

THE PHILOSOPHY OF A CANADIAN RAKUGO STORYTELLER

Canadian kamigata rakugo teller Sunshine Katsura has performed rakugo, a traditional Japanese art of telling comic stories, in English on the stages abroad to great acclaim. Katsura delves into his long career in stage performance and his attitude and philosophy as a performer.

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In the four-century history of the traditional Japanese performing art of *rakugo*, Toronto native Sunshine Katsura is the first non-Japanese *rakugo* performer in a hundred years. Having studied classical Greek drama at the University of Toronto, he pursued a stage career as a playwright and composer of musicals and comedies. He became interested in Japan when he came across an academic paper that pointed out the similarities in worldview of 2500-year-old Greek drama and Japan's *noh* and *kabuki*.

He came to Japan in 1999 to study *noh* theater. A few years later after his Japanese improved, he happened to see a performance by young *rakugo* storytellers. The expressive way they presented their stories and scenes using only a folding fan and a facecloth struck the former comedy writer.

The path to becoming a *rakugo* storyteller involves a strict master-disciple system and tough apprenticeship, but this did not stop him



The long sleeves of his original kimono can be swapped out to create different outfits

- 1 Sunshine Katsura performing for sold-out crowds in New York and London in 2017
- 2 The entertainer using his fan to mimic slurping noodles
- 3 Sunshine switches deftly between characters while kneeling on his podium

from diving into the *rakugo* realm. Sunshine was particularly drawn by the samurai-like spirit of a performer truly living for his or her art. In September 2008, he became the fifteenth apprentice of master Sanshi Katsura (now known as Bunshi Katsura), and received the stage name of “Sunshine” in 2009.

Performing in another language was not easy, Sunshine acknowledges. It was often hard for him to understand classic *rakugo* stories when he heard them for the first time. However, this proved no barrier thanks to Sunshine’s love of learning.

“You can learn the meaning of the stories by asking your *rakugo* master questions. If you take the time to study it deeply and listen to the story twenty times or so, eventually it will stick,” says Sunshine with his usual humor. “I actually found it more challenging to get used to the customs related to living with the master and senior apprentices, and using proper formal spoken Japanese.”

At first he performed *rakugo* shows abroad several times a year, hoping to introduce a part of Japanese culture. However, seeing that his audiences liked the shows so much, he decided to start performing English *rakugo* as a one-man show, and did his first tour of North America in 2013. In 2017, he performed a show in London’s famous West End and had a long off-Broadway run of performances in New York. Sunshine explains that the key to moving the audiences beyond the cultural gap is to deliberately translate Japanese *rakugo* stories into English very literally, including all elements and rhythm of the story.

For example, if he used the word “flamingo” instead of “crane” so that the audiences would get the story better, the scene they would imagine would not be in Japan but Africa or Latin America. After realizing that changing parts of the story for British and American audiences did not quite work, he decided to stick to the original *rakugo*. For audiences who come to the performances expecting an authentic Japanese cultural experience, even the unfamiliar parts of *rakugo* stories—such as Japanese food items they’ve never heard of and conversations between kimono-wearing townspeople from long



ago—are proof of the comedy’s authenticity and the reason behind their laughter and satisfaction.

However, he does find ways to help the audiences understand the stories. “*Rakugo* is convenient because it has *makura*, a more colloquial introductory part that leads into the traditional story,” he explains. “In overseas performances, I explain Japanese culture in a comical manner during *makura* so that the audiences are smoothly drawn into the main story.”

From riffing off of “Ottotto,” a common exclamation uttered when pouring sake into a small cup to the almost competitive exchange of humble behaviors, all topics are fair game. “My strength as a non-Japanese *rakugo* storyteller is that I understand traditional Japanese customs that are taken for granted in Japan,” he notes. Sunshine takes advantage of his experience as a comedy writer to fill in cultural gaps with humor through *makura*.

The performer has big ambitions for the future. “I hope to extend the 2019 off-Broadway show into a one-year run,” he remarks. After the off-Broadway show, he’d like to line up a world tour. “I want to share Japanese humor with large audiences on the great stages of the world.” True to his stage name, Sunshine’s bright performances show that a love of humor is genuinely universal. ■