiwa Bunraku puppets. This puppet's face transforms into a demon-like serpent!*

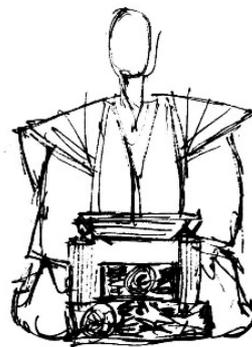
After the show the presenter asked for three volunteers to hold the serpent-woman puppet, and I was most fortunate to have a go at holding the head and right arm. Until that moment I had not realised how incredibly heavy these puppets are, and so much of the weight is supported by the chief puppeteer. The head, mouth and eyes are all controlled by toggled strings within the wooden neck mechanism, and pulling on the toggles (which requires a considerable level of dexterity and fine motor skills) can make the puppet nod, blink, shout (or in this puppet's case, transform into a demon serpent).

Another highlight from Seiwa Bunraku was visiting the museum which connects to the main theatre hall. Before visiting this museum, I had the preconception that Bunraku was a relatively secretive art form, where only the performers have the knowledge about how the puppets work and how they are made. On the contrary, this museum shows in very plain view the anatomies of the puppets, such as the arms, legs and torsos, with videos showing how they are operated. There are also some original puppet pieces which are free for the public to touch, such as the various *kashira* (heads).

**A boxful of Bunraku: Second-Hand book shopping in Tokyo**

Before heading back to Sydney after my Bunraku experiences, I was drawn to make one final stop to Kanda in Tokyo, which is famous for second-hand books. Kanda is quite close by to Akihabara (a blinking oasis of electronic gadgets), and it is there that I found “Teduka Books” which specialises in selling books about traditional Japanese theatre. Tucked away in a tiny alley and nestled between a ramen noodle shop and a fluorescent convenience store, I squeezed my way into the crammed little store and pored over its shelf full of Bunraku books (all very reasonably priced). I ended up buying about 7 books (all in Japanese but full of beautiful photos) and am excitedly anticipating their arrival via sea mail, which will probably take a few months – still, I think about those performers on stage and what they go through and I tell myself, ‘Patience, patience’.

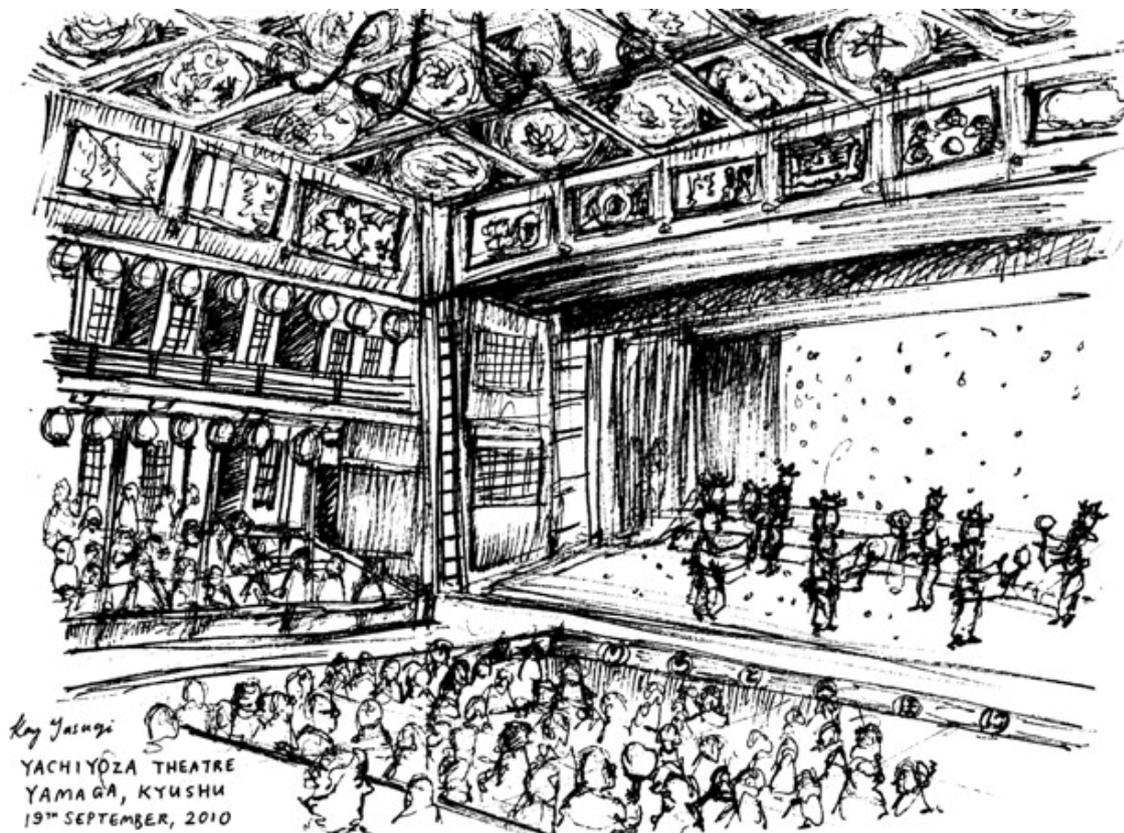
After seeing both Osaka Bunraku and Seiwa Bunraku, I was left in awe of the performers – their dedication, discipline, endurance and humility. I was also fascinated by the fragmented style of the performances, where the puppetry, voice and music come from three separate parts to create a whole. There is something very special about seeing a traditional art form so carefully preserved for the modern audience, and I left Japan hopeful that this puppetry will continue for many years to come.



NARRATOR



SHAMISEN PLAYER



YACHIYOZA THEATRE  
YAMAGA, KYUSHU  
19<sup>TH</sup> SEPTEMBER, 2010

More sketches done while watching performances. Top: Bunraku puppeteers operating a priest puppet; Middle: A Tayu (Narrator) and Shamisen player; Bottom: Yachiyozza Theatre in Yamaga, Kyushu (this theatre had a Taiko drum performance with traditional dancing).