

PROFESSIONAL RAKUGO PERFORMER FROM SWEDEN WORKS TO MAKE THE ARTFORM MORE FAMILIAR TO THE WORLD

Kouseinen performs *rakugo* in front of an audience.

***Rakugo* is a traditional storytelling art in which a single performer plays the parts of multiple characters. It has a history of around 400 years. One professional *rakugo* performer by the name of Sanyutei Kouseinen, who came to Japan from Sweden, ventured into the demanding world of *rakugo*. While styles of *rakugo* range widely from traditional classics passed down over the generations to creative modern versions, all forms tend to involve humorous tales about ordinary people and moving stories revealing human nature. Kouseinen performs in Japanese, as well as English and Swedish as he works to convey to the world the charms of the form.**

Murakami Kayo

Sanyutei Kouseinen originally came to Japan as an exchange student. His first encounter with *rakugo* came when he happened to be invited to a *rakugo* club at the university he attended. *Rakugo* is unique in the way it is performed, with the performer kneeling on a cushion, wearing a kimono, and taking on several roles on their own, distinguishing between different characters using only the tone of their voice and gestures without relying on costume changes or stage settings. This fascinated Kouseinen. After obtaining a university degree back in his native Sweden, he had the realization that company work life was not meant for him. Feeling that his encounter with *rakugo* had been fateful, he decided to return to Japan and pursue the path of the professional *rakugo* performer in earnest. While taking courses at

an acting school, he made repeated visits to performances at *yose* theaters, where *rakugo* is performed.

To become a professional *rakugo* performer, one must find a master and study under them as an apprentice. From among the many performers he came across, one stood out as the one he strongly hoped to study under. This was master Sanyutei Koraku. To convey his ambitious intent, Kouseinen paid Koraku a visit backstage, bringing with him a long letter written in Japanese.

Kouseinen explains, “My master’s *rakugo* has warmth to it. He is a person you can really look up to. In my letter, I conveyed to him that although I came from outside Japan, I hoped to study *rakugo* under him.”

Kouseinen’s sincere intent came across to Koraku, and he was accepted as an apprentice. While he ventured into the world of *rakugo* with the

understanding that it would require highly demanding training, he admits that he was confused at first by certain unique customs and differences from Swedish culture.

He recalls, “I had to start from the very beginning learning some things, like the correct way to fold a kimono and related etiquette, the way to serve tea, and so on. One thing that took me a particularly long time to learn was the proper way to make apologies. In Sweden, when some kind of trouble occurs, we explain the reason for it. If you take this same approach in Japan, though, it can come across like you are trying to make an excuse. When a fellow apprentice makes a mistake, you all have to take collective responsibility and apologize together with them. The world of traditional performing arts has many unique rules like this. It did take me a little while to fully come to terms with certain things



Sanyutei Kouseinen Photo: Nakamura Kyohei



A performance in Sweden Photo: Sanyutei Kouseinen

like that.”

In August 2020, four years after becoming an apprentice, he was promoted to *futatsume*, the second-highest rank for professional *rakugo* performers, allowing him to perform as a professional. He then received the name Sanyutei Kouseinen from his master. In his specialty, *Gojo-Kyu*, the main character is a man whose friend brags to him of how well he has endured the great heat of moxibustion¹ treatments he has received at a clinic with a reputation for being effective though involving intense heat. In an attempt not to be outdone, the man prepares and applies plentiful moxibustion to his arm and dares to endure the intense heat. Currently, in addition to Japanese, Kouseinen performs programs translated into English and Swedish as well. He also organizes *rakugo-kai*² performances in European countries, including his native Sweden.

“When translating *rakugo*,” he says, “I try to preserve a sense of its

characteristic human touch, as well as the *ochi*.³ Also, when there are expressions that audiences will not understand without knowledge of Japanese culture, I find replacements with similar meanings from the local culture.”

Lately, he has also been trying his hand at creating original *rakugo* involving themes from Swedish culture, such as the Christmas and Midsummer holidays. His plan for the future is to train further as a professional *rakugo* performer with the aim of advancing to the *shin-uchi* rank, which would allow him to take on apprentices of his own.

“First I want to improve my own skills further, while being careful to preserve the traditions, so that I can be recognized as a professional *rakugo* performer in my own right,” he says. “Then, I hope to build on that, pursuing a form of *rakugo* that takes advantage of my individual character, and make *rakugo* more widely familiar to the world. This may be quite a ways

ahead still, but I also think it could be interesting to take apprentices myself one day, if anyone else from outside Japan is hoping to become a professional *rakugo* performer, or if there is interest in *rakugo* performed in English.”



Beyond traditional classical *rakugo*, he tries out creative versions of his own as well.

Photo: Sanyutei Kouseinen

1. A method of treatment used in Eastern medicine. A material called moxa is used for it, made from downy hairs from the undersides of mugwort leaves that are dried and formed into cotton-like bunches measuring about 3 to 5 mm across. Burning moxa is applied to the skin at certain locations, which is thought to promote healing of various health conditions by stimulating the body with heat.
2. Performances where *rakugo* performers visit halls, theaters, and other spaces where *rakugo* is not ordinarily performed.
3. Generally a means of providing an effective conclusion to a story. In *rakugo*, it refers to the act of bringing a story to a finish using a pun or other wordplay, or to the part of the story where this occurs.