

EDUCATION

Puppetry at UCLA: Experiment in East-West Fusion

by Carol Sorgenfrei and Lisa Aimee Sturz

Fascination with Asian theatre as a means of revitalizing Western drama is hardly new. Brecht, Artaud, Grotowski, Meyerhold, Brook, Mnouchkine, and others have sought alternatives to external, literal illusionism. In their search for the timeless and universal, for the archetypes of theatre, for the essence of human experience in ritual, spectacle, and communion, these twentieth century pioneers have turned again and again to the stylized patterns and aesthetic traditions of Asia. They have sought to confront and overwhelm the audience: to shake them out of habitual thought.

Whether the goal was intellectual enlightenment or spiritual rebirth, Asian theatrical techniques have been used to advance theatre beyond that deadly modern narcissism so narrowly and inaccurately termed "realism." Puppetry, an art form bridging the gulfs of literalism and stylization, humanism and spiritualism, ritual and theatre, East and West, is one technique which can aid in furthering these goals.

This year at UCLA, two students in Professor Carol Sorgenfrei's graduate seminar in Japanese Theatre — puppeteer Lisa Sturz and actress-singer-composer Michelle Holmes —

collaborated with Dr. Sorgenfrei on a Bunraku adaptation and production of John Ford's Jacobean tragedy of incestuous love, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (1629-1633).

In undertaking this venture they recognized that theatrical conventions of every country are organic to the traditional genres. Therefore, in contemplating an East-West fusion such as this, care was needed to be sure that the result was of significant theatrical and/or educational value. The use of Eastern theatre techniques should provide cross-cultural illumination rather than merely add an exotic touch to a Western play. Fusion can succeed only if some inner core of sensibility is shared by both cultures.

It is evident that such sharing does exist between Ford's play and the love-suicides which form the bread-and-butter of Bunraku. In both instances, characters are caught between the desires of their hearts and their obligations to society, family, or conventional morality. Historically, in both cultures, anachronistic governments forced repression of natural tendencies toward exuberance. Sensuality, violence, and excess in the arts flourished. Swift government reprisals often placed restrictions on entertainment. Playwrights in both Jacobean England and Tokugawa Japan reflected these aspects of life.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), often called the Shakespeare of Japan, wrote many of the most popular Bunraku plays and perfected the love-suicide drama. He advocated an aesthetic of "unreal realism," maintaining that too accurate an imitation of life detracted from artful presentation. The extremely realistic puppets of Bunraku, like the male actresses of Kabuki (onnagata), exemplify this principle.

In the case of adult puppet plays, the most horrific deeds can be presented

on stage because the use of dolls rather than live actors creates aesthetic distance. Such distancing is essential in a contemporary portrayal of violence such as that depicted in *'Tis Pity She's A Whore*. In this play Giovanni rips open the belly of his sister-lover Annabella to kill their unborn child, then cuts out her heart and carries it bleeding on his dagger. Staging of such a grotesque scene by actors in today's theatre could easily degenerate into a horror-show parody. The use of puppets permits us to see the violence without diminishing our concern for the plight of the doomed lovers. Other aspects of Bunraku theatre further enhance this aesthetic distance: the ever-present manipulators dressed in black robes and hoods to symbolize invisibility, and the performance of all narration, recitation and dialogue by a single story-teller (joruri).

In order to design and build the puppets, Ms. Sturz studied the construction process used for Bunraku figures in Japan. Although practicality and the unavailability of materials forced certain compromises, the resulting puppets were patterned after Japanese originals. Puppeteer and filmmaker Burt Geller and graduate student Al Schnupp aided in puppet construction and Malia MacDiarmid



Photo: Burt Geller

Puppet heads, arms and legs were carved from wood, split open and hollowed out to house the mechanisms for articulated movement of eyes, eyebrows, and hands. Springs were substituted for whalebone; heavy nylon thread for silk.



Photo: Burt Geller

The traditional mixture of animal glue and crushed shells was unavailable. Therefore, after extensive sanding, the face and body were painted with several layers of a glue and pigment mixture, sanded again to a porcelain-like finish and smoothed with layers of lacquer. After the final sanding they were sprayed with flat paint and a matte finish. Wigs made of synthetic hair were attached to the heads with velcro to facilitate easy removal for mechanical adjustments. (Ms. Sturz is shown holding Soranzo.)

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assisted in costume design and construction. Jeff Brown created a set which mimicked that of a traditional Bunraku play. While puppets were being made, changes were also taking place with the play as the result of a study of typical Bunraku plays. Ford's script was cut and adapted, leaving only the spine of the play and three characters. Ms. Holmes wrote original music and narration for the drastically cut script. In preparation for the musical composition and performance she studied tapes of joruri, samisen and English music of the Renaissance.

To prepare for rehearsals, the production group watched videotapes of both Bunraku and Kabuki, familiarizing themselves with the stylized arts of gesture and vocal production. Bun-

raku puppets are traditionally operated by three manipulators clothed in black. Although the UCLA students could not devote the twenty years required of Japanese puppeteers to master this craft, the nine operators worked diligently to learn typical poses and simple movement patterns. Professor Sorgenfrei suggested and demonstrated appropriate poses and gestures based on her extensive knowledge of Japanese theatre and culture.

Under the direction of Ms. Sturz, the manipulators worked with mirrors. Gradually, a more fluid movement developed as they sensed the rhythms of working together in dance-like patterns. Students involved in the production included puppeteers Lisa

Aimee Sturz, Burt Geller, Lamis Khalaf, Suzanne Wakomoto, Malia MacDiarmid, Remi Omodele, Terry Crawford, Andi Hogan and Michel Chenelle; set designer Ed Wright; lighting designer Jerald Enos and technical director Jeff Brown.

Dr. Carol Sorgenfried is a playwright, director, and scholar of Japanese theatre who teaches at UCLA.

Lisa Aimee Sturz is a professional puppeteer and graduate student in Theatre Arts at UCLA.

UCLA is one of the few American universities which offers a scholarly approach to the puppet theatre. The puppetry program began in 1954 under the direction of Professor Melvyn Helstien. Graduate courses include a study of the development of world puppetry and seminars in Japan, Southeast Asia, India, and African puppet traditions.



Giovanni and Annabella

Photo: Burt Geller