

JAPANESE TRADITIONAL STORYTELLING IN THE USA

Japan's Traditional Storytelling in the USA

Tatsuya Sudo aka Kanariya Eiraku



Kanariya Eiraku performing 'Time Noodles' at Miyako Hotel in Los Angeles

Aug 15, 2015

In August this years, I performed rakugo in English in San Mateo, San Francisco, and Los Angeles with some of my students. It was the first time for us to perform English rakugo outside Japan. I do appreciate the organizers in these three cities who made every effort to realize our recitals.

The term rakugo is still not popular in foreign countries unlike kimono or sushi,

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so I thought hard about how to translate rakugo. Some translate it into ‘sit-down comedy’ as opposed to ‘stand-up comedy’ in the United States, but rakugo includes stories not only comic but also tear-jerking, and horrifying. So I decided to translate it into ‘Japan’s traditional storytelling’. Another idea was ‘Japan’s narrative art’.

In LA, we joined Nisei Week Festival, which has been held every August since 1934. It is the oldest and largest festival for Japanese and Japanese Americans living in the United States. I have done a lot of researches into performing arts of Japanese Americans, so this occasion was something special for me. We performed at Miyako Hotel in Little Tokyo and at Opus Music in Torrance. At the beginning of each performance, I gave an introduction to rakugo such as how to use a fan and a hand towel and the rules of Kami-Shimo or stage left and stage right so that the audience would better understand and enjoy the stories. I performed “Time Noodles,” in which a man goes to a noodle stand and uses a trick to cheat the proprietor when paying the bill. Another man watches and tries to do the same thing the next day, with unfortunate results.

In San Francisco, we performed at a hall of Hokka Nichibeikai, the Japanese American Association of Northern California; and in San Mateo, at Japanese Community Center. A lot of Americans of Japanese ancestry came to see our performances. I met many of my friends who are in the film and the theater industries at the venue. Mr Keizo Norimoto, the former president of Hokubei Mainichi Newspaper, who introduced me to the president of Hokka Nichibeikai, also came to celebrate our show. The recitals in these two cities would not have come true without his efforts.

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After the performances, I got some emails from the attendees. In Japan, the audience is not so responsive as in the U.S. I usually receive no feedback from the audience after the show in Japan. This time, I received such emails as ‘I enjoyed the show very much and I was talking about the show with my dad while driving back home.’ Some people suggested ideas about how we should promote and advertize our show. The feedback from the audience is encouraging and helpful.

We will hold English rakugo shows in Phoenix, Arizona and Seattle next year. I hope the audience in the U.S. will enjoy and appreciate rakugo, one of our national cultural assets. Also, we would like to present rakugo for foreign tourists in Japan. The number of foreign tourist is now increasing with the Olympics in five years; we would like to entertain them with rakugo. I believe it will be one of the best Omotenashi or heartfelt services for them.