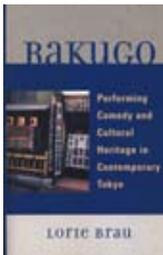


REVIEWS



Japan



Lorie Brau. *Rakugo: Performing Comedy and Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Tokyo*

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GOETHE, with his usual perspicacity, once wrote that nothing is more revealing of a person than what he or she finds ridiculous; and so it is with entire cultures. The comic provides a window to social values, local knowledge, and historical memories. It sheds light on the underside of human relationships, ones often slighted or ignored in more serious discussion. Yet judging from the relative dearth of Western-language books on Japanese humor, the realm of the comic remains undervalued as a source of insight into Japanese culture and history. Only a handful of *kyōgen* have been translated and probably the best general study of this genre's history and aesthetics remains Dorothy Shibano's dissertation *Kyōgen: The Comic as Drama* (University of Michigan, 1974). Despite Thomas Satchell's pathbreaking 1929 translation of Jippensha Ikku's *Tōkaidō hizakurige* (1960), Edo-period comic prose is only beginning to be known in the West, even if nearly everyone agrees that it constituted one of the pillars of early modern Japanese literature. *Kyōka* and *kyōshi* poetry, comic song texts, collections of jokes and riddles, and the hilarious tales that eventually became "classic" *rakugo* remain for the most part the province of specialists. To be sure, efforts such as Leutner (1985), Morioka and Sasaki (1990), Hibbett (2002), and the recent collection *Understanding Humor in Japan* (2006) have helped to begin rectifying this situation. Nevertheless solemnity, seriousness, and religiosity are usually still taken as *prima facie* evidence of Japanese profundity (rather than, say, confusion, credulity, or snobbery), whereas humor remains simply something to be laughed at. Comprehending a zen *kōan* or a courtly poetic metaphor has always seemed more worthy and discerning than snickering at an off-color joke three hundred years old.

Yet precisely because humor foregrounds the particular situation, the fleeting moment, and the individual foible, it may, to rephrase Nietzsche, provide insights

that it takes an entire tome of supposed eternal verities—not to see. For the “outsider” who does not possess the necessary linguistic skills and cultural knowledge necessary for the appreciation of Japanese hilarity and irony, nothing can be more welcome than a historically-informed ethnographic analysis of such culturally specific modes of comic discourse and the social institutions that stand behind them.

This is precisely what Lorie Brau has set out to provide in her study of one form of Japanese wit, that of comic narrative performance (*rakugo*). Whereas Morioka and Sasaki’s illuminating study or Hibbett’s engaging volume target specific texts and provide valuable exegesis, Brau focuses her efforts on *rakugo* transmission, performance, and attendant social meanings. Her methods, mostly those of a participant-observer, endow her interpretations with a keenness and persuasiveness unrivalled by earlier studies. Through careful scrutiny, questioning, and reflection, Brau unravels for the reader the overt and hidden meanings of the world of *rakugo*: the socio-cultural and historical context of performers, the dynamics of interpersonal relations among students, the sources of tension between various status groups, and much else. Moreover, Brau reveals herself as competent as anyone else in unraveling the textual meanings and literary qualities of specific *rakugo* pieces. After some introductory material in the opening sections, she provides an illuminating explanation of Katsura Bunchō’s rendition of the classic tale “Cherry Blossom Viewing of the Row House Tenants” (*Nagaya no hanami*). Although this piece is not, as some have contended, intrinsically “incomprehensible” to non-Japanese, only a “thick” reading such as Brau’s can hope to bring to light the historically conditioned, class-specific humor it contains.

In chapter 3 Brau explains the general structural and stylistic features of *rakugo* and offers a brief historical outline of the genre. Here I could not help wondering about the accuracy of some of the generalizations. Were the variety halls or performance spaces known as *yoseba* really simply early examples of what came to be known as *yose*? Such designations were hardly uniform in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and *yose* were at various times and places labeled *yoseba*, *seki*, or *kōshaku-ba* in a rather haphazard manner. The discussion regarding the social status of early *rakugo* performers and the control of *yoseba* by Nidayū, the head of part-time outcasts (*gōmune*), also rests on shaky foundations. Nidayū was still collecting fees from Edo *yose* operators in 1842, suggesting that early *rakugo* performers had probably not sought sanctuary in *yose* simply to escape his reach. Moreover, Nidayū only controlled Edo street performers, whereas many of the early *yose* appeared in the Kansai area. Outcast status was never simply a function of being a performer (*geinin*) and the Tokugawa *bakufu*, unlike the Meiji regime, rarely considered *geinin* a distinct social group. Instead, *geinin* social status depended in large measure on precisely what art (*gei*) was performed. The difference in social position between, say, a Nō actor in the employ of the shōgun and a street juggler was vast, though both might be referred to as *geinin*.

Brau, however, has chosen not to lose herself in these intricate, debatable socio-historical issues. In chapters 4 and 5 she returns to the main theme of the book: the social situation, lifestyles, and cultural functions of *rakugo* performers today, and their training and rise in the ranks. Here she elucidates not just the nature of

patronage, the structure of artistic “families,” and the function of professional associations, but also the mores, values, and habits that govern today’s *rakugo* world. The model *rakugo* performer is not simply a successful raconteur who behaves however he (rarely she) wishes. Instead, performers are expected to adhere to more lofty ideals: stylishness without conceit; knowledge without scholarly erudition; loyalty to tradition tempered by a genuine sensitivity to contemporary concerns.

Brau next presents an instructive discussion of the situation of modern *rakugo*, caught between tradition and innovation. Even if *rakugo* today depends for much of its image on its status as a “classic” performing art, it would soon desiccate if it shunned all novel possibilities. Thus although *rakugo* may still be experienced at the few remaining *yose* today, performers now often turn to concert halls, museums, schoolrooms, and other venues to display their art. Live performances still make and break careers, but today’s performers derive significant income from television and radio broadcasts, from marketing audio or video recordings, or from teaching *rakugo* classes. Classics constitute the core repertory, but some performers revise such tales, improvise additions, or conceive entirely new plots and jokes. Even *rakugo* fans turn out to harbor conflicting views regarding the old and new. While some deify a favorite contemporary star, others scoff at recent artists and assiduously collect recordings and memorabilia of past masters.

The main problem for “tradition” in *rakugo*, I would argue, is that the more modern (or postmodern) Japanese society becomes, the more it seeks to shore up the legitimacy of its socio-economic and political systems by turning ideologies of “heritage,” which Brau treats in her last chapter. The past, packaged in the form of national traditions, is presented as a piece of property of which all social classes supposedly possess an equal share and which is said to represent the interests of all. Anthropologists have recently explained the prevalence of this phenomenon, common to nearly all genres of Japanese performing arts, by invoking the notion of nostalgia, which is usually interpreted as a means for relieving the pressures and shortcomings of the present. Yet such an account avoids the central question of why disappointment with the present should exhibit itself in such a passive, retrospective form. The Japanese nostalgia industry is no mechanical, inevitable reaction to hardship and tracing its roots to ancient values and the Buddhist “sadness of things” is not even remotely convincing.

And it is here that the comic may provide more hopeful possibilities. For example, “Cherry Blossom Viewing of the Row House Tenants” convinces a good many of those who accept the standard conservative ideologies supplied by the mass media and the education system that life was more pleasant, simple, or meaningful two hundred years ago. Yet this tale may just as easily remind audiences that the avarice and stupidity of exploitative landlords has a long history, one that ought finally to be brought to an end. Much of *rakugo*’s content, far from glorifying a timeless “heritage,” scandalously implies that bygone errors should not be repeated, that old habits provide no useful ideals, and that supposed universal truths and timeless values are hollow and serve only specific interests. *Rakugo*, despite its commodification as a “heritage,” still contains progressive energies that many more serious or tearful genres lack. Instead of seducing its listeners to wallow in a sad, spurious

pseudo-past, it suggests that with proper social and political practice, things may, after all, end happily. One day, it implies, we may all laugh at the stupidity of the past rather than engage in a self-pitying, politically inert mourning for its loss.

Brau does not pursue such implications, but her splendid study, in which every page provides fresh insights and surprising information, cannot help but remind us of such possibilities. It suggests that if *rakugo* can avoid a hopeless return to spurious archaic values and reconstituted traditions and pass instead straight through its current commercialization, ideological appropriation, and stale postmodern celebration as a “national heritage,” it may yet emerge invigorated on the other side, where it can release its progressive potential.

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