



Rakugo storyteller Katsura Shinnosuke performs before a rapt audience at the Shinjuku Suehirotei theater.

The Art of Telling Stories on a Solo Stage

A traditional Japanese performing art called *rakugo* shares glimpses of life with theatergoers through tales ranging from the humorous to the sentimental.

by Chiho Iuchi

As stage performances go, it doesn't get much simpler than this.

Dressed in a chic kimono, a solitary storyteller sits on a cushion, his legs tucked under him as he acts out funny, heart-warming stories set in downtown Edo, as Tokyo was once called. He uses only voice changes, gestures and facial expressions to differentiate between various characters—male, female, young and old, samurai and merchant—and turns his head to the right or left to switch roles during a conversation. The audience is drawn into the monodrama, laughing at wordplay interspersed in the story while awaiting the punch line that often concludes the tale.

This is *rakugo*, the traditional Japanese art of storytelling that developed as a form of entertainment for the common people during the Edo period (1603–1868). “With films or plays, audiences are exposed to a story through the same

images,” says Yanagiya Sankyo, a master *rakugoka*, or storyteller, and member of the board of directors of the Rakugo Kyokai, one of the major associations of the performers in Tokyo. “But rakugo inspires each listener to enjoy it in their own imagination. That is its biggest appeal.”

Although performances have been broadcast on radio and TV, distributed on CDs, DVDs and through the Internet, there is nothing like the live performances held at theaters called *yose*, where shamisen and drum music accompany the entrance of the *rakugoka*. The performer begins with a preliminary talk called *makura*, often featuring gossip about recent events or anecdotes that grab the attention of the audience. Then, with an abrupt change of tone, he calls out a character's name, marking a segue into the feature story.

The *rakugoka*'s only props are a folding bamboo fan and a hand towel. He can make the fan resemble a cup, a ciga-

rette, a pen, chopsticks, or even a sword; the hand towel is used to mimic a wallet, a letter and so on, to express various situations in the narration.

“At live performances, the storyteller and the audience share the same air,” Master Sankyo says. He describes how the storyteller is like the pivot at the base of the fan, directly connected to each member of the audience through the spread of the bamboo ribs. “This is something only possible at live shows,” he says.

At the peak of Edo culture in the 18th century, each community had its own theater, where neighbors gathered to enjoy performances. Although the number has decreased, there are still venues that keep up the traditions, hosting live performances almost every day.

The *yose* are usually open from around noon to 9 p.m. “You can enter any time, and you can stay as long as you like. At most, tickets are just 3,000 yen,” says Yuichi Tazawa, secretary general of the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyokai, another major Tokyo association of *rakugoka*. According to Tazawa, the theater style has remained unchanged since the Taisho period (1912–1926). “It's important for traditional arts to repeat the same patterns,” he says.

Classical *rakugo* stories come in various types, including *otoshi-banashi* stories that end with a joke or pun, *ninjo-banashi* stories portraying the human drama and ghost or theatrical stories. They have been passed down over the ages, and audiences delight in hearing contemporary performers add

their own perspective to an old standard. “Some of the stories featuring elements from old Japan, such as the red-light district, are hard to understand today,” says Master Sankyo. “But I try to re-interpret the feelings of the characters and make the story relevant to present-day audiences. Adapting them to the times is how the classical stories survive.”

The many new pieces that have been created by the storytellers themselves are another matter. “Often, the humor depends on the speaker's own character so much that it is not easy for other *rakugoka* to perform them,” Tazawa says. “But if the piece is interesting and well-structured, it may be picked up by other *rakugoka* and handed down to the next generation.”

Recently, the *rakugoka* associations are working to attract more audiences from abroad. At a performance at a traditional Tokyo shrine in September 2017, simple English words and manga illustrations were projected on the stage behind the *rakugoka*. “We just gave brief hints to help non-Japanese speakers understand the story and focus on the funny gestures and facial expressions,” Tazawa says.

The Rakugo Kyokai is also planning *rakugo* shows for non-Japanese speaking audiences. Master Sankyo, who has performed in the U.S. and Europe since 2006, says, “It's difficult for such audiences to understand the wordplay in Japanese, but human emotions are something that we all have in common.”

It will be interesting to see how *rakugo* storytelling can maintain its Edo traditions while finding new audiences and new themes. But it will surely continue to bring laughter and smiles to long-time *yose* fans.



Stylized lanterns decorate the traditional façade of the Suehirotei theater.