

## **Inanimate Actors: animating puppets for melodrama**

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MA Word & Image: reworking the classics

An important type of theatre during the Edo period of Japan (1600-1868) was the puppet theatre, or *ningyō jōruri*, which combined the already established musical storytelling called *jōruri* with puppets.<sup>1</sup> The *jōruri* plays could be divided into two genres: *jidaimono* (‘period plays’) and *sewamono* (‘domestic plays’). The latter dealt with ordinary, contemporary life, rather than epic tales of past heroes, and were presumably appreciated for their topicality.<sup>2</sup>

In analyses of scholars like Donald H. Shively and Donald Keene, the use of puppets is too often treated as debilitating. Moreover, the use of character types is discussed as a limitation of the puppet theatre – even though stock characters are by no means exclusive to puppet plays. In previous research I have argued that the use of types is not a negative trait.

This research paper will build on that point and attempt to answer why these underappreciated qualities of puppets are not only beneficial, but actually make them better actors for the melodramatic *sewamono* than humans.

The term melodramatic is used, because *sewamono* are in some ways comparable to the genre of Melodrama. Melodrama was originally musical theatre aimed at evoking emotional responses from the audience.<sup>3</sup>

My main argument will be that puppets are better suited to *sewamono* because their emotions are conveyed effectively, partly due to conventionalized techniques, and partly due to their inanimate nature which facilitates an easier suspension of disbelief from the audience.

The first chapter will explain the textual, visual and musical techniques that make puppets characters. The second chapter will consider why those techniques are effective and what special quality puppets have as inanimate actors.

## 1. The puppet as a character

*Sewamono* rely on melodrama and puppets successfully serve as vehicles for this. At first glance, one might consider puppets to be primarily suited for epic tales in which superhuman feats are accomplished that cannot be recreated by actual human actors. However, the *sewamono* that rely heavily on emotions and less on action, use puppets as well. Why is that? How can puppets believably portray emotional humans?

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Keene, *World within walls: Japanese literature of the pre-modern era 1600-1868*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 236

<sup>2</sup> Keene, *World within walls*, 239

<sup>3</sup> “Melodrama,” *Literary Terms*, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://literaryterms.net/melodrama/>

In order to answer this question, I will explain the textual, visual and musical techniques at work that bring puppets to life, through the people that use them: the playwright, the puppeteers, and the chanter and musician.

## **The playwright**

The plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon distinguished themselves from others due to their literary quality, as argued by Keene. The text has a certain complexity through an intricate web of puns, half-finished phrases and allusions.<sup>4</sup> Even though the audience likely did not understand everything, they could enjoy the beautiful language<sup>5</sup> and the atmosphere it created. Notably, the most poetic passages of puppet plays are found in the third act, during the *michiyuki*, also known as the travel song.

According to Keene, the *michiyuki* was a dramatic device that served to build the main characters into the tragic hero and heroine.<sup>6</sup> The poetic passages filled with allusions and word plays had a tragic quality not found in previous acts.<sup>7</sup> Keene states: “it is as if the two women had been enabled through poetry to become human beings, instead of remaining childish puppets.”<sup>8</sup>

I agree with the function and effect of poetic language, but Keene’s choice of words is unfortunate. Westerners may associate puppets with children, but given the adult themes and audiences of Japanese puppet plays, the word “childish” is unwarranted.

In any case, the language used by the playwright could create atmosphere, whether tragic or not, and thus add to the emotional layer in other ways than just telling the story and describing emotions. Keene even emphasized the necessity of emotionally charged phrases, for puppets had no personality of their own to enhance the dialogue.<sup>9</sup>

## **The puppeteer**

Regarding visual techniques, the most obvious ones are puppet heads and gestures. Although décor is needed to ground the characters in their world and costumes reveal things like social status, puppet heads and gestures can be said to give us the most information about the character, who they are and what they are feeling.

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<sup>4</sup> Keene, *World Within Walls*, 267

<sup>5</sup> Keene, *World Within Walls*, 268

<sup>6</sup> Keene, *World within walls*, 247

<sup>7</sup> Keene, *World within walls*, 247

<sup>8</sup> Keene, *World within walls*, 247

<sup>9</sup> Keene, *World within walls*, 266

In “Bunraku: the Art of the Japanese Puppet Theatre”, Donald Keene provides a categorization of puppet heads, in relation to their age and their ‘good’ or ‘bad’ nature.<sup>10</sup> These male and female puppet heads reveal from the start what type of character the audience is dealing with, similar to the way villains and heroes from Disney animation movies, for example, are instantly recognizable by their design. The male heads are more detailed and therefore expressive than their female counterpart and the male types are larger in number. The types became more rigid and conventionalized, as the theatre developed, downgrading individuality and making character shifts less effective.<sup>11</sup>

The emotional displays of these puppets relied partly on changes of expression from the male heads with movable eyes, eyebrows and mouths, used sparingly in the climactic scenes.<sup>12</sup> However, the most common technique was the tilting up or down of the head, playing with light and shadow, as was the convention in the *nō* theatre.<sup>13</sup> This was especially useful for the less expressive female heads.

As for gestures, there were *furi* and *kata* gestures, wherein the first reproduces natural human motion in a stylized fashion and the latter goes beyond this to create motions that are extensions of human attitudes.<sup>14</sup> For example, a female puppet may cover her face with her hands and tremble heavily to express her sorrow. This makes her dramatic and lively.

### **The chanter and musician**

Music is essential to the carefully orchestrated puppet plays, along with the previous elements. They cooperate for the optimal emotional effect, which cannot be achieved to that extent in the Kabuki theatre, for example, that revolved around sensation and the actors’ popularity, and where actors tended to take liberty with their lines.

According to Andrew Gerstle, chanters played an important role, managing their troupes and fashioning stories into a musical narrative that was considered to be more important than the content, which was usually based on earlier sources, because it distinguished the play

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<sup>10</sup> Donald Keene, *Bunraku: the art of Japanese puppet theatre*, Tokyo: Kodansha International LTD (1973): 53

<sup>11</sup> Keene, *Bunraku*, 32

<sup>12</sup> Keene, *Bunraku*, 56

<sup>13</sup> John Carpenter, “The Human Figure in the Playground of Edo Artistic Imagination” in Robert T. Singer ed.: *Edo: Art in Japan 1615-1868*, Washington: National Gallery of Art (1998): 372

<sup>14</sup> Keene, *Bunraku*, 56-57

from those sources.<sup>15</sup> The chanter's singing and recitation are complementary to the music made by the shamisen.<sup>16</sup> Gerstle states the following about this:

The singing is earthy and unrestrained, often filled with vibrant energy that clearly tells the listener that the art's origins lie far from cloistered aristocracy. The emotions are those of the commoners' society, robust, vigorous, and sometimes crude.<sup>17</sup>

In other words, the singing conveys raw emotions that were likely familiar to the audience. In his further discussion of chanters, Gerstle talks about two men in particular: Uji Kaganojō and Takemoto Gidayū. Both of them agreed that each act of a play ought to have a distinctive musical style.<sup>18</sup> Kaganojō has actually written about the four musical styles of which the feelings and musical moods must be chanted in a different way: the auspicious style, that requires elegant and proper sounding words, yet a vigorous and strong delivery; the elegant style, that is essentially a softer and more serene version of auspicious chanting; the amorous style, that requires deep concentration as it seeks to convey the yearning of lovers and move the heart of the audience; and the tragic style, that removes the sentiments of the previous styles until nothing but a "lingering touch of love" remains, and for which the chanter must keep his heart strong and harbor in its depths the feelings of the fleeting nature of life.<sup>19</sup>

Gidayū has written about two contrasting styles of which the interaction and constant alteration in a play can be said to form the basis of *jōruri* chanting.<sup>20</sup> The styles are a "quick moving and exciting dramatic style" (*jigoto*) and a "lyrical style in which action stops, and poetry and music give depth to the play" (*fushigoto*).<sup>21</sup> This contrast manifests itself in the organization of plays that used two categories, 'musical-lyrical' and 'dramatic', for the division of scenes.<sup>22</sup> Dramatic scenes are the ones with action and thus the majority of a play.<sup>23</sup> Another opposition found in the organization lies within the dramatic parts and

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy : convention in the plays of Chikamatsu*, Cambridge, Mass. : Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard Univ. ; Cambridge, Mass. etc. : distr. by Harvard University Press, 1986, 17

<sup>16</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 17

<sup>17</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 17-18

<sup>18</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 25

<sup>19</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 25-26

<sup>20</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 39

<sup>21</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 39

<sup>22</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 40

<sup>23</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 40

consists of *kotoba*, which is a style replicating speech without decorative qualities, and *ji* or *ji iro*, which is melodic and accompanied by music.<sup>24</sup>

These styles alternate throughout the play to create tension and follow a *jo-ha-kyū* musical pattern, wherein *jo* is the slow beginning, moving on to the higher pace and increased tension of *ha*, followed by the short moment of relaxed tempo and tension of *kyū*.<sup>25</sup> This constitutes the structure of the play as a whole, as well as that of smaller scenes and sections.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of the three-act *sewamono*, the climax of the play is usually reached in the last half of the second act. That is, therefore, the moment when the music is at its most dynamic, complicated and intense.<sup>27</sup> The contrasting ‘cool speech’ and ‘hot song’ delivery styles effectively convey the alternation of rational and emotional thought and the inner turmoil of the characters.<sup>28</sup>

Contrary to the above, *fushigoto* passages disrupt the flow of the drama<sup>29</sup> and allow the audience to catch their breath. They can offer a fresh perspective on the action or the psychology of a character, they can set the mood and create the desired atmosphere, and sometimes they comment on the action.<sup>30</sup>

## 2. The puppet as an actor

As discussed in the previous chapter, the puppets are animated through the cooperation of textual, visual and musical techniques. They all influence how a character is perceived, how (effectively) emotion is conveyed and what the atmosphere of a given scene is. However, why exactly do these techniques work so well and what relation does their effectiveness have to the inanimate nature of puppets?

### The power of association

The previously described techniques and conventions can be assumed to have worked well, since they were often used, but that only gives an indication of effectiveness, not an

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<sup>24</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 40

<sup>25</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 40

<sup>26</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 40

<sup>27</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 41

<sup>28</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 52

<sup>29</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 54

<sup>30</sup> Gerstle, *Circles of fantasy*, 55

explanation. We should consider *why* these techniques worked. To do so, it should be pointed out that theatrical conventions are largely culturally determined.

In previous research on the construction of characters by playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon, I have discussed the context of his creations and the appreciation in his time for the stylized representation of reality. Stylization and symbolism were preferred over naturalistic realism by Edo popular culture and the resultant use of types could positively impact a play's relatability and moral.<sup>31</sup> The moral is served by 'simplification', as explained by Scott McCloud in his discussion of cartoons, and this simplification brings the essence of the narrative to the forefront by eliminating unnecessary details and thus focusing the story.<sup>32</sup> This simplification can lead to 'objectivity' versus 'subjectivity', when the hero of a story lacks details in his appearance (or personality) needed for identifying a specific person and thus becomes universally identifiable.<sup>33</sup> A villain can be drawn more detailed to create distance between him/her and the audience, and unconsciously make them feel closer to the hero.<sup>34</sup> This translates well to the puppet theatre where 'good' heads tend to be less detailed than 'bad' heads.<sup>35</sup>

In other words, the use of types and simplification in the visual techniques, can result in a more empathetic attitude from the audience and make them open to the emotional experience. However, this alone doesn't suffice to explain how the described techniques *move* the hearts of the audience. Earning empathy from your audience is one thing, but effectively conveying the emotions is quite another.

Perhaps the most important element that grants the techniques and conventions their effectiveness is association.

With this I do not just mean the association that comes with recognizing intertextuality or the like, which requires cultural capital. I mainly refer to the very basic principle of using a technique repeatedly for a certain purpose until it manages to fulfill that purpose through association. In other words, being a convention in and of itself has effect.

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<sup>31</sup> Kirsten Groot, *The Love Suicide at Amijima as a Performance: the construction of Chikamatsu's characters*, unpublished bachelor thesis, 2019, 16

<sup>32</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993): 30

<sup>33</sup> McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 36

<sup>34</sup> Groot, *The Love Suicide at Amijima as a Performance*, 17

<sup>35</sup> Groot, *The Love Suicide at Amijima as a Performance*, 17

To illustrate this, I'll use music as an example. Music evokes certain emotions by creating atmospheres, but those specific emotions are not entirely fixed from the start. They are guided by association.

A useful way to explain this, would be to discuss the concept of a *leitmotiv* often used in western music. A *leitmotiv* is a recurring musical theme<sup>36</sup> that usually represents or is otherwise connected to a particular idea, character, place, or even emotion, within the dramatic context.

An example of a popularly used and powerful *leitmotiv* is a part of the *Dias Irae*. Through regular use for the same types of scenes, this piece of music has become the musical representation of Death.<sup>37</sup>

Once the association is established by repetitive use, the emotions of previous instances wherein the *leitmotiv* was used, will be unconsciously brought to the forefront of the audience's mind. Thus, it strengthens the emotions of the current instance.

Using the allusive quality of the *leitmotiv*, Giuseppe Verdi used melodies associated with earlier happiness for a final tragic situation as a means to recall that past.<sup>38</sup>

The theory of *leitmotiv* and association fits well within the puppet theatre, since the *sewamono* followed a certain formula. Particular musical styles were conventionally used for certain acts and tension was built up or relaxed through particular styles. Moreover, apart from music, *sewamono* reused story structures and tropes and were typically mindful of conventions. As such they were able to create an inventory of associations. This means that the predictable storylines and stock characters that are often looked down upon, actually not only made audiences more empathetic through simplification, but also made the conveyance of emotions more effective. They evoke the audience's memories of previous plays and the emotions they felt then, to strengthen the ones they feel while watching presently.

## **The suspension of disbelief**

Most of the lifelike quality of a puppet is owed to the audience's willingness to temporarily believe whatever happens in the story. For example, when watching a horror film, the viewer is terrified of the monster, while knowing fully well that it is not real. How does this

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<sup>36</sup> "Leitmotif," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed March 22, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/leitmotif>

<sup>37</sup> Sideways, "How the Music Spoils Sweeney Todd (and why that's a good thing)," YouTube Video, 22:19, October 30, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1uh1O3MHKE>

<sup>38</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, "Leitmotif."



‘suspension of disbelief’ show the advantage puppets have in relation to their inanimate nature?

The best way to explain this, is perhaps to draw a comparison with animation. Disney’s Howard Ashman has talked about music and animation as opposed to live action film. As shown by Sideways, Ashman stated that music in live action film does not work as well, because music has more license in animation and theatre due to the different level of reality.<sup>39</sup> Sideways goes on to argue that “the abstract representation of a cartoon makes it easier to suspend your disbelief”, for a singing animal is as believable as a talking one, whereas lifelike film is an ill-suited context for this type of singing, since it breaks the illusion of reality.<sup>40</sup>

This line of thought can be extended to the puppet theatre. If the audience is supposed to believe that puppets can move and talk, it becomes less of a stretch to believe that they feel deeply, and thus the melodramatic scenes are more effective. Moreover, I imagine *kata* gestures, which are motions humans do not naturally make, seem more convincing when performed by the inanimate puppet than the actual human for precisely this reason.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, puppets can provide emotional depth as actors, not despite but *because* of their inanimate nature. They serve as fitting vehicles for these stories, since they allow for an easier suspension of disbelief. It does not seem unnatural for them to move in exaggerated fashion, for they should not even move at all. If the audience can believe their mobility, the stylized manner seems perfectly believable.

The melodramatic *sewamono* benefit from the very coded and stylized version of reality they present. The techniques are mostly conventionalized and can thus utilize the inventory of associations for deeper emotional responses. Text, visual experience and music all cooperate and support each other, so that the audience knows what exactly is happening and how they should feel about it.

Their interaction is seen in examples like the weeping female puppet heavily trembling and covering her eyes, while the chanter uses his heartfelt voice singing lamenting words to express her deep sorrow. Each element – textual, visual and musical – contributes to the

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<sup>39</sup> Sideways, “Why the Music in the Live Action Disney Remakes is Worse than you Thought,” YouTube Video, 30:11, February 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaO3M-zR8E>

<sup>40</sup> Sideways, “Why the Music in the Live Action Disney Remakes is Worse than you Thought.”

overall experience and the puppet itself makes the over-the-top sadness and unnatural motion believable. Thus, together they successfully move the heart of the viewer, in a way none of them could have done alone.

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