

PERFORMING ARTS

2024

25





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Members at Japan Society enjoy exclusive benefits, invitations to special events and discounts on hundreds of performances, films, lectures and classes annually.

Japan Society presents

The Benshi Tradition and the Silver Screen: A Japanese Puppetry Spin-off

Thursday, December 12 at 7:30 pm: *A Diary of Chuji's Travels* 『忠次旅日記』

— Followed by a Private Gathering for Artists and Members

Friday, December 13 at 7:30 pm: *Chushingura* 『忠臣蔵』

— Followed by an artist Q&A

Ningyo! A Parade of Puppetry Series – Program #4

Screening materials for *The Benshi Tradition and the Silver Screen: A Japanese Puppetry Spin-Off* courtesy of the National Film Archive of Japan.



2024—2025 Performing Arts Season Support

The season is made possible by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.



Additional, major support is generously provided by Doug and Teresa Peterson, Howard Gilman Foundation, and Jun Makihara and Megumi Oka. Endowment support is provided by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Endowment Fund, John and Miyoko Davey Foundation, and a leadership gift from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation.



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ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This is the final installment of Japan Society Performing Arts' *Ningyo! A Parade of Puppetry* series. As titled, this program highlights a "spin-off" of Japanese puppet theater culture.

The later pages of this playbill explain why a silent movie with *benshi*, or "movie talker," is presented as a spin-off of Japanese puppetry. However, if you attended our previous *Ningyo* series events in October (*National Bunraku Theater*) or November (*Shinnai Meets Puppetry*), you can easily understand the connection between the two art forms. It is safe to say that the direct lineage between *benshi* performing with silent film and traditional Japanese puppetry is not "scholarly proved," but the commonality is obvious: a) characters in both are "silent"/do not speak; b) a storyteller not only narrates scenes but also uses various mimetic voices to depict each character; and c) the storyteller is accompanied by shamisen and other Japanese traditional instruments. I am thus pleased to present Japanese puppetry as a broader *Ningyo* series, through which we are able to demonstrate these significantly unique similarities between puppetry and *benshi* – similarities that even most people in Japan do not recognize.

Fortunately, we are able to work with Ichiro Kataoka, a prominent *benshi* artist whose artistry has contributed to the recent surge of [silent film + *benshi*] events happening inside and outside Japan. The two silent film titles under this *A Japanese Puppetry Spin-off* program were hand-picked by Kataoka-san, and both have unique English subtitles corresponding to his "talking."

This is his first performance with musician Sumie Kaneko on shamisen and koto, and, at the time of writing this, I haven't yet seen how they might "groove" together, but I am sure that they will ignite these materials from the early 20th century in real time. Yes, it is a screening event, yet it's also a thrilling live show! Please enjoy.



Yoko Shioya
Artistic Director

Ningyo! A Parade of Puppetry Series – Program #4 ***The Benshi Tradition and the Silver Screen: A Japanese Puppetry Spin-off***

Benshi: Ichiro Kataoka

Musician (shamisen, koto and voice): Sumie Kaneko

Silent film with live benshi narration in Japanese with English subtitles.

A Diary of Chuji's Travels 『忠次旅日記』 (1927), DCP, b&w

Director: Daisuke Ito

Starring: Denjiro Okochi as Chuji Kunisada

Naoe Fushimi as Oshina

Ranko Sawa as Okume

Hideo Nakamura as Kantaro

Kichiji Nakamura as Kabe Yasuemon

Film runtime is 111 minutes.

Chushingura 『忠臣蔵』 (1910-1917), DCP, b&w

Director: Shozo Makino

Starring: Matsunosuke Onoe as Asano Takuminokami, Oishi Kuranosuke
and Shimizu Ichigaku

Ichinojo Kataoka as Kira Kozukenosuke

Kiraku Arashi as Kataoka Gengoemon and Tachibana Sakon

Film runtime is 90 minutes.

ABOUT THE FILMS

Daisuke Ito's *A Diary of Chuji's Travels*, one of the great masterworks of Japanese silent cinema, exists in incomplete form—a triptych missing its first segment with remnants of its second and third parts—yet stands out as a seminal *jidaigeki* (period drama), voted the greatest Japanese film of all time in a 1959 *Kinema Junpo* poll. Starring Ito's frequent collaborator Denjiro Okochi, another great star of the silent era known for his portrayal of Sazen Tange, *A Diary of Chuji's Travels* recounts the exploits of Chuji Kunisada (Okochi), the outlaw *bakuto* (gambler)—a real-life proto-yakuza figure who took on a romanticized Robin Hood reputation. A fragmented version of its once four-hour long runtime, *A Diary of Chuji's Travels* is a kinetic dispersal of rapid-cut swordplay sequences, fluid camerawork (Ito was nicknamed *Ido-daisuki*, a pun on his name meaning “big fan of dynamic camera movements”), expressionist techniques and political commentary—an embodiment of the modernized period drama that both Ito, the “father of *jidaigeki*,” and Okochi helped pioneer.

One of the representative works of Shozo Makino, the “father of Japanese Film,” and Matsunosuke Onoe, Japan's first movie star, *Chushingura* adapts the classic tale of the forty-seven ronin who enact vengeance following the unjust death of their master, based on true events. Makino, once the theater manager for Kyoto's Senboza Theater, was said to have discovered Onoe, a regional kabuki troupe leader known for his stage tricks. Rather than simply adapting the complicated narratives of kabuki and bunraku plays, Makino melded them with choreographed swordplay and heroic tales, becoming a pioneer of the *kyugeki* (old theater)—a classical period drama that would precede the now better-known *jidaigeki* (period drama). The film is a patchwork of sorts—a continual “work-in-progress”—wherein newer *Chushingura* films starring Onoe included include scenes from the previous releases, evolving with every release. This presentation primarily includes scenes from the 1910 production (said to be the first full-length version of the story in Japanese cinema), a print of *Jitsuroku Chushingura* held by Matsuda Film Productions and a tinted 35mm print discovered in Kyoto by *benshi* Ichiro Kataoka.

ABOUT *BENSHI*

Benshi, Japan's “movie talkers” of the silent film era, were a unique Japanese cultural phenomenon within the history of cinema. While lecturers for motion pictures existed outside of Japan in the early decades of cinema, they quickly became the exception rather than the rule and occupied a comparatively small role in the screening of a film. However, during Japan's silent movie era, which reached its height between 1910 and the mid 1930s, *benshi* were an integral and influential part of this pastime. Many *benshi* grew huge fan followings as aural stars and attracted audiences to specific theaters to hear their dramatic vocal portrayals of characters on-screen.

The *benshi* “role” in silent films largely began as a pre-screening lecture, in which *benshi* would give introductory remarks and detailed cultural information for the (primarily) foreign-imported films being screened. During the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), when Japanese citizens packed the cinema to see newsreels and stagings of Japanese soldiers in battle, *benshi* served a more prominent role during screenings themselves, rallying patrons with active commentary before, during and after the film.

Following the war, and as motion pictures became much longer and more narrative-focused, *benshi* began to experiment by adding mimetic character voices along with narration and commentary—similarly to the *tayu* (chanter) role in Japanese traditional puppet theaters—during the course of a film, ultimately superseding their “lecturer” role. Since live musicians, including performers on shamisen, *fue* (flute), taiko and percussion, also often accompanied film screenings, *benshi* and musicians frequently formed a kind of symbiotic relationship, with the orchestra coordinating with the *benshi* on when to play, add musical punctuation or remain silent so that the (frequently) solo *benshi* narrator would not be aurally drowned out.

While *benshi* were a unique component of Japanese film screenings, this rich period of early Japanese cinema shares a direct structural connection with the tradition of Japanese puppet theater, in which chanters narrated stories and gave voice to silent puppets alongside theatrical shamisen music. Bridging the gap between 19th-century Japanese theater and early silent motion pictures, several of the earliest *benshi* came directly from kabuki or Japanese puppet theater traditions themselves. They were also often accompanied during film screenings by performers on traditional Japanese

instruments, heightening the dramatic narration provided by *benshi* in much the same way as instrumentalists would complement *tayu* chanting and narration during a bunraku play. For early cinema audiences in Japan who would have likely had some familiarity with this structure of “off-screen” narration and mimetic voicing to accompany live puppet theater, the *benshi* tradition in the early 20th century may have felt like a natural extension of traditional Japanese storytelling forms.

Although the *benshi* tradition faded and eventually disappeared with the advent of new film technologies, this live performance style remained popular for so long that the silent film era in Japan extended for close to a decade after it had receded in other parts of the world. The art of the *benshi* has recently found an international resurgence of interest among cinema enthusiasts and appreciators of Japanese culture.

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Ichiro Kataoka (*benshi*) is among the most prominent and highly regarded contemporary *benshi*, celebrated not only in Japan but around the world for his dynamic, nuanced performances. He first embarked on his career in 2002 when he apprenticed with pioneering modern-era *benshi* Midori Sawato; since then, he has performed in more than 18 countries, writing and bringing to life scripts for approximately 350 silent films (Japanese, Western and Chinese) in a variety of genres including documentaries and early animation. In 2019, he served as lead *benshi* for the first *Art of the Benshi* program at UCLA, whose success prepared the way for the *Art of the Benshi 2024* world tour, a month-long tour led by Kataoka of varied *benshi* programming across the United States. Alongside his work as a *benshi*, he has also performed *kamishibai* (“paper theater”) and Meiji-era political songs called *shosei-bushi*, and is active as a voice actor and writer—notably as the author of a deeply researched history of *benshi* titled *Breathing Life into Film: A Benshi History (Katsuda Shashin Benshi: Eiga ni Tamashii wo Fukikomu Hitobito)*, published in 2020. He appeared as a *benshi* in Isao Yukisada’s film *Spring Snow (Haru no Yuki, 2005)*, on Tamio Okuda’s DVD *The Return of the Incredibly Lifelike Pamphlet (Ugokidashiso na Panfu Ritanzu, 2010)* and in the television drama *Idaten: The Epic Marathon to Tokyo (2019)*; and served as a consultant and coach for Masayuki Suo’s

2019 feature film *Talking the Pictures (Katsuben!)*, in which he himself also appeared as a *benshi*. In recent years, he has also been working to preserve silent film culture, discovering both the oldest film version of *The Forty-Seven Ronin (Chushingura)* and *My Papa Loves Mama (Watashi no Papa-san Mama ga Suki)* starring Hideko Takamine.

Sumie Kaneko (shamisen, koto, voice) is a multi-instrumentalist and singer, equally at home in traditional, contemporary and experimental genres of music. Trained in both traditional Japanese performance and vocal jazz, she has developed the use of shamisen and koto in the context of jazz and experimental music through solo and group performances worldwide. Kaneko has collaborated with a diverse range of international artists, including Dai Fujikura, Lew Tabackin, Clarence Penn and Pulitzer Prize winner Paula Vogel, among many others. She has performed at many prestigious venues, including American Ballet Theater, where she premiered a solo shamisen work alongside ABT principal dancers in a *pas de deux*. She has also performed at Carnegie Hall, Blue Note in New York, for TED Talks, Google and The Getty Center; and as an educator, she has lectured at universities including Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Princeton University and Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo. She has performed in over 20 countries and has worked closely with the Embassy of Japan on several international projects over the past decade. In 2018, she expanded her career in Europe, and until 2024, she toured various cities through sponsorship provided by The Japan Foundation. She has released new works to sound libraries: Splice, Artlist and Epidemic Sound, and several albums, including her solo album *Dead of the Night (2016)*, which features a collection of new works straddling multiple genres. She is currently developing a commissioned work with pianist Nik Bärtsch. www.sumiekaneko.com

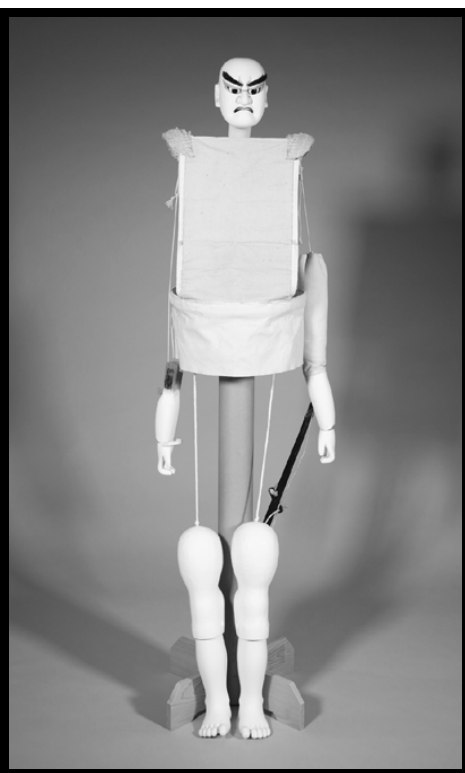
JAPAN SOCIETY GALLERY EXHIBITION

BUNRAKU BACKSTAGE

OCTOBER 4, 2024 — JANUARY 19, 2025



Alongside the live bunraku performances held at Japan Society this fall, Bunraku Backstage offers a rare glimpse behind the scenes of the theater. Showcasing actual working puppets, props, instruments, and costumes on loan from the National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka, this exhibition unveils the collaboration that goes into staging a bunraku production. Unexpected bunraku-inspired multimedia works by contemporary artists explore bunraku's ongoing inspiration and influence.



Japan Society's 2024-2025 Performing Arts season continues in January with:



CONTEMPORARY DANCE | NORTH AMERICAN PREMIERE

Contemporary Dance Festival: Japan & East Asia

Friday, January 10 at 7:30 pm

— Followed by an opening night reception

Saturday, January 11 at 7:30 pm

— Followed by an artist Q&A



CONTEMPORARY THEATER | NORTH AMERICAN PREMIERE

Shuji Terayama's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*

Wednesday, January 15 at 7:30 pm

— Followed by an opening night reception

Thursday, January 16 at 7:30 pm

— Followed by an artist Q&A

Friday, January 17 at 7:30 pm

Saturday, January 18 at 7:30 pm



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Yoko Shioya 20/20: Celebrating 20 Years of Artistic Vision

For over seventy years, Japan Society's Performing Arts Program has enriched the arts in New York City, the U.S. and beyond through the presentation of artists whose works are formed or inspired by the arts and culture of Japan.

Taking the mantle as head of Japan Society's Performing Arts Program in 2004, Yoko Shioya has carried this mission through the 21st century, programming over 200 events of the finest Japanese theater, dance, and music from the very traditional to the most cutting edge. Join us in celebrating Japan Society's Artistic Director Yoko Shioya's 20th anniversary and support the future of the Performing Arts Program! Your donation today will make tomorrow's unparalleled cultural experience possible.

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Hiroshi Sugimoto Photography Auction

Radio City Music Hall, New York

Place your bid in this one-of-a-kind opportunity to own Hiroshi Sugimoto's signature black and white photography work, while joining in celebrating Japan Society Artistic Director Yoko Shioya's 20th anniversary. In honoring Yoko's milestone, her long-time friend and collaborator, Hiroshi Sugimoto, one of the most revered contemporary Japanese artists of his time, has donated his work to be auctioned off in support of Yoko Shioya and Japan Society's Performing Arts program. The proceeds of the auction will go directly to the Yoko Shioya 20/20 campaign.

See the work and learn more here:



Yoko Shioya 20/20 Supporters

as of 11/30/2024

A heartfelt thank you to those who have already contributed in honor of Yoko Shioya's 20th anniversary and to ensure the continued success of the Performing Arts Program!

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