

The December issue of *The Japan Society Review* closes a wonderful year of publications, films, performances and events which have brought Japanese culture, arts and history to a UK audience. In 2017, the *Review* has featured over 30, from the latest anime hits to academic books and stage plays, combining familiar topics with new approaches and authors. Some additional reviews appear online only on our website. All this has been possible only thanks to our enthusiastic reviewers who have always managed to transmit their knowledge and passion about Japan in their articles. This issue is especially dedicated to them with our most sincere gratitude.

In this issue, Sir Hugh Cortazzi reviews *The Art of Shiguchi*, which focuses on Japanese art and architecture exploring the beauty and craftsmanship of the traditional methods of construction, in particular the joins or *shiguchi* which keep together the pillars and the beams of old Japanese farm houses. Next, Trevor Skingle reviews Shimazaki Satoko's academic work *Edo Kabuki in Transition* in which she examines the developments and changes in kabuki theatre taking as a case study one of its most famous plays, *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan*.

Japanese literature is also represented in this issue with the latest translations of books by celebrated Japanese authors

such as Abe Kobo and Murakami Ryu and with the debut novel of British writer James Buckler. Abe's short novel *Beasts Head for Home*, reviewed by David Boyd, is set in war-torn Manchuria after the collapse of the Japanese Empire, where a teenage male protagonist looks for his identity in the new post-war reality. *69* by Murakami Ryu, reviewed by Beau Waycott, focuses on Japanese counter-culture in the titular year seen through the eyes of a seventeen year old living in rural Japan. Finally, *Last Stop Tokyo* by James Buckler is a thriller set in contemporary Tokyo in which an English teacher is drawn into increasingly complex and ultimately dangerous circumstances around commercial art galleries.

Our December issue concludes with a review by Alex Rees of Katsura Sunshine's *rakugo* show which ran for two weeks this autumn at the Leicester Square Theatre in London's West End.

Thank you for joining us this year to discover the latest Japan-related writings and productions available in the UK. We look forward to having your company again in 2018 and, in the meantime, wish all our readers a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Contents

- 1) *The Art of Shiguchi. Japanese Joinery on Display* by Takishita Yoshihiro
- 2) *Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost* by Shimazaki Satoko
- 3) *Beasts Head for Home* by Abe Kobo
- 4) *69* by Murakami Ryu
- 5) *Last Stop Tokyo* by James Buckler
- 6) *Rakugo* performed by Katsura Sunshine

Editor

Alejandra Armendáriz-Hernández

Reviewers

David Boyd, Sir Hugh Cortazzi, Alex Rees, Trevor Skingle and Beau Waycott.

Image from *The Art of Shiguchi. Joinery on Display*

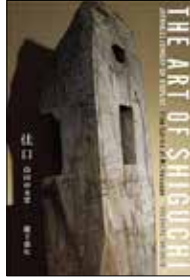
The Art of Shiguchi. Japanese Joinery on Display

by Takishita Yoshihiro

Shiguchi-do (2017)

(parallel Japanese and English text)

Review by Sir Hugh Cortazzi



the pillars and beams needed sturdy and carefully worked joins or *shiguchi* which had been 'carved out by carpenters in total devotion to their craft... *Shiguchi* are manifestations of the carpenters' souls'.

Kamakura, the capital of the Minamoto Shoguns in the late 12th, 13th and early 14th century should be on the itinerary of any serious visitor to Japan (*Exploring Kamakura* by Michael Cooper, first published 1979 is an excellent little guide). There is so much to see, not least the temples of Engakuji and Kenchoji, the Hachimangu and the Daibutsu. Some tireless walkers may amuse themselves by walking up to Zeni-arai Benten shrine where they can wash their money in the hope that it will multiply. The intrepid will continue up to the shrine on Genjiyama and follow the road along the ridge where on a clear day there is a fine view towards the Izu peninsula and Mt Fuji. The discerning traveller will notice on the hill a small group of wooden buildings which, if he has visited some of the mountains of central Japan, he will recognize as former farm houses built in the *gassho-zukuri* style. This complex includes the 'House of Antiques' belonging to Takishita Yoshihiro, the author of this fascinating book.

Takishita Yoshihiro is a man of many talents and skills. He has much knowledge of the arts of Japan and exquisite taste. He is also a master craftsman and builder having over many years saved many old farmhouses from the scrap heap and rebuilt them in other parts of Japan and places abroad as far away as the Argentine. He is happy to show the discerning visitor who makes an appointment in advance some of his treasures.

In the course of his reconstruction of old Japanese farm houses he was struck by the beauty and craftsmanship of the traditional methods of construction, in particular the way in which heavy wooden beams were slotted into one another. Nowadays with modern machinery, steel and concrete structures we take so much for granted.

Takishita relates in an introductory essay that his favourite *minka* (*min* = people, *ka* = house) was of the *gassho-zukuri* type found in area of Mt Hakusan, where the winter snows are heavy, and which were built two or three hundred years ago. The process of lowering the truss to the ground caused him 'many thrilling moments as hundreds of years of history are brought to light from the accumulation of generations of dust'. He realized that to be strong and long lasting



'A White Pheasant' (Yoshihiro 2017, pp. 84-85)



'Shinto Priest' (Yoshihiro 2017, pp. 52-53)

Of course the *shiguchi* are not visible to the inhabitants of reconstructed *minka*, but Takishia was loath to discard them and kept some of the more interesting examples in his store room. He saw them as 'the offspring of nature and necessity... the embodiments of construction, function, practicality and rationality... brought to life through the blessings of wood, man's most precious natural resource'.

This book, in addition to illustrations of some of the *shiguchi* Takishita-san has kept in his store room, contains essays by experts and connoisseurs including 'The Power of the Shiguchi' by Peter Grilli, 'Hidden beauty: Art in the the Craft of the *Shiguchi*' by

Edward R. Bosley, 'Shiguchi: The Essence of Wooden Architecture' by Hiroshi Naito and 'Shiguchi and a Sculptor' by Naoko Kumasaka. Takishita Yoshihiro has written about 'The Tree Sprits of Mount Hakusan'.

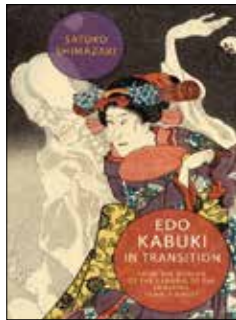
The book also includes illustrations of the carpenters' tools used by the traditional craftsmen who fashioned these joints. This section reminded me that once many years ago I had visited a carpentry museum in Kobe which underlined to me the importance of the joiner's craft in a land where in the past all buildings were of wood and where some of the oldest wooden buildings in the world are still preserved e.g. in Nara. §

Edo Kabuki in Transition: From the Worlds of the Samurai to the Vengeful Female Ghost

by Shimazaki Satoko

Columbia University Press (2015)
ISBN-13: 978-0231172264

Review by Trevor Skingle



Quite obviously a long time in the writing, Assistant Professor of Japanese Literature and Theatre at the University of Southern California, Shimazaki Satoko's seminal work focuses on the developments and changes in kabuki since the 1825 premiere of Tsuruya Nanboku IV's play *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (The Ghost Stories at Yotsuya on the Tokaido). She uses that play and its premiere as a starting point and, contrary to what is said, as a pivotal point in the history of kabuki. Importantly though the author does provide an enlightening contextual exegesis as to the important difference between the two in the development of kabuki plays and their performance.

An early assertion that generally used English translations of the titles of plays would be used is contradicted by the author's translation of the play's title into English as 'The Eastern Seaboard Highway Ghost Stories at Yotsuya'. This departs somewhat from the internationally used English title 'The Ghost Story of Yotsuya', though this is used subsequently throughout the rest of the book. The reason why the first translation is initially used is not explained and, though this may seem a petty point to highlight in light of the academic rigour of the book, an explanation might have been helpful.

Further on in the Introduction the author proposes her two main issues that inform the rest of the book. That kabuki can be perceived in two ways depending on whether the viewpoint is that of historical Edo or modern Japan. The first is that kabuki performances were part of a traditional and community based interactive dynamic and creative social process (*dento*), the 'ephemera' of which have since been overshadowed and replaced by the modern. This second one is a more static interpretation which revolves around the text bound handing on and use of scripts as they are (*densho*). As a result of this, kabuki 'ephemera' have generally been lost to the world of modern kabuki. This isn't very controversial, and it's a theory that's not particularly borne out by modern evidence of the continued interaction between theatre and audience, including ad hoc changes to the scripts witnessed during around sixty performances over a period of thirty years, and the interaction between fans and actors, and fans and the actors' staff managers or *banto san*, albeit these days no doubt to a lesser degree.

She also argues that the historical samurai based worlds, or *sekai*, that formed the basis for kabuki in the past, were gradually replaced around the time of Nanboku by the notion of the female ghost and its associations with the intensely emotional feminine states of jealousy, resentment and desire. The main part of the book expands on and elucidates the theories expounded in the Introduction occasionally wandering again into the over romanticised. For instance it is also suggested that the communal theatre space was a liminal threshold, a space linked to the realm of other and that this was suggested by the name of the space under the stage and *hanamichi* walkway through the audience (*naraku* meaning hell). This idea comes

across as something of a romantic overstatement. Quite simply put, in the way of Japanese sharé or word puns, the reason for this was because it was so dark and dingy it reminded people of the underworld.

The issue of liminality of theatre space is again brought up in regard to the theatres use of and proximity to riverbanks as a utopian symbol. Yet no mention is made of the other extreme, the generally accepted historical use of the term *kawara-kojiki* (or river bank beggars) to refer pejoratively to Edo era kabuki actors, and riverbanks as places of implicitly dubious entertainment.

The list of subject areas covered in the book is extensive and these are just a few of the early examples. A critique of the proposed theories would fill enough space to make another book, but then perhaps the intention is for the narrative to be provocative. Suffice to say that this book does not make easy reading, its academic distinctiveness leaping from the page. Early on it wanders into academic jargon when the reader would do well to keep a dictionary to hand, ironically not for the Japanese terms but for the thesis style English.

Many associations in the book are over romanticised in a predominantly academic way, theories squeezed to fit the author's ideas, which can occasionally be quite frustrating. The book works best when it relates historical facts to support the arguments about the development of kabuki from the twin perspectives highlighted previously; *dentō* and *denshō*. It works least when it wanders off into academic text-babble musings. There is an extremely useful and informative notes section which for a book such as this is always advantageous.

On the whole, the book is a fascinating mix of the informative and is scattered throughout with some obscure historical eyebrow raising facts, and the author's weighty theoretical narrative, a daunting adventure for whoever dares to enter, and a steep learning curve for the uninitiated. Not for the general reader, which is ironic considering that kabuki was created for the plebeian sections of Japanese society and at nearly £50 a considered purchase rather than an impulse buy. §

Beasts Head for Home

by Abe Kobo

translated by Richard F. Calichman

Columbia University Press (2017)
ISBN-13: 978-0231177054

Review by David Boyd



Abe Kobo (1924-1993) often set his stories in worlds without names or history. Yet, as translator Richard F. Calichman notes, *Beasts Head for Home* (1957; trans. 2017) makes fuller use of its setting than most of the writer's work. The short novel takes place in war-torn Manchuria a couple of years after the collapse of the Japanese Empire – a significant moment for Abe, who grew up in Mukden (present-day Shenyang).

Kuki Kyuzo, the story's teenage male protagonist, is still in Manchuria, despite the fact that the vast majority of Japanese settlers have already been repatriated. At the outset of the novel, he's living among a group of Soviet officers, but soon escapes, bringing only a few stolen necessities: food, matches, vodka.

Kyuzo heads for Japan, a homeland he's never known.

Everything he's learned about Japan – 'a smiling island of green surrounded by the sea, where the wind

was gentle, birds sang, and fish swam' – came from 'textbooks at school'.

The path from Manchuria to Japan is treacherous, and survival is far from guaranteed. Every step forward presents another mortal danger, be it natural, animal or human. Kyuzo's only company for most of the journey is a stranger whose name and identity are constantly in flux. At various stages in the story, the inscrutable character attempts to pass as Chinese, Korean and Japanese. He even tries passing as Kyuzo.

While the two continue their hellish trek together, Kyuzo cannot completely trust the nameless man (I will call him 'Ko', one of his aliases). For his part, Ko trusts no one. As he sees it, the wilderness they are attempting to cross is extremely 'dangerous' because of its betweenness:

'We're still at the border between friend and enemy. When all is said and done, I think the most dangerous thing is a border. They're more dangerous than being in the midst of enemies... The next town is Shuanggang. That's also on the border. The towns after that, Kaitong, Bianzhao, Tanyu, Taipingchuan, as well as the towns thereafter, are all on the border. In times such as these, the border definitely expands'.

Yet Ko himself is no less dangerous than the surrounding wilderness. He is a border in human form, committed to a given identity only to the extent that

it furthers his chances of survival. For the callow Kyuzo, on the other hand, national identity is an immutable reality. With time, however, Kyuzo begins to see 'Japan' differently.

After leaving the Soviet camp, Kyuzo crosses paths with several people who read or speak Japanese fluently. In each instance, he asks expectantly: 'Are you Japanese?' Invariably, the answer is 'No'. Near the end of his journey, Kyuzo finally finds himself in Japanese company, but this ethnic community is not the one promised in his textbooks. As he comes closer to Japan

than ever before, Kyuzo begins to let go of his dreams of Japan:

'Perhaps Japan doesn't exist anywhere. With every step I take, the wasteland walks together with me. Japan just flees further away...'

While this early work differs from Abe's better-known novels in some significant ways, *Beasts Head for Home* is unmistakably his. Calichman's masterful translation is recommended reading for the uninitiated reader and diehard Abe fan alike. §

69

by Murakami Ryu

translated by Ralph McCarthy

Pushkin Press (2013)

ISBN-13: 978-1908968463

Review by Beau Waycott



For many -myself included-, the introduction to Japanese literature comes in the form of Murakami Haruki's *Norwegian Wood*, which seems to now epitomise the idea of contemporary Japanese prose (arguably mistakenly, given its distinctively American influences). Those wishing to delve further into Murakami often turn to novels such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore*. However, this poses a dilemma for readers disengaged by the magical realism and surrealism that permeates (or, if not, dominates) the rest of Murakami's works. Strangely, the novel that comes closest to *Norwegian Wood* is written by another distinctly separate Murakami - Murakami Ryu and his work *69*.

Both *69* and *Norwegian Wood* share the theme of *Bildungsroman* throughout their respective plots, but Murakami Ryu's *69* is far more focused on the counter-culture seen throughout rural Japan in the titular year, with the seventeen year old protagonist, Yazaki Kensuke, aiming to win popularity and impress his female contemporaries with voguish -but never particularly individual- anti-authoritarian and pro-Western views. The differences lie with the two novels' protagonists; whilst Kensuke is superficial and desperately provincial, *Norwegian Wood*'s Watanabe Toru is intellectual and slightly more anonymised by his urban setting.

Told through an extended period of analepsis, *69* introduces us to Kensuke -now in his early thirties- reflecting on his formative years in a rural town,

Sasebo, consisting primarily of misunderstanding (and thoroughly patriotic) adults, sailors from the nearby US navy base and his scholarly contemporaries, all of whom are either deeply insipid or deeply attractive to Kensuke. Whilst in Tokyo's numerous universities there is a movement of common love, leftism and the ever-playing rolls jazz music, not quite so much in Sasebo. Ken firstly barricades the school, bringing him a certain local fame, which even the most superficial of readings make clear Ken (perhaps even in his thirty year old self) wallows in with absolute pride. This leads him to host a cultural celebration of film, art and music, planning with no knowledge and the money of various expendable friends, whom provide the logistics to Ken's epic visions.

69 really is an enjoyable read. Written with a relaxed and hugely entertaining register, Murakami deftly illustrates that adolescence is most certainly a matter of adult literature when executed with a believable, and fundamentally relatable, protagonist. Whilst Ken is sardonic and truly shallow, he represents two distinct parts of all of us: the overtly cynical and the hopelessly romantic, without patronising us. Although Murakami does rely heavily on archetypes, they are employed successfully, managing to convince the reader of Ken's characterisation, with his friends also being presented adroitly.

The brevity of physical descriptions also works impressively to convey Ken's genuine distaste, the most memorable the description of a chicken farmer looking 'exactly as you'd expect a chicken farmer to look.' Murakami's more famous works of prose are entangled with nihilism, gratuitous violence and near-parasitic characters, but *69* is a fast paced and light hearted text that balances both the innocent and the political through logical description, juxtaposition and -at times- toilet humour.

But what does Murakami really want us to achieve with reading his novel? In spite of the fact he has described the work as a *Roman à clef*, he does appear to make undisguised criticisms of the student revolutionary movement of the late sixties, showing many to be concerned with need either to fill their ego or fill their wallets. Perhaps Murakami wants to persuade us to not lament the inadequacies of modern living in specious groups and via power-hungry leaders, but instead tackle such issues head-on.

Despite its first publication in 1987, *69* does touch on some issues close to home for all today; the deep longing of Ken's to escape his communities

conservatism might encapsulate many young pro-Europeans; the rejection of societal norms to seek tangible change can link clearly with the rise of populist figures in world politics.

I would recommend *69* firstly to any adolescent to show the ordinariness of what seem the most extraordinary feelings, but also to any adult who remembers their juvenescence and is unhappy with the world today. This is the kind of novel that, yes, is easily forgettable, but will provide enough of a stimulus to mourn the inevitable death that everyone's youth will one day reach. [S](#)

Last Stop Tokyo

by James Buckler

Doubleday (2017)

ISBN-13: 978-0857524973

Review by Trevor Skingle



James Buckler's debut novel *Last Stop Tokyo* follows Alex Malloy who escapes to Japan to get away from the disgrace that he feels as a result of a deeply traumatic family incident involving his outwardly respectable brother over which he tries to exert some control with tragic consequences. He gets a job in Tokyo teaching English and, as a result of his naiveté and his initially trusting nature, finds himself through his relationship with his girlfriend, the perplexing, manipulative and self-serving Naoko Yamamoto. Alex ends up being drawn deeper and deeper into increasingly complex, difficult and ultimately dangerous and deadly circumstances, which seem to revolve – to a greater and lesser degree throughout the book – around the commercial art gallery sector.

The two main characters, Alex and Naoko, are quite rightfully well-developed though it was difficult to imagine two of the other key characters, Jun the Yakuza henchman and Megumi the twisted psychopathic gallery associate of Naoko, as multi-faceted and three dimensional. They deserved much more character development as did other seemingly pivotal figures in the plot such as Alex's friend Hiro, the Police Officers Inspector Saito and his assistant Officer Tomada, and Alex's parents, especially his mother.

Occasionally Japanese phrases are included but not translated, and there is a visit to the popular Tokyo resort town of Karuizawa which is accompanied with only a superficial description of the resort, an approach

which is also applied to other locations. It would have improved the story somewhat had brief translations of the phrases been provided and more intimate location descriptions been included for fans of this oeuvre who perhaps haven't visited Japan and aren't familiar with the country and the language – a lesson which could perhaps have been learnt from the insightful style of writing in translation in the anthology *Tokyo Stories: A Literary Stroll* (University of California Press, 2002).

Though a violent thriller, the lack of serious menace of the first two thirds of the story is made up for by the twists and turns in the main plot which holds together numerous inter-related sub plots which fortunately don't become so complex that it is difficult for the reader to follow the general tenor of the main story. The flashbacks to the circumstances surrounding Alex's escape from his family situation back home are handled well as is that of his seemingly inescapable descent into the seedy underbelly of the world of the criminal fraternity in Japan. Some of the unexpected plot twists do leave the reader trying to second guess what to expect, the hallmark of a reasonably good thriller.

Though Buckler's debut novel takes a while to pick up the pace when it does it makes for an interesting if not gripping read. Quite where it fits into the genre's output isn't clear; not the in the same easy reading category as Fran Pickering's Josie Clark sleuth thrillers (*The Tokyo Karaoke Murder, The Cherry Blossom Murder, The Haiku Murder, The Bullet Train Murder*) but also not in the same deeply disturbing category as Natsuo Kirino's innovatively gruesome intrigues (*Out, Grottesque, Real World*). Perhaps somewhere in the middle. Not particularly a 'can't put it down' but more of a 'savour it at regular intervals' book.

In a predominantly crimeless Japan it is interesting that crime novels have become such a popular read yet it doesn't quite feel like Buckler has managed to get under the skin of the Japanese and the Yakuza, and captured the way that they interact with each other and, potentially, with foreigners in the way that other writers of thrillers located in Japan, especially native Japanese authors, do so well. Consequently, though Buckler obviously knows Japan having worked there as a teacher (1), as a debut thriller it feels a little clichéd and as such could really have been located in any major city in the world. This is not the Tokyo that most seasoned visitors and foreign residents know and love.. This is a Tokyo of the imagination, a darker shade of a somewhat brighter city that the reader should only take seriously for the purposes of Buckler's story.

In summary as his debut novel *Last Stop Tokyo* could be regarded with some leeway as a 'bedding

in' publication by a novice author, something which isn't limited to Buckler; there having been some pretty dismal attempts at English language serial crime novels located in Japan that leave an awful lot to be desired. However that being said what definitely does come across is that there is a glimmer with *Last Stop Tokyo* of future promise and that with further work on character and plot development, a little stylistic tweaking and a tighter plot line that future novels in this genre by Buckler will hit much closer to the target.

(1) James Buckler grew up in the South West of England and currently lives in London. He spent some time as an English teacher in Japan. He studied film at the University of Westminster and worked in film and TV for many years, most notably as a post-production specialist for MTV and BBC Films. §

Rakugo

performed by Katsura Sunshine

Leicester Square Theatre, London
(30 September to 15 October 2017)

Review by Alex Rees



Rakugo (落語, meaning "fallen words") is one of the Japanese performance traditions we are fortunate enough to experience today, as a result of an unbroken chain of teaching that stretches back at least to the 18th century. Equipped with only a fan (*sensu*) and a hand towel (*tenugui*) for props, and kneeling on a pillow for the entire performance, the lone *rakugoka* monologues comedic stories, tales, and anecdotes to their audience. These stories often require the performer to play several characters at once, which they differentiate through tone of voice, gesture, and changes in the angle of the head. The limitations placed on the performer and vast repertoires of stories that have to be memorised necessitate years of training in a traditional master-apprentice relationship. There are two recognised traditions of professional *rakugo* that train in this way: the "Edo" school of Tokyo, and the "Kamigata" school of Osaka.

Mr Katsura Sunshine is the first non-Japanese practitioner of the latter, only the second non-Japanese to be trained in either school, and the only living, professional, non-Japanese *rakugoka*. Following

his early successes in theatre in his native Canada, he moved to Japan and completed a full Kamigata apprenticeship under master and TV presenter Katsura Bunkyo VI, who awarded Katsura Sunshine his stage name as per *rakugo* tradition. Mr Sunshine has been performing *rakugo* worldwide ever since, in English and in Japanese, and across 4 continents.

For those unfamiliar with *rakugo*, "traditional minimalist one-man storytelling from Japan" may sound like a daunting choice of entertainment. This becomes even more confusing if you try to apply whatever image this conjures to Katsura Sunshine; a broad-faced and beaming westerner with spiky, buttercup blonde hair, dressed in a traditional kimono that he wears so comfortably it looks like he was born in it, and armed with a name that seems almost deliberately esoteric. However, everything clicks into place when you see him perform. Sunshine is not just an excellent storyteller, he's also adroitly aware of how he straddles the cultural divide. By using this to his advantage he makes a unique performance that can be enjoyed by connoisseurs and newcomers alike.

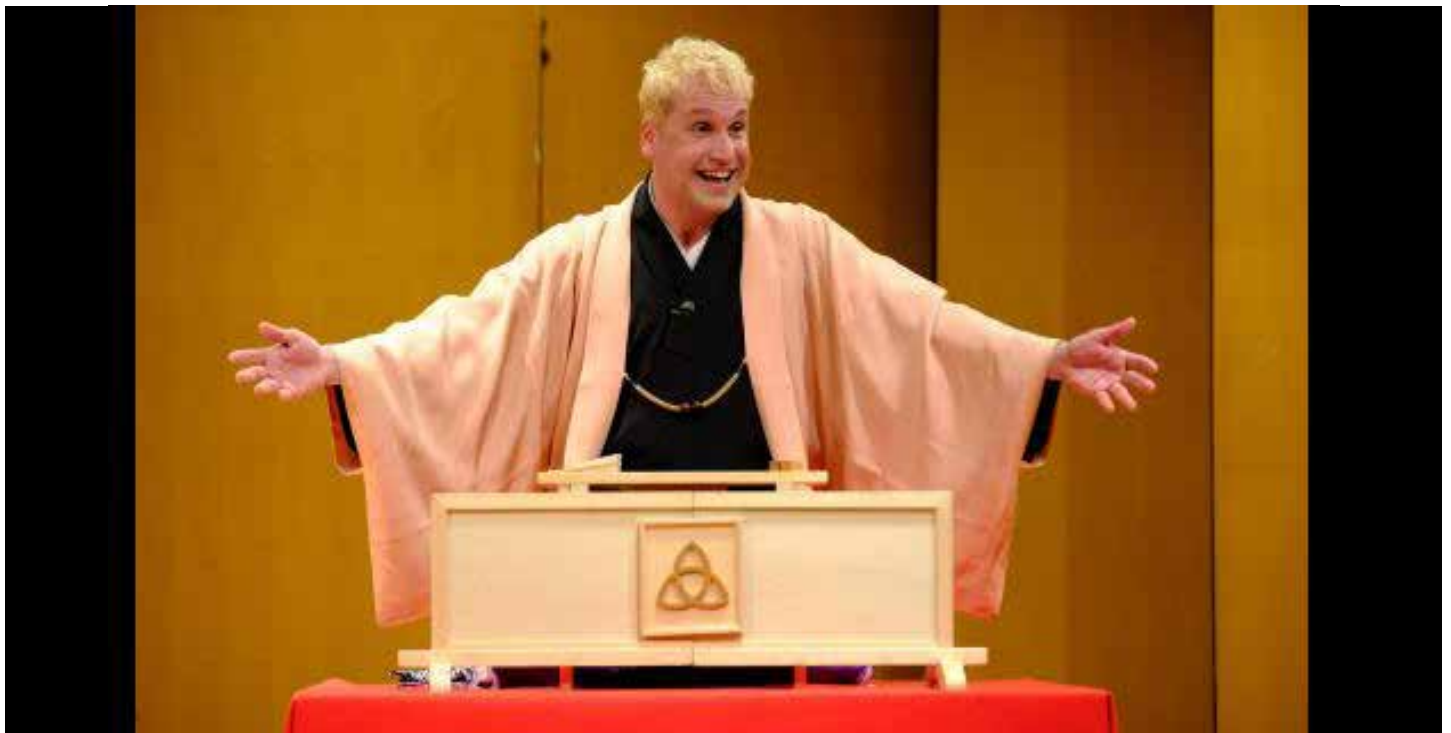
The meat of his performance lies in his renditions of classic *rakugo* tales; witty stories that build up your expectations with elaborate set-up before paying off with a laugh-out-loud punchline (several punchlines, if you're lucky). On the night I attended we were treated to three of the more "traditional" *rakugo* stories. The first was *Jugemu*, a shaggy-dog story about a boy with a very long name; a name which Sunshine ably rattled off several times to increasingly impressed applause.

Later came *Momotaro*, a Princess Bride style telling of a Japanese father recounting the folktale *Momotaro* to his Japanese-Scottish-American son, which Sunshine neatly wove into a parable of the differences and similarities between Japanese and Western culture.

Lastly we had another *rakugo* classic, *Chiritotechin*, where two conniving friends set up an ungrateful acquaintance with a nasty “delicacy”. These parts of the show are where the methods and technique of *rakugo* are most evident, where the work that Sunshine has put into his storytelling art clearly and repeatedly pays off. Sunshine makes full use of the mime, masterful pacing, and careful articulation that *rakugo* offers, pairing them with his natural flair for telling a good story. Often it feels like this combination is so seamless that one loses sight of the individual techniques and become fully immersed in his flow.

keeping the pace of the show varied and keeping the audience up to speed. These sections don't obviously involve the “*rakugo* techniques” to the same extent, but they are welcome additions to the night and Sunshine delivers them with a great deal of sparkly wit.

This is aided by Sunshine's extremely genial performance style. He is unafraid to discuss his methods, and yet is also very modest; he is boisterously enthusiastic, but never boastful or aggressive, like many stand-up comedians. He seems to consider his performance something he enjoys sharing with his audience, and is an extremely attentive host. Indeed, he goes to striking lengths to keep the show accessible; very little knowledge of Japan or *rakugo* is assumed, and where it is necessary Sunshine goes to great length to prime the audience first. On occasion he even involves the audience by teaching a little Japanese.



To achieve this Sunshine compliments the main stories with a wealth of freeform anecdotes, about *rakugo* itself of course, but also Japan and Japanese culture more generally, and often concerning his own (mis)adventures. On the night I attended, they included accounts of *keigo* honourific language, sake drinking etiquette, tales of Sunshine's own apprenticeship, and how he dealt with an audience who just wouldn't stop filming him. These are interspersed among the actual *rakugo* stories and take up a good half of the runtime,

If this sounds dangerously like “edutainment”, it certainly doesn't feel like it, and Sunshine makes learning a pleasure through constant encouragement.

All this comes together to make a show that is at once recognisably *rakugo*, and yet also uniquely Katsura Sunshine's, a one-of-a-kind performance which will leave you tickled and feeling like you've learnt something new. If there's any way to get into *rakugo*, it's through him. §

Interested in writing for The Japan Society Review?

Please write to alejandra.armendariz@japansociety.org.uk with examples of your work and information about your knowledge of and interest in Japan.
