



Introduction to Kanadehon Chushingura

Bunraku Puppet Theatre: Kanadehon Chushingura (仮名手本忠臣蔵),
‘Treasury of Loyal Retainers’, premiered in Osaka in 1748.

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By any standard Japan has a tremendously rich theatrical tradition. A distinctive aspect is that its most popular dramas originated in **puppet** performances in the merchant city Osaka. Among these, *Chūshingura* is the most popular on both the bunraku and kabuki stages.

Bunraku (*Joruri* puppet theatre) developed out of the medieval epic storytelling tradition of itinerant blind minstrels (*biwa hōshi*). Around the year 1600, storytellers linked up with puppet troupes and began to perform regularly on urban stages. Narrators, accompanied by a shamisen player, perform the voices of the puppets. The chanter, who brings to life all the voices, has always been the acknowledged leader of the troupe. Until recent times, connoisseurs said they went to ‘listen’ rather than to ‘see’ to Bunraku.

The puppets, about two-thirds life-size and manipulated by three men, nevertheless, have always evoked a sense of magic. Like mask drama, wooden puppets must entice spirits to enter them to come to life. The chanter’s voice must be synchronised with the puppet movements to produce the elixir of life in the audience’s eyes. We lose ourselves in our own imaginations as

we suspend disbelief and bring to life the fiction on stage. Master puppeteers are magnificent to watch as they bring the inanimate figures to life.

The third element, less obvious initially, is the shamisen accompanist who sits next to the chanter in full view. A connoisseur will relish the voice of a master chanter first, then observe the skill of the puppeteers. Next they will hear the intense shamisen notes and realize that the shamisen player is not just accompanying the chanter but is like a conductor, leading, pushing and restraining the chanter. Finally, we are able to see all the parts as a dynamic whole.

Bunraku is similar to other musical dramas in that the performance rises and falls in intensity, riding musical rhythms, leading to highly-charged, aria-like emotional crescendos. Nearly all the more than 1000 plays produced for Bunraku over the 17th and 18th centuries contain at their core tragic moments that elicit tears from the audience. Like opera, tragic characters are both women and men. Connoisseurs relish the intense, cathartic moments of passionate outpourings of characters who face death themselves or that of loved ones – spouse, child or parent.

Chūshingura is a long play that today takes two days to perform completely. It has several aria-like outpourings when voice and shamisen reach for the heights of intensity, infusing the puppets with tremendous emotional power. A major theme of the play is the destructive, tragic consequences of the demands of loyal duty.

Part One

In the streaming programme, one highlight of part one is the suicide of **Lord Enya Hangan**, who had attacked Lord Moronao within the Shogun's Palace. He desperately hopes that his senior retainer **Oishi Yuranosuke** will arrive in time. The climax is Yuranosuke's arrival just before Lord Hangan dies and his receiving of the dagger that Lord Hangan uses to kill himself. We witness the depiction of Yuranosuke's anger and desire for revenge that he struggles to constrain.

Part Two

In part two, the climax of the whole play is the destruction of a poor farm family innocently caught up in the crisis at Court. In order to raise money for the vendetta, **Okaru**, wife of the samurai **Hayano Kanpei**, sells herself to be indentured to a Kyoto brothel. (Kanpei is disgraced because he and Okaru had been frolicking about when he was on duty serving Lord Hangan and he didn't help his lord at the moment of crisis.) Her father **Yoichibei**, returning at night from Kyoto with the brothel money, is killed by a robber (**Sadakuro**). Kanpei aims to shoot a wild boar but finds in the dark that he has killed a man (Sadakuro) and takes the stolen money. He goes home with the money, but then farmers bring home Yoichibei's corpse. Kanpei kills himself, mistakenly thinking that he has killed his father-in-law. Finally, two samurai take the money. We are left with Okaru's elderly **Mother** alone, sitting with the dead bodies of her husband and son-in-law, and her daughter sold to a brothel. Her aria-like lament is a high moment of intensity, an innocent farm woman whose family is cruelly crushed in service to samurai.

Part Three

Part three begins with a dance journey (*michiyuki*) of a mother and daughter. The daughter **Konami** is betrothed to **Rikiya**, son of Yuranosuke, but won't be able to marry him since he plans to die in the vendetta. Her father **Honzō** is the focus of this section. He had bribed the villain Moronao to save his own Lord Wakasanosuke and had restrained Lord Hangan from killing Moronao with a final blow. He sacrifices his life for his daughter. To help Yuranosuke's vendetta, he reveals the internal plan of the villain Moronao's mansion. His death and love for his daughter take the play to another intense musical high point.

Most bunraku plays conclude with a resolution of the crisis that began the play: the vendetta is successful, although the audience knows that the loyal retainers will be sentenced to ritual suicide (*seppuku*) by the Shogun.



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