KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Bunraku is a form of traditional Japanese puppet theatre that originated in Osaka in the seventeenth century.
- It is included on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
- Bunraku emphasizes collaboration and achieving harmony among multiple simultaneous elements: narrative recitation, music, and manipulation of puppets.
- Bunraku music is performed on a three-stringed traditional Japanese instrument called a shamisen.

BUNRAKU

Developed and refined over centuries, bunraku combines multiple art forms, including puppetry, music, and text. The art of joruri (or chanted narrative music, where the recitation of a story is combined with shamisen music) was brought together with ningyo (the manipulation of puppets) in the seventeenth century, creating ningyo joruri. After hundreds of years of evolution, this form is known today as bunraku.

Bunraku dolls, usually made of wood, are half-life-sized. Approximately 40 traditional types of puppet heads are used in classical bunraku performances. These can be customized via changes to the hair and makeup. During the seventeenth century, bunraku puppets became complex enough to make detailed movements of the eyes, fingers, and mouths, and it became typical for three puppeteers to operate a single puppet character. Rather than being hidden, bunraku puppeteers traditionally perform in full view of the audience, wearing black robes, which sometimes include black hoods.

It is typical for a single chanter, or narrator, to recite many or all of the parts, changing their voice to represent different characters. The chanter harmonizes with music performed on a shamisen.

The bunraku canon is divided into three major categories: historical (Jidai-mono), domestic (Sewa-mono), and dances (Keigoto/Keiji). The different categories typically have different structures and numbers of acts.

From the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, there were hundreds of bunraku troupes across Japan, both amateur and professional. The number has dwindled since World War II, and today there are only a handful of troupes using traditional bunraku forms, including the National Bunraku Theater in Osaka, Awaji Ningyoza, and Mokugu-sha.

KANROKU AND MOKUGU-SHA

Kanroku has been a bunraku ningyo puppeteer for almost half a century. He studied at the National Bunraku Theater in Osaka under Master Kanjuro Kiritake II, and was named Kanroku Kiritake in 1979. He then apprenticed under Minosuke Yoshida III, and was renamed Kanroku Yoshida in 1987. In 2006, he started his own theatre company, Mokugu-sha. Kanroku teaches and practices the classical works of bunraku ningyo theatre while pursuing contemporary projects and collaborating with artists working outside of bunraku. Mokugu-sha is based in Osaka, the birthplace of bunraku.
BUNRAKU TERMS

gigeiin – bunraku performers
joruri – the art of chanted narration with music
kashira – the head of a bunraku doll
ningyo – the manipulation of puppets
shamisen – traditional Japanese instrument with three strings
tayu – narrator

FAMOUS BUNRAKU PLAYS

HISTORICAL (JIDAI-MONO)
Honcho Nijushiko (1766) by Chikamatsu Hanji et al.
Imoseyama Onna Teikin (1771) by Chikamatsu Hanji et al.
Meiboku Sendai Hagi (1785) by Matsu Kanshi et al.
Ehon Taikoki (1799) by Chikamatsu Yanagi et al.

DOMESTIC (SEWA-MONO)
Sonezaki shinju (1703) by Chikamatsu Monzaemon
Shinpan Utazaimon (1780) by Chikamatsu Hanji

DANCES (KEIGOTO/KEIJI)
Kotobuki Shiki Sanbaso (1859) – a ceremonial dance performed on special occasions such as the new year

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Why is it important to preserve and share traditional art forms?
The synchronization of elements (narrative recitation, shamisen music, and puppetry) makes bunraku a highly collaborative art form, and the quality of a performance is judged partly on the harmony between elements—for instance, between the shamisen player and the chanter. How well do you think the voice and instrument harmonized in this performance?

How did the puppeteers manipulate the dolls to signify the traits of different character types or identities? What does this tell us about the relationships between movement, gesture, and social identities?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT

Mokugu-sha online
mokugusha.com
Performing-arts events at the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center in Little Tokyo
jaccc.org/performingarts
The antique bunraku puppets in the USC Libraries’ East Asian Library
libraries.usc.edu/locations/east-asian-library
DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

REBECCA CORBETT of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about bunraku ningyo and this evening’s event. Those with a call number (e.g., books) are physical items which you can find in our campus libraries. Those without a call number (e.g., journal articles and databases) are electronic resources, which you can access through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu.

BOOKS


Leavey Library: PN2924.S6 N6 K38 1990


Doheny Memorial Library: PL768.J6 B865 2013

ARTICLES


DVDS

Request these materials at the Doheny Memorial Library circulation desk.


Doheny Memorial Library: JDVD 029


Doheny Memorial Library: JDVD 030

OTHER RESOURCES

Invitation to Bunraku www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/bunraku/en
Basic information on Bunraku from the Japan Arts Council website (English/Japanese)