

## 「Bunraku Appreciation」

### I. Sonjuku appreciation of Bunraku

Shimada sonjuku members and myself visited National Theatre in Tokyo to watch, appreciate and learn about Bunraku, the Japan's most traditional puppet theatre with rigorous narrations and Shamisen, three string instrument, music. We visited the theatre twice, on December 14, 2014 and May 12, 2015.

Let me write in this essay on why we, Shimada sonjuku members, attempted to appreciate Bunraku, brief history of Bunraku, some explanations about the performers; Jorurishi or chanter, Shamisen player or three string instrument music player, and Ningyo-tsukai or puppet handlers. Then, Ningyo or the puppet, and structure of the theatre, and finally, brief introduction of four program plays and our impressions of the performance.

### II. Why Bunraku

The main objective of Shimada sonjuku is to study and learn together important subjects of history, religions, cultures and values of broad cultural zones of the world, the knowledge which will be useful for them to work globally in the future. To understand such subjects of foreign cultures, it is important for them to know the Japanese cultures well as a bench mark.

For this purpose, we have been and will be studying various aspects of Japanese traditional arts as condensed expression of Japanese culture such as Noh plays, Kabuki, Ukiyoe-art, Sumo etc. Bunraku is perhaps the most traditional and rigorous classic art which Japan has preserved for the last several hundred years. This is the reason why we chose to appreciate Bunraku.

Bunraku theatre, however, is not that easily accessible in Tokyo. One reason is Bunraku has been developed in Osaka and main theatre exists in Osaka and not in Tokyo. Another reason is that Bunraku performers are not that many. The number of performers is around 80 or so. Therefore, the frequency of their performance in Tokyo is quite limited.

While Bunraku is highly respected art not only in Japan but also overseas as shown by the fact that many Bunraku performers and puppet craftsmen are designated as living national treasures and that Bunraku has been regarded as the first candidate for the world cultural heritage( for some reason it was officially designated as late as 2009), because of the relative paucity of theatre availability the opportunity to watch the performance is rather precious. This is another reason, Shimada sonjuku organized a group appreciation.

The history of Bunraku goes back to some 400 years. In mid 17th century, attempts were made to merge the puppet shows which existed in primitive forms and the reading of story texts with Shamisen, traditional three string instrument, music. The outstanding story reader, Mr. Gidayu Takemoto, developed such a new performing art and demonstrated it in his theatre, Takemoto-za, which he built in Osaka in 1684.

Taking after his name "Gidayu," the text reader has been called "Gidayu" subsequently. He made friend with a highly productive story or drama writer, Mr. Monzaemon Chikamatsu. He is regarded to have written at least 100 pieces of drama for Takemoto-za. Many of his works are still played in current theatres. Since Kabuki, very popular traditional performing art, has been taking many of the drama stories originally performed in Bunraku, the de facto influence of Mr. Chikamatsu could be pervasive and enormous. He may well be regarded as a Japanese counterpart of Shakespeare.

While this classic Bunraku was popular, even more popular than Kabuki of early times, it has somehow declined in 18th century. In latter 18th century, Mr. Bunrakuken, Uemura, who was the puppet show performer in Awaji island near Osaka, came to Osaka and built a new theatre named Bunraku-za which was opened in 1805. The performances of Bunraku-za grew very popular, and Mr. Uemura in effect revived the tradition of puppet show with text reading and Shamisen music.

In fact, the name Bunraku is a kind of nick-name named after the name of this theatre Bunraku. The formal name for this synthetic puppet drama is "Ningyo Joruri" meaning puppet play with rigorous text reading.

Since the prosperity of Bunraku-za, Ningyo-Joruri maintained its tradition

as well as innovating itself on the way. The most important innovation was that the number of puppet handler increased from one to three. With the team of three, it became possible for the puppet to exhibit much more delicate and variety of movements not only its body but also its face, lips, eyes and eyebrows so that the puppet now can express the feelings, emotions and temperament much more effectively than before.

As time went on, the Bunraku theatre suffered from disasters such as fires and typhoons, and rebuilt later. Currently, the prime theatre is in Osaka, which is supported by national and local governments. Since this Ningyo-Joruri developed siphoning and reflecting the feelings and emotions of the people of Osaka, who have been highly independent commoners such as merchants and craftsmen and not obedient to the governing power of Samurai, commoners feelings are well penetrating into the texts and performances of the theatre.

The most impressive of this Ningyo-Joruri or Bunraku for us is the fact that this performing art has preserved the traditions of skills, mentality, and training faithfully and rigorously. This is perhaps the most rigorous and precise commoners' art to preserve the traditions for several hundred years. This is the reason why many Bunraku performers and puppet craftsmen are designated as national treasures, and also is designated world's cultural heritage. And this is the reason why we, sonjuku members, visited the theatre to lean about the classic art which we, the Japanese, should be proud of.

### III. Bunraku Theatre

Of the make up of the Ningyo-Joruri or Bunraku theatre, the most important are the three kinds of performers.

First is Tayu or the chanter who reads the text correctly and faithfully. He reads the text of lines of each and all of the actors who are represented by the puppets. He uses his capacity fully to express the model and the role of the actors such as Samurai, merchant, craftsman, old woman, a girl etc not only by the way he speaks and pronounces but also his facial expressions. He also reads lines to describe the situation.

In Ningyo-Joruri, the most important performer is Tayu. The text of lines

is critical. In Kabuki theatre, the most important is the actor. Others must follow him. In Ningyo-Joruri, the chanter is the most important. Other performers must perform in perfect harmony with the chanter.

Second is the puppet handler. Except for earlier historical stage of Ningyo-Joruri, three men handle the puppet together. The prime role is performed by “Omote-zukai” or face handler who is sometimes called “Kashira-zukai” namely head handler. This is followed by “Hidari-zukai” or left hand handler, and the third is “Ashi-zukai” or feet handler. These three handlers must be perfectly silent during the show and yet they have to communicate perfectly well to coordinate their actions simultaneously so that the puppet acts just like a living person, or sometimes even more impressively or effectively than human beings.

To reach the level of skills to handle the head, the hands and the feet in perfect harmony and coordination without making any sound, they spend long time to work together and train themselves. Usually said that it takes ten years to be skillful as feet handler, another ten years to move left hand perfectly, and still another ten years to master the best skills to handle the head and face. At the back of the face close to neck there are strings made of whale mustache which are sensitively controlled by the face handler to express various types of emotions.

Third, and not at least, is Shamisen-hiki or the player of traditional three string instrument which provides the music to go with the reading of the text and motions of the puppet.

Interesting is the fact, unlike many of Japanese traditional performing arts like Kabuki, Odori or Mai(dance), Ohana(flower arrangement), Ningyo Joruri performers in principle have no blood relations. In Kabuki, the top performers are chosen from heirs of limited families who have played historically major roles to develop Kabuki, which is true for Odori and Ohana. In Ningyo-Joruri, the performers are selected whoever trained hard, worked hard and mastered the required skills. The way the performers are trained and fostered is extremely pure and fair.

Ningyo-Joruri has been fostering the performers in this way through extremely rigorous disciplines and training spending years to develop the human capability to preserve the tradition faithfully and yet introduce

creative elements without changing the form and movements at all. This rigor of human development to an extreme extent is the purest form of the critical core of Japan's traditional performing art. Ningyo-Jyoruri possesses such a critical value in the most perfect and purest way among many traditional performing arts in Japan.

#### IV. Programs and Impressions

Finally, let me introduce briefly the stories of the four programs we have appreciated in two opportunities and some of my impressions.

On December, we appreciated (1) "Ninin Sanbanso" and (2) "Ehon Taiko-ki". Ninin Sanbanso is a part of the longer performance describing the festival celebrating the harvest. Two persons(puppets) dance actively on the stage enjoyably. Rhythm of body motions, particularly of their feet knocking the floor, is impressive.

Ehon Taiko-ki is a popular program which has been cherished by the audience for hundreds of years. The scene is a country-side hut at the time of war ridden period of Japan's medieval history. A warier chief, Takechi, Mitsuhide a parody name, who killed his master Oda, Nobunaga visited his old mother who hided herself in this hut shaming her son's unjustifiable deed to kill his master.

There, a disguised priest Hisayoshi, a parody name of Hideyoshi, visited the hut. The old mother recommended the priest to take bath to ease his fatigue. Realizing that he is a disguise of Hideyoshi, Mitsuhide's ultimate enemy, Mitsuhide sharpened the bamboo to make a spear and thrusted the bath room to kill Hideyoshi. However, who he stabbed was his old mother. Thrusted by the bamboo spear, the mother tumbled out of the bathroom groaning the fatal pains, and yet scolded and admonished her son's misbehavior.

This last scene of old mother's groaning speech at the brink of death was heart moving. While the puppet, the old mother looked more impressive than a live actress. The fact that the puppet can be more impressive and effective than a live actor when the three kinds of performers work in a perfect harmony and coordination is the gimmick of attractiveness Ningyo-Joruri meant to create four hundred years ago. We, Japanese should be

proud of the enormous creativity of our ancestors.

On May 12th, we appreciated two major programs:(1) Gion Sairei Shinko-ki, and (2) Katsura-gawa Renri no Shigarami.

Gion Sairei Shinko-ki is a grand scale act using the historical story of the rivalry battle between Matsunaga-Daizen, a bad figure, and Kinoshita, Tokichi, a parody of Tokichiro. The scene is Kinkakuji or the golden temple in Kyoto. Daizen captured the mother of Shogun, Ashikaga, Yoshimiteru by trick and isolated her on the third floor of the temple. There are princes Yukihiime and her lover in the act to make the story more complex and colorful.

Amazing is the fact that the whole stage moves up and down when Tokichi climbed the cherry tree at the side of the temple to reach the high third floor without using the ladder and yet bypass the first floor where Daizen is staying. This spectacular arrangement was first used in this act some hundred years ago.

Katsura-gawa Renri no Shigarami is the story of sad love suicide of a matured master of a merchant house and a teenage girl of the neighbor house. On the way back from the worship tour to a holly shrine, the master happened to had a love affair with the girl who sneaked into his bed trying to hide her from the menace of her stoker. This love affair has been known by nasty step mother and after complex and thrilling developments, the man and the girl have finally been obliged to commit suicide at a river in Kyoto in the dawn.

This is one of those love suicide story. But the actions of the puppets coordinated with text reading and Shamisen music are just incredibly perfect. While watching the stage, we feel just as though we are also playing in the marchant house or at the river side at the dawn because the motions, the sound of footsteps, voice and music are in just perfect harmony.

In addition to this incredible effectiveness and strong impressions of the puppet act, the use of parody names for historical figures who actually existed like Hldeyoshi, Mitsuhide and the like reflects the humorous and critical ways of expressing the spirit of independent commoners as

prosperous merchants who supported the development of Osaka. Their commoners' pride during the era of Samurai, warrior, dominance is another common feature penetrating through all the dramas and acts of Ningyo-Joruri which was born and developed in the merchants' city of Osaka.