

The UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage “BUNRAKU” on the world stage!

The National Theatre presents a spectacular fusion of tradition and anime in the United States!

Bunraku is one of Japan's representative traditional performing arts, refined over its 300-year history. This fall, the first American performance produced by the National Theatre will be held in Washington DC, New York, Los Angeles, Fairfield (CT), and Houston.

Bunraku combines *tayū* narration and expressive, live shamisen music with the lifelike movements of puppets, with each puppet operated by three puppeteers. It is designated as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

This tour aims to give people in five cities the opportunity to experience the unique artistry of Bunraku and explore the joy of traditional Japanese performing arts.

The USA tour of Bunraku

The performances in the U.S. are intended to introduce the appeal of Bunraku to American audiences. This five-city North American Tour was organized by Japan Society, a New York-based non-profit organization founded in 1907, which has made significant contributions to promoting exchanges between Japan and the United States.

Bunraku combines storytelling and music similar to opera or musicals. It's not just a puppet show for kids but rather a sophisticated art form aimed at adult audiences. The stories in Bunraku often blend real historical events with fictional elements and delve into the complexity of human emotions. For those who have not seen it, the artistry involved in Bunraku can be quite surprising. Just as information can be disseminated borderlessly via the Internet these days, we aim to bring Bunraku across borders so that as many people as possible can experience the charm of Bunraku live in multiple cities in different parts of the United States. We hope that the interest in Bunraku will increase the momentum for enjoying full Bunraku performances in Japan, leading up to Expo 2025 in Osaka, Kansai, Japan.

The performance will include two climactic scenes from classic Bunraku repertoire: *Date Musume Koi no Higanoko* (Oshichi, the Greengrocer's Daughter) and *Sonezaki Shinjū* (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki), along with an additional demonstration to introduce audiences to the techniques of Bunraku. In addition, a separate workshop will be held to provide a closer look at Bunraku puppetry and give participants an opportunity to operate puppets themselves. In New York, Japan Society will also hold a Gallery exhibition entitled "Bunraku Backstage," providing a rare glimpse behind the scenes of Japanese puppet theater. The National Bunraku Theatre, one of the theaters in National Theatre group, has collaborated with Japan Society, offering some of its precious

possessions, including Bunraku puppets, costumes, props, and musical instruments, to assemble a part of the exhibition.

Of special interest for the U.S. tour production, the stage backdrop for "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki" will be animated footage based on original drawings by OGA Kazuo, who has worked on background art for animated films such as "My Neighbor Totoro," "Princess Mononoke," "In This Corner of the World," and other internationally-renowned works. This unique fusion of Japanese anime, which has many fans worldwide, and traditional performing arts is sure to delight audiences.

The success of "BUNRAKU 1st SESSION" in Tokyo

In March 2024, we held the performance "BUNRAKU 1st SESSION" as a preview for our upcoming performances in the U.S. The performance was only 60 minutes, including a commentary for Bunraku newcomers and an excerpted scene from "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki." By keeping the performance short and providing English pamphlets and audio guides, we successfully attracted a diverse audience, including many international visitors and Japanese people new to Bunraku. Our efforts to crowdfund a collaboration between Bunraku and anime were also successful, with over 400 donors contributing a total of over 9 million yen, enabling us to bring the performances to the U.S.

Bunraku and "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki"

In Bunraku, the story's time, place, and season, as well as the lines and emotions of the characters, are all expressed through the *gidayū-bushi* performed by the narrator, the *tayū*, and the shamisen player. *Gidayū-bushi* was founded by TAKEMOTO Gidayū in 1684 and has been passed down through the generations. In addition, the performance of the puppets is coordinated by three puppeteers - the main puppeteer (operating the head and right hand), the left puppeteer (operating the left hand), and the foot puppeteer (operating the feet) - who work in unison to create realistic human-like movements and create a unique Bunraku world, all accompanied by the expressive sound of *Gidayū-bushi*.

The main performance of this tour, "The Forest by the Tenjin Shrine scene" from "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki," depicts the feelings of the protagonists Ohatsu and Tokubē, who are driven into a tragic situation leading to a double suicide, with a rich poetic portrayal against the backdrop of the darkness of night spreading over the forests of Osaka, and is one of the scenes that best conveys the charm of Bunraku.

"The Love Suicides at Sonezaki" premiered at the Takemotoza Theater in Osaka in 1703. It was adapted from an actual double suicide incident by CHIKAMATSU Monzaemon, often likened to Japanese Shakespeare. Performances were discontinued for a period, but they were revived in 1955 with a new adaptation and composition, and since then, it has become one of the most popular Bunraku works.

In this story, Tokubē, a clerk at a soy sauce shop in Osaka, falls into a difficult situation after lending money to a friend, and is eventually driven to commit double suicide with Ohatsu, a courtesan who loves him. The story is easy to understand, and the sincere feelings of Tokubē and Ohatsu shine through. The music for the revival is beautiful and rich in nuance.

[Program, Cast, Staff]

"*Hinomi Yagura* (The Fire Watchtower scene)" from "*Date Musume Koi no Higanoko* (Oshichi, the Greengrocer's Daughter)"

Commentary with Demonstration

"*Tenjin no mori* (The Forest by the Tenjin Shrine scene)" from "*Sonezaki Shinjū* (The Love Suicides at Sonezaki)"

Written by CHIKAMATSU Monzaemon

Scripts and Compositions: NOZAWA Matsunosuke

Choreography: SAWAMURA Ryūnosuke

Supervision of the Images: KIRITAKE Kanjūrō

Art Director: OGA Kazuo

Production of the Images: YAMADA Shinpei

Co-Production of the Images: Dehogallery, Inc.

〈Tayū (narrator)〉

TOYOTAKE Todayu, TOYOTAKE Yoshihodayū, TOYOTAKE Sakijudayū

〈Shamisen〉

TSURUZAWA Seishirō, TSURUZAWA Kantarō, TSURUZAWA Seiin

〈Puppeteers〉

YOSHIDA Tamasuke, YOSHIDA Minoshirō, YOSHIDA Minotarō, KIRITAKE Mon'yoshi, KIRITAKE Kansuke, YOSHIDA Tamanobu, YOSHIDA Tamayuki, TOYOMATSU Seinosuke

[Schedule of the tour]

September 28 (Sat.) Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (Los Angeles, CA)

October 1 (Tue.) Fairfield University (Fairfield, CT)

October 3 (Thu.) - October 5 (Sat.) Japan Society (Manhattan, NY)

October 8 (Tue.) - October 9 (Wed.) J.F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Washington, DC)

October 12 (Sat.) Japan-America Society of Houston (Houston, TX)

*Tickets for the New York show will be available for purchase starting from August 8 (Thu.) at www.japansociety.org. Tickets for other cities will be sold at their respective venues.

[Special cooperation and sponsorship]

We thank ALL NIPPON AIRWAYS CO., LTD., Kikkoman Corporation, and Suntory Holdings Limited for their generous support, which made this performance possible.

The National Theatre

The Theatre opened in 1966 to preserve and promote traditional Japanese performing arts. It showcases a wide variety of traditional Japanese performing arts, including Kabuki, Bunraku, Nihonbuyo (traditional Japanese dance), Hogaku (traditional Japanese music), Gagaku (Japanese court music), Shomyo (Japanese Buddhist chant), and folk performing arts. After closing at the end of October 2023, the performance business has continued at various theaters in Tokyo.

https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/en/theatre/national_theatre/

The National Bunraku Theatre

Opened in Osaka in 1984 as a base for preserving, inheriting, and developing the Bunraku and a wide range of the Kyoto-Osaka area performing arts.

As a hub for Bunraku, the Theatre showcases Bunraku performances and various traditional performing arts shows. Furthermore, it trains future Bunraku performers and curates collections of Bunraku-related materials for public display.

<https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/en/theatre/bunraku/>

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0

This tour is supported by the Japan Arts Council and the Agency for Cultural Affairs as a project co-organized by the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 to introduce "The Beauty and the Spirit of Japan" to the world. For more information, please refer to the following website.

<https://japanculturalexpo.bunka.go.jp/en/>

Japan Society

Japan Society is the premier organization connecting Japanese arts, culture, business, and society with audiences in NYC and around the world. In over 100 years of work, the Society has inspired generations by establishing itself as a pioneer in supporting international exchanges in arts and culture, business and policy, as well as education between Japan and the U.S., providing over 200 public programs each year at its NYC landmark building headquartered in Manhattan's mid-town East.

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