



The Sacred Tray

Sketches of Takeda puppets: Eilean Pearcey

TWO MAJOR JAPANESE TRADITIONS OF PUPPETRY

Fernau Hall

One of the most admirable qualities of the Japanese is their custom of preserving their traditions of the performing arts, not only in the way they have developed at different periods but also in their original form. Even the

very ancient traditions of the music and dance of India, as modified at the T'ang courts of China, were taken to Japan in the 7th century and to this very day are performed by artists belonging to the Imperial household as one part of Gagaku music and dance; and traditions of drama and puppetry perfected at different periods in Japan have also been preserved with astonishing fidelity.

Needless to say the later Japanese traditions owe much to more ancient traditions, and though a great many links are to be found between the different branches of theatre, these later branches still preserve their individuality.

The two major branches of puppetry surviving in Japan possess traditions of skill and artistry quite comparable to those of the traditional theatre using dancers and actors. Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the great dramatist, preferred to work with the Bunraku puppets rather than with the Kabuki Theatre; he wrote some of his pieces for Kabuki, but their central place in the Kabuki repertoire is mainly due to fact that Kabuki took them over from Bunraku. In fact a great many influences from the ancient No theatre may be detected in Kabuki and in both major forms of puppetry (Bunraku and marionettes, i.e. string puppets), and because Kabuki and the two forms of puppet theatre have developed side by side since the 17th century they have influenced each other in many ways.

No, Kabuki and the Bunraku puppets have been known in the Western world for some years because of performances by excellent troupes and the publication of various excellent books. But the Japanese marionettes remained unknown in the west, and the visit of the Takeda troupe to Britain in the spring of this year, on its way to an international puppet festival in Moscow, was a revelation.

I was fortunate enough to be invited to travel with the Takeda Marionette Company across London, and thus to be able to see two performances in one day. One performance was given at the famous Little Angel Marionette Theatre, with its own company directed by John Wright. This theatre, reconstructed as a puppet theatre, has a low proscenium arch and a gallery from which marionettes can be manipulated; here the Japanese puppeteers remained invisible, and the general atmosphere was very like that in the Takeda company's own theatre in Tokyo. The other performance was given in a hall in an arts centre in Sutton, a suburban town lying to the South-West of London. This hall has no proscenium arch, so the puppeteers were constantly in view. But this did not affect in any way the enjoyment of the spectators; in fact they revelled in seeing how the puppeteers used their extraordinary skill, exploiting techniques rather different from those employed by the marionette-manipulators of the West.

Respect for ancient traditions was established very clearly at the begin-



Dancing Skeleton—a Takedapuppet

ning of the programme, when Sennosuke Takeda, head of the company and master-puppeteer, emerged from a side door in traditional formal clothing. Carrying rice wine and a sacred tray, he walked to the middle of the area in front of the puppet stage, put down the tray, and struck sparks using flint and steel, in order to purify the room, exorcize evil spirits, and bless the stage and the audience. In fact he performed a ritual ceremony correspondingly very closely to the puja performed by an Indian classical dancer before a performance. After striking the sparks he took up the tray and walked off, using a smooth gliding step very much like that of a No dancer-actor. In contrast to Indian dancers, however, he wore the tabi socks characteristic of the classical Japanese theatre — socks in which there is a space between the big toe and the others, so that the person wearing them can put on flat slippers (gripping the thong running inside the big toe) when he moves away from the stage.

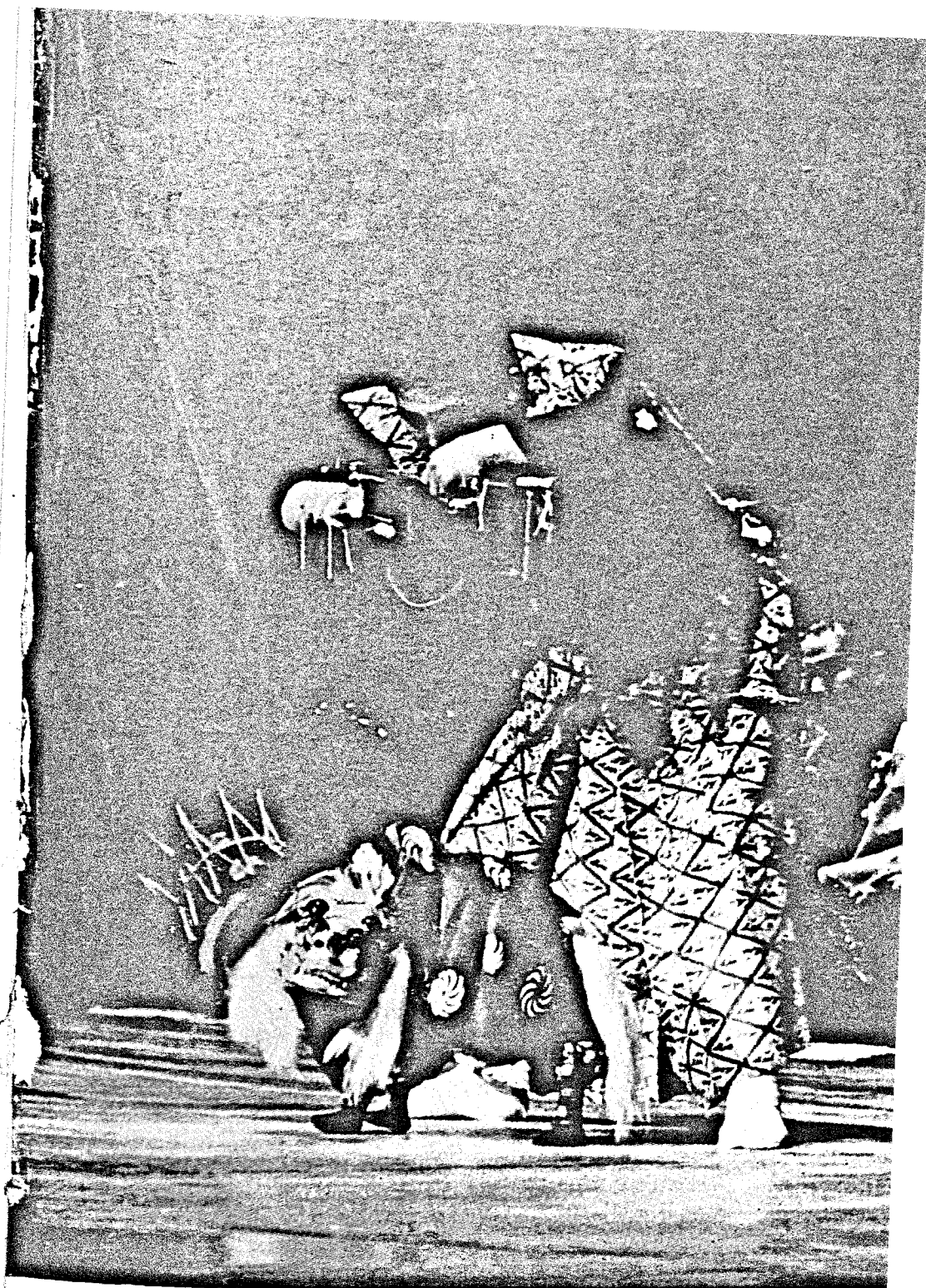
Next, a Sanbaso marionette-dancer, wearing the tall, strangely-shaped hat characteristic of this age-old figure, was made to enter. This figure also used a slow gliding walk, but made long strides beyond the capacity of a human dancer. At this point I was reminded of a Kabuki programme which began with *Avatsuri Sanbaso*: a Sanbaso dancer moved with slow puppet-like movements, while another Kabuki dancer, dressed in black like a puppeteer, pretended to manipulate strings controlling the Sanbaso dancer. Sanbaso is actually an ancient, rather lively folk-dance; for ritual reasons it was taken into the No repertoire, and made far more stately; later still both the puppets and Kabuki took it over—while preserving both its ritual quality and some of its gay folk-dance quality.

After the marionette-Sanbaso reached the centre of the stage it made a formal bow to the audience, in traditional Japanese fashion. First it knelt down centre-stage, with knees akimbo, and carefully arranged its sleeves. Then it bent its body slowly forward until its head touched the stage, before returning to its previous kneeling position. Then it began to dance, sometimes holding a position with one foot high in the air. These held positions emphasized the vigour of the dancing movements: as wrote Zeami (the great pioneer of No) movements of “no-action” are of great importance in the expressive vocabulary of a dancer.

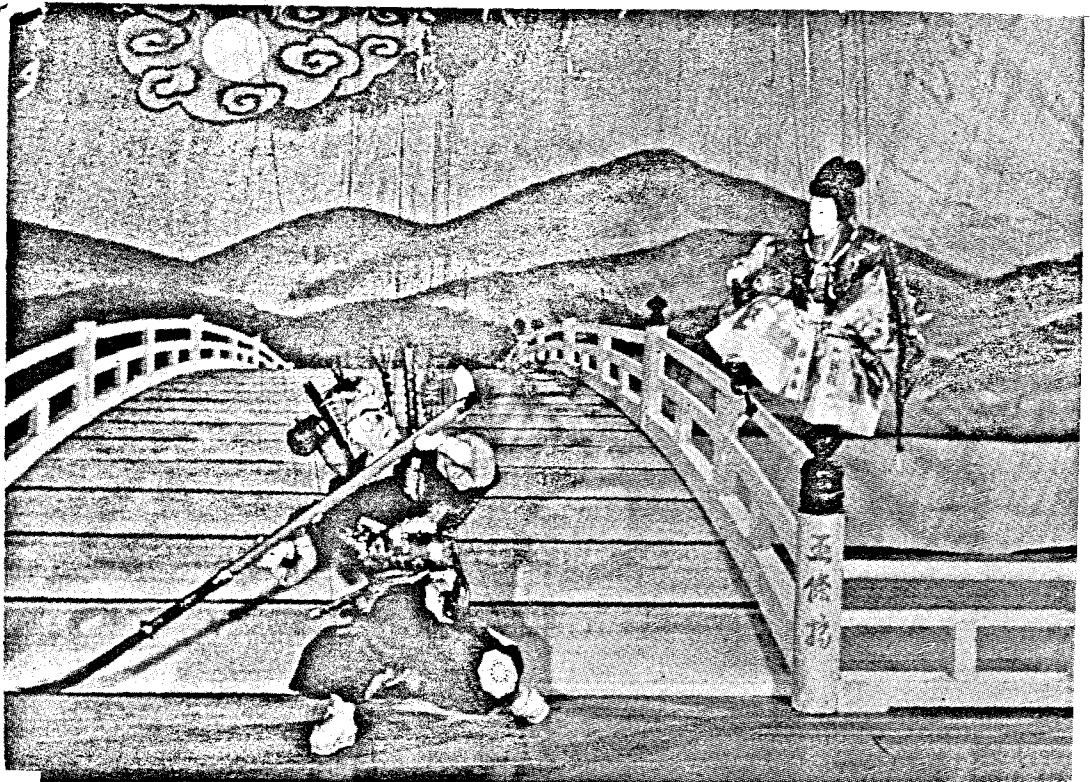


Shi Shi

The next item to be performed was *Shishi Mai*, the Dragon Dance. The shishi is an imaginary animal akin to both the lion and the dragon. The Shishi dance, originating in China, has been performed in the streets and in temple festivals in Japan for many centuries, and the marionette theatre has performed it for 200 years. The marionette version preserves the humour



Shi Shi Ma being manipulated by Kinosuke Takeda (Photos : Takeda Marionette Troupe)



Hashi Benkei

Oshi Chi : Takeda Puppet Theatre



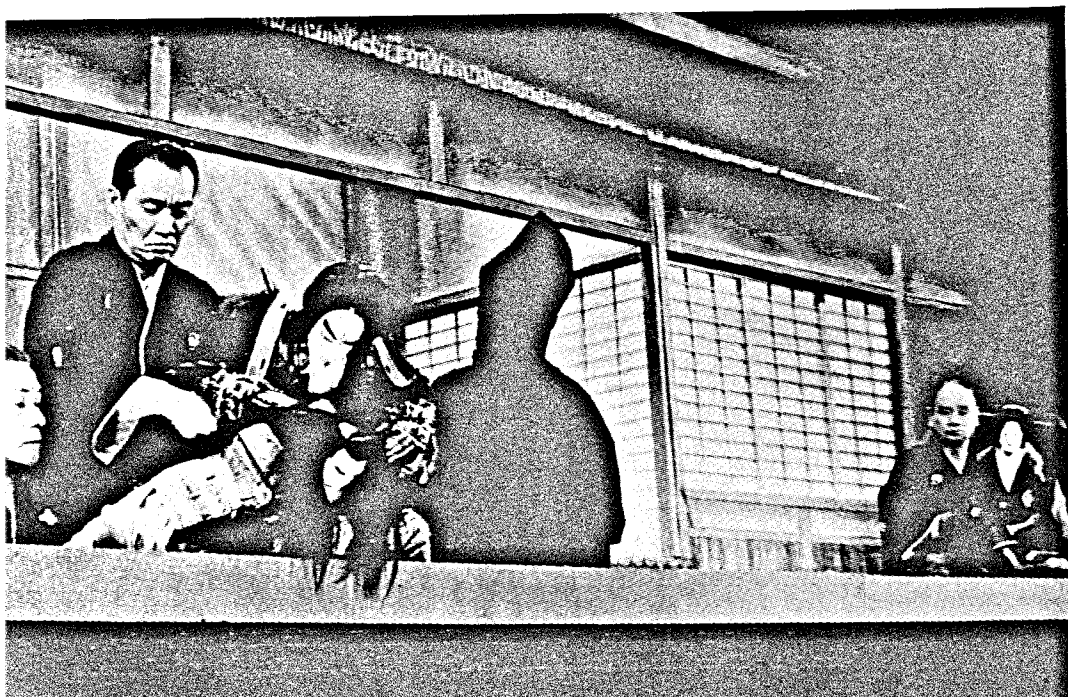


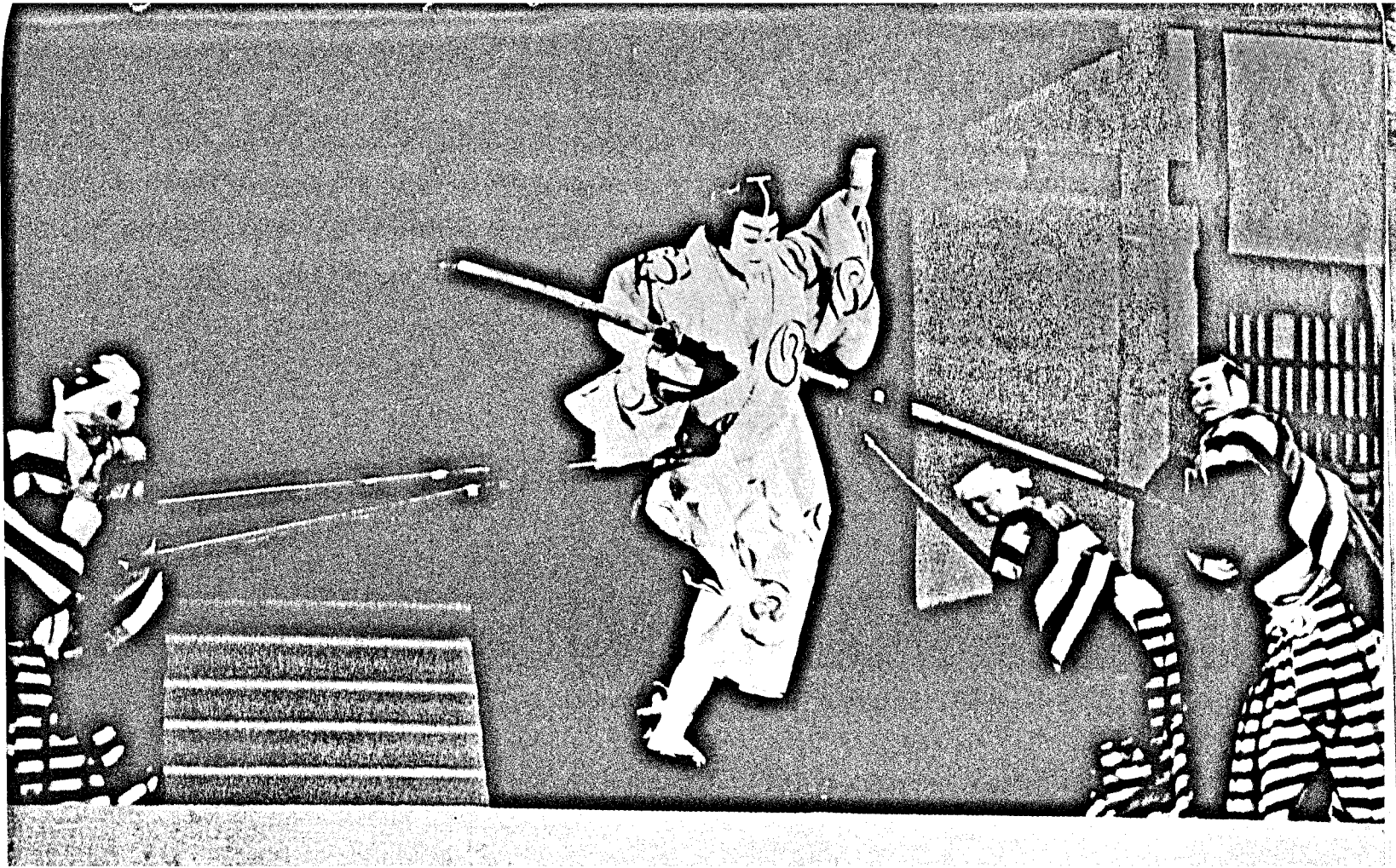
*Bunraku Puppet Theatre. "Shimpan Utazacmon" (The Triangular love).
Scene of the Showdown at Nozaki Village, Puppets (l to r) heroine, father and hero.*



"The Priest in Exile"

"The Exploits of The Shogun" Scene of Confrontation. Puppets (l to r), wounded Jujiro, father and mother.







One of the exiles climbs a rock to look out to sea. Master-puppeteer controls body and right

of the street version of *Shishi Mai*—in contrast to the relatively recent Kabuki version, which is more serious. The marionette *shishi* groomed its feet and other parts of its body just like a cat; then, when it began to dance, it made clear that—as in the street festivals—it was actually being manipulated by two men inside it. In fact the leg movements satirised those of a real animal. A further layer of humour was added by the fact that the two small puppets inside the *shishi* were rivals, peeping out at intervals to catch the attention of the spectators. The charm of this dance, with its complex relationship between human manipulators, puppet-manipulators and an imaginary animal, was very unusual and delightful.



Narrator and Shamisen player

One of the most striking characteristics of the Bunraku puppet theatre is the use of a narrator who sits on a special platform, along with his accompanist who plays the shamisen. The *tayu* (narrator) recites the story, adapting his voice to each character as he recites their lines, and acting with great animation. (In fact this *joruri* recitation was an established art-form before the Bunraku puppets were invented). In the marionette version of *Yaoya Oshichi* (*Oshichi the Grocer's Daughter*) a marionette reciter and shamisen player were presented at one side of the stage, thus establishing clear link with Bunraku. The skill of the marionette manipulators was breathtaking: the puppet-reciter moved his face and his arms with all the dramatic intensity characteristic of *joruri*, while the shamisen player was made to move his hands

in perfect rhythm with the music, so that the illusion was admirably maintained.

There were fascinating contrasts between the staging of *Yaoya Oshichi* by the marionette company and the Kabuki version of this dance-drama. The Kabuki version, derived from Bunraku, has a dancer representing Oshichi as a Bunraku puppet, making puppet-like dance movements, and with another dancer representing a Bunraku puppeteer seeming to manipulate the puppet-Oshichi.

In the marionette version the stage is necessarily much more shallow than in Kabuki, and we saw a high wall filling it from side to side, with a fire tower in the middle of it. The climax came when the marionette Oshichi attempted over and over again to climb up the ladder leading to the top of the drum tower, and kept falling back. Here the skill of the master puppeteer Sennosuke Takeda was made very clear, as it was in other passages of the puppet dance-dramas: each movement was perfectly controlled, and facial expressions were suggested by changes in the angle of the head. As in Bunraku, the puppet movements were just as perfect in their own way as their own was those of living performers, making clear why puppetry is treated as a major art of the theatre in Japan.



Back of a puppet in squatting position



The puppet when pulled up

The frame used by a Japanese marionettist to support the strings is rather different from that used in the West. There are several bars, hinged in the middle of the frame, which can be rocked from side to side. Rocking these bars produces balanced dance-postures of arms and feet, and are also used to turn the head. Far more strings are used than in the West, but the puppeteers manage to keep them from getting tangled and sometimes, for very complex movements, two puppeteers manipulate one puppet.

It is possible to trace Indian influence on the traditional theatre arts of Japan in the stamps which occur from time to time. The Japanese classical dancer (whether puppet or "live") does not strike the ground in a series of fast and complex rhythms, as in Indian classical dancing. The stamps are spaced out at intervals, as the climax of a phrase of movement; as in India, however, the foot-beats are exactly matched to the drumming. In the marionette performances it was fascinating to discover how the puppeteers matched the stamps precisely to the movements of the feet of the puppets by stamping with their own feet: since each puppeteer stood behind the figure he was manipulating, and since his own feet were screened from the audience,



Benkei at the Bridge

the illusion that the sound of the stamp was produced by the puppet was totally convincing.*

One of the most famous and popular of all the dance-pieces of Japanese puppets and Kabuki is *Hashi Benkei*, showing the duel at a bridge between the giant-sized and powerful warrior Benkei and the young and apparently delicate boy Ushiwaka. This story is based on real events of 1,000 years ago, when the Genji and Heike clans were battling for supremacy in Japan. At the time of the story of the events at the bridge, the Heike clan was in power, and Ushiwaka, one of the few children left in the Genji clan, was forced to flee for his life. At the bridge—a painted one on the marionette version, receding into the distance — Benkei stood, his body covered with ferocious weapons, making tough and violent movements. His weapon in the duel was a broad sword fixed to a pole — the Japanese equivalent of a halberd. Ushiwaka, in contrast, moved very elegantly, and countered the thrusts of the halberd with offhand skill, using only a fan. (He wore a small sword but did not draw it.) The whole of the long battle was beautifully choreographed, and the puppeteers brought out with great skill the sharp contrasts in the movements of the two puppets. Finally Ushiwaka stood over the prostrate Benkei in triumph, in a striking pose reminiscent of the *mie* which is so characteristic of Kabuki, and has been depicted so often in colour prints.

Especially skilful was the way the fighting movements were stylized and fitted to the music, so that in effect they became dance movements. This tradition of combining the martial arts and dancing, characteristic of many branches of the Japanese theatre, is also highly developed in the classical theatre of China, in the Kathakali dance-drama of India, and in the dance-dramas of a number of countries of South-East Asia where Indian influence is strong.

By a happy coincidence one of the main events of the Edinburgh International Festival a few months later was a season by Japan's great national Bunraku company. The Bunraku puppets are much larger than Japanese marionettes, being over half the size of a human being, and each important character is manipulated by three puppeteers, working together very closely as a team. The chief puppeteer — whose work is so skilled it demands thirty years of training — holds the body of the puppet and manipulates the head (including sometimes movements of the eyebrows, eyes and mouth) and also the right hand. The second puppeteer works the left hand of the puppet with the help of a metal fitting which enables him to stand back, out of the way of the chief puppeteer; his training by tradition lasts twenty

* A somewhat similar technique is used by the traditional marionettes of Rajasthan when their marionettes perform Kathak dancing. The marionettes have long skirts and no feet; the sound which would be produced by the feet of a Kathak dancer are produced by the puppeteers, and the spectator is made to imagine that these sounds come from the imaginary feet of the puppet dancers.

years. The third puppeteer (with at least ten years training) works the feet, kneeling on the ground and thus keeping out of the way of the other two puppeteers; since the feet of female characters are commonly hidden by the kimono, female puppets often have no feet, and the third puppeteer suggests their movement by judiciously spaced movements of the bottom of the kimono. The chief puppeteer wears high wooden-soled sandals which raise him about 6 inches above his colleagues and facilitate interaction with them. All three puppeteers are constantly visible, but they move with such concentration on the puppet they are manipulating that the puppet seems to dominate them. This effect is so enchanting, and so true to the aesthetic traditions of all branches of theatre in the Far East, that I found it very enjoyable — when this company first visited Britain — that the chief puppeteer wore bright clothes and left his face clearly visible. In Edinburgh last summer, all three puppeteers working each important puppet wore black for the whole evening, with black gauze over their faces much of the time so that their presence would be as unobtrusive as possible; but I was glad that for certain scenes the chief puppeteers removed the gauze from their faces, so that it was possible to relish the devotional intensity with which they identified themselves with the puppets. So far from distracting attention from the puppet, the clearly visible faces of the master puppeteers, gazing so intently at the puppet, made the puppet seem even more convincingly alive.

The Bunraku company was much larger than the marionette company: in Japan it has about 70 members, and the Edinburgh programme listed 4 joruri reciters, 5 shamisen players, 15 puppet manipulators and 2 percussionists. The percussionists work the wooden clappers which announce the beginning of a piece as well as emphasising important moments, and produce essential sound effects; unlike the reciter and shamisen player, they are not visible to the audience. The strain on the reciter is so great that it is customary to change both him and his accompanist from time to time. In Japan the musicians sit on a special round stage at the side of the puppet stage; when a change of musicians is called for, this stage rotates, and other musicians are brought to the front. It was not possible to construct such a stage at Lyceum Theatre at Edinburgh; fortunately this theatre has boxes close to the stage, and the musicians were able to use this box. With characteristically Japanese flair for achieving perfection in every tiny detail of presentation, the reciter put a cylindrical-weighted pillow behind his back so as to keep his complicated robes in order, no matter how passionate his gestures.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Bunraku is that the puppets do not walk or dance on a solid stage: in fact they move so to speak "on air", thus making it possible for the puppeteers to crowd around them, without getting in each other's way. The illusion that the puppets have their feet on the ground is created by very ingenious use of masking: the audience sits on a level below the puppets, and strips of wood cross over the stage at a low level. The manipulators of the feet of the puppets adjust their movements

very precisely so that the puppet-feet line up with the top of the strips of wood, and the illusion of moving on a solid surface is perfectly preserved.

In Edinburgh, however the Lyceum theatre has a high proportion of its seats above the level of the stage: in the grand circle, the upper circle and the balcony. I was given seats in the grand circle for the opening performances, and found that the movements of the puppets, seen from this position, were almost meaningless. Ideally, the theatre management should have sold only the seats in the stalls; but this would have been financially disastrous.

Each of the two programmes included two pieces — one each of the two genres of Bunraku as codified by Chikamatsu, *jidai-mono* (period pieces, concerned with an epic story from the distant past) and *sewa-mono* (pieces concerned with contemporary life — contemporary in this instance referring to periods between the origin of Bunraku in the 17th century up to the time when the feudal period ended in Japan after this country was opened up to the rest of the world in the 19th century).

By far the greatest pioneer and playwright of Bunraku was Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724). His pieces are still crucially important in the puppet repertoire, as they are in the Kabuki repertoire, and two of his pieces were included in the opening Bunraku programme.

Heike Nyogonoshima (The Priest in Exile) is concerned with three men exiled to a remote and desolate island for conspiring against the ruling Heike clan. Their leader is the priest Shunkan — a stern old man who is at the centre of the action. He has a splendid, square-cut face with large expressive eyes; after a ship arrives with a pardon for the exiles, he suffers torments of sadness when he realizes that he is not included in the amnesty. There are scenes of violent action when he wounds and then kills the contemptuous messenger Seno, and his despair when the ship moves away from the island, leaving him behind, is beautifully done.

Chikamatsu was clearly fascinated with stories of double suicides — a long-established Japanese custom, the suicide being committed by two lovers who can see no way out from their hopeless situation — and he wrote a number of *sewa-mono* pieces using this theme. *Sonezaki Shinu* (The Double Suicide at Sonnezaki) was written by Chikamatsu and produced with such speed that it reached the stage in Osaka on 7th May 1703, only a month after the events which inspired it — the double suicide of the shop clerk Tokubei and the courtesan Ohatsu. Chikamatsu, as was his habit, wrote the piece at considerable length, in five acts, but the version performed by the Bunraku Theatre was skilfully condensed into three scenes by Shoichi Yamada for the tour by the company. (This problem of condensation is one which almost all classical theatrical troupes from the East must face when performing in the West.)

The style of this piece, was more intimate than the *jidai-mono* piece, but in its own way it was no less effective. There was a pathetic scene in which Tokubei, seeking to recover money he had lent to the arrogant Kuheiji in order that he could secure the freedom of his beloved Ohatsu, attacked Kuheiji but was beaten up, and this was followed by another pathetic scene in which Ohatsu hid her lover under her kimono while awaiting a guest in the tea-house. It is interesting that in feudal Japan, as in India in the great days of the Sanskrit drama, the courtesan was treated with great respect, and was often the heroine of dramatic pieces.

Changes of scenery are very important in the Japanese puppet theatre, just as they are in Kabuki, and the final scene was placed in the woods. There Tokubei drew his sword and killed first Ohatsu and then himself: a very satisfying ending for Japanese audiences to whom the idea of a double suicide is familiar, even though the suicide rate in Japan is no higher than in many Western countries.

The second programme at Edinburgh showed two pieces written by dramatists who followed the lead given by the great Chikamatsu. The first (*Ehon Taikoki*) was in epic style, but was based on events in the period immediately preceding the one in which the play was written; for this reason the name of the man who was to become the shogun (the real ruler of Japan, at a time when the Emperor had no effective power) was changed from Hideyoshi to Hisayoshi.

The battle scenes, involving the heroic characters Harunaga and Hisayoshi and the villainous Mitsuhide, were performed with great skill and gusto, as in Kabuki pieces. When Harunaga was attacked by four rebels armed with spears, only one puppeteer manipulated each rebel and his spear, while at the centre of the rebels the shogun Harunaga — armed with a sword — was manipulated by the full complement of three puppeteers, and made far more complex movements.

All three of the main characters performed solo dances from time to time in which they expressed their feelings, supported by appropriate recitation by the *tayu* and playing on the shamisen. Here one could see clear links with the much older traditions of No, in which the whole action is devised in such a way as to lead up to a long dance by the principal artist, which forms the climax of the piece.

The main action of *Ehon Taikoki* was shown in the complex third scene — a scene so long and concentrated that a change of *tayu* and shamisen player was considered necessary in the middle of it. This gave audiences a chance of hearing and seeing the art of the great *tayu* Tsudaya Tamemoto, who has been honoured in Japan with the title "Living National Treasure". This scene

included a pathetic episode, near the end, when Jujiro, seriously wounded in battle, struggled on stage to report to his father Mitsuhide that his forces had been crushingly defeated. The scene ended with the reappearance of Hisayoshi in full battle attire, ready for the crucial battle which would decide who was to be the next shogan—himself or Mitsuhide.

The contrast between the faces of the powerful, mature and wicked Mitsuhide and his son Jujiro showed very clearly how well the art of sculpting the Bunraku puppets has been preserved through the centuries. At present there is one surviving master-artist in this field, and this makes it possible for the company to maintain the same high standards in its puppets as in the other branches of Bunraku — puppet manipulation, joruri recitation and shamisen playing.

The theatre arts of Japan often deal with themes concerned with the conflict between duty and feeling, and a good example of this was displayed in a scene at Nozaki village — the childhood home of the hero — in the domestic piece *Shimpan Utazaimon* (The Triangular Love). His return to his home cause preparations to begin for his wedding to Omitsu, to whom he had been betrothed as a child. But he had fallen in love with the beautiful Osome, daughter of his employer in Osaka: hence the triangle referred to in the title of the piece.

One of the most delightful scenes showed Omitsu very carefully combing her hair in preparation for her wedding. This called to mind numerous scenes in Indian classical dancing in which the *nayika* dresses her hair and puts on her make-up and jewels in preparation for the arrival of her beloved. It also brought to mind a scene in a puppet-play staged by the great Russian puppeteer Sergei Obraztsov, *Two to One Against Us*. Obraztsov has developed his own technique of puppetry in which several puppeteers manipulate one puppet, as in Bunraku; the Russian puppeteers remain invisible, but achieve a degree of control and collaboration comparable to that of the Bunraku puppeteers, working their puppets by rods from underneath. In this particular scene a young man, in hospital, became greatly excited because the girl with whom he had fallen in love was going to visit him: he therefore determined to shave himself, and the deftness of the puppeteers in making the puppet handle the razor was a marvel to see.

Since the Bunraku puppets are smaller than a human being, the puppeteers normally keep their own hands out of sight, hidden by the long sleeves, and manipulate the jointed puppet-hands. But when a Bunraku puppet has to grasp something — a fan in a dance episode, a sword in a fight, a comb in a scene of hair-dressing — then the master-puppeteer uses his own hand to grasp the rope. At such times one can see two hands simultaneously — the puppet-hand and the much larger hand of the puppeteer. But this is quite in

harmony with Japanese aesthetic ideas, and is easy to accept — like the visible faces of the master puppeteers, the black-clad stage hands of Kabuki, and the actual chins of No performers which sometimes may be seen below the chin of the No mask.