

The Perils and Joys of Pioneering the Arts of Japan in New York

by Beate Sirota Gordon

Lecture given April 28, 2004 as the Donald Keene Center's Soshitsu Sen XV Distinguished Lecture on Japanese Culture.

It gives me great pleasure to be here tonight. I am honored to have been invited by the Donald Keene Center of Japanese Culture to give this year's Soshitsu Sen Lecture especially because I have known Mr. Sen, the great tea-master, ever since he visited the United States to give a series of demonstrations on the art of the tea ceremony. I was working at the Japan Society part-time only because I had two small children, a 4 year old and a 6-year old. I was director of the student program and also participated in cultural exchange activities between Japan and the U.S.. The executive director of the Japan Society asked me to interpret for Mr. Sen during his tea ceremony demonstrations. I happily agreed to do this not realizing that the demonstrations would be held on the weekends, a very precious time for me to be with my children, and that they would go on for a month. After 2 or 3 demonstrations I found that they were very much the same, and I asked Mr. Sen if he would mind my making a tape of my interpretation which then could be played while he was demonstrating. You must understand that I was talking to the grand master of tea ceremony, the most famous of all in Japan. He looked at me with a really withering glance and said, "Mrs. Gordon, I am not a robot." and so that was that.

One of the first people to come to the U.S. under the cultural exchange program was the greatest Japanese contemporary woodblock printer Shiko Munakata. I was assigned to him as his Girl Friday, and I was to find housing for him, interpret for him, make arrangements for exhibits, and make him known in the U.S. I had heard about him when I was growing up in Japan before World War II, but he hadn't become really famous there until the 1940's when I had left Japan and was attending college in the U.S.

I had started working at the Japan Society in 1954 because not only could I use my Japanese language skills, but I could also participate in an activity which I thought was the easiest road to continued peace, which was very much on our minds after World War II. I thought that it was essential to understand other countries' cultures, and I wanted my fellow Americans to learn more about Japan. I think I must have been partly motivated by certain memories. When I arrived in Japan at the age of 5 ½, never having seen an Asian before, I saw many black-eyed, black haired people at the docks as our ship arrived, and I said to my mother "Are they all brothers and sisters?" My mother was shocked and dismayed, and determined to integrate me into Japanese society so as to combat my ignorance. And then, when at the age of 15 ½ I came to the U.S. to go to Mills College in California, my dates asked me if the Japanese lived in huts or trees, I was so offended that people had such ridiculous notions about a country which had, before World War II, bought more Western classical music from Columbia Records than any other country in the world, that I decided not to tell people I came from Japan!

When Munakata arrived at the docks in Brooklyn, I took an immediate liking to him; he was charming, humorous, and profound.

I will now show you a clip from a film I made about him with Channel 13. Please pay particular attention to when he carves the woodblock. He is not using a sketch on top of the block which is the usual way. He is carving directly on the block. This has never been done before or since I made this film. He did it because he wanted Americans to be able to see clearly how he carved the wood without the interference of a white piece of sketching paper.

As all of you know, kabuki is one of the greatest arts in Japan. In the early sixties, the Grand Kabuki came to New York City, and I thought it was essential to document it on video so that knowledge about it could be spread through TV presentations and tapes. I went to the actor Kuroemon who was one of the stars in the troupe, and asked whether he would consent to the making of an educational film. He was enthusiastic, but said that I must get the permission of the other actors, also. This was 4 days before they were leaving NYC, and I had to act fast - first in getting funding, and second, in getting Channel 13's cooperation. I did both in one afternoon, but to get the kabuki's consent was another matter. As they were giving their last performance at City Center, I ran up and down the stairs backstage, to the dressing rooms of the various actors who all agreed. But the last one said, "Mrs. Gordon, you now must get the agreement of the musicians." I hurried down the stairs to the musicians' dressing rooms, received permission, and then the chief musician said, "You must now get permission from the narrators." I ran up the steps, got permission, but they said, "Now you just get permission from the dressers." After the dressers, I went to the wig makers, from them to the handlers of large props, and then to the handlers of small props. The last I was told to do was to ask permission from the disciple of Mr. Kuroemon who sat in Kuroemon's dressing room and in the wings of the stage all evening long! You will now see the product of all my running around.

Now you will see Kuroemon with a "brown wrinkled face".

Please notice when the woman bites the tissues - that symbolizes extreme grief.

Very close to the kabuki as a theatrical art form, is the Japanese puppet theater. The most famous is the bunraku from Osaka, but I brought the puppets from Awaji Island in the Inland Sea, because they are bigger, more easily seen in large auditoriums, and more earthy in their characterizations - what the Japanese call *tsuchi-kusai* - smelling of the earth.

When chanting about sad occasions, the narrators cry real tears, and the puppets' movements are very communicative.

I always tried to bring the most communicative art forms to the U.S. I wanted the hearts of the Japanese performers to reach the hearts of the American public.

Sometimes a disaster strikes, but then something good comes out of it. This was the case of the Awaji puppets.

The puppets used by the Awaji puppeteers are very precious - some of them are several hundred years old. We transported them in wooden boxes which were loaded in the buses the puppeteers and musicians rode. One day, after leaving the performers off at Carnegie Hall, the bus went to refuel, and thieves stole 2 boxes, not knowing that one box contained the head of a puppet and another the body of a horse.

We were devastated. It meant that 2 puppets could not be used in the upcoming performances in the programs slated for Washington D.C. and other venues. I went on TV, and begged for the return of the puppets, and the next day someone called saying she had seen them in a dustbin in her yard. Unfortunately it had rained during the night and the puppets were soaked and ruined. The story made headlines in Washington D.C. and in the other cities where they were to tour, as well as in Japan. The result was, that in the U.S., the halls were filled because of all the publicity, and in Japan the local bureaucrats of Awaji Island voted to build a school of puppetry. Thus the troupe which had previously been overshadowed by the bunraku from Osaka, became famous. They even received invitations from Europe to perform, and have been touring happily for the last 30 years.

In my first year as the director of the Performing Arts Program of the Japan Society which was my title from 1958 on, I brought the purest forms of traditional classical Japanese performance to the U.S. However, at one point, I felt I was showing a skewered picture of Japan - the Japan which was producing Toyotas, Hondas, Sony Walkman, etc. This Japan was also producing contemporary music and dance, and theatre. I was not going to present such art unless it was of high standard and could compete with American and European offerings, and the Japanese in fact, had such innovative art. The first Japanese contemporary dancer I presented in the 1970's was Saeko Ichinohe, who has some of Japan's traditional devices in her movement vocabulary, but her dance is really contemporary. In Japan she studied with Ishii Baku, a student of the German dancer Mary Wigman. In the United States, she studied at Julliard with the great Antony Tudor. You will now see Saeko Ichinohe in "Fire-Eating Bird".

The theatrical troupe Kazenoko, Children of the Wind, was created right after the bombing of Hiroshima during World War II. Performed by professional dancer/actors, the troupe toured schools in Japan telling stories and Japanese legends, as well as showing traditional Japanese games which were becoming only memories. They use the simplest of prop: sticks, hoops, ropes and origami - Japanese paper folded into stylized animals, alphabetical letters, the sun, flowers, etc. In their repertoire they also include Western folk tales such as "The Ugly Duckling" which you will see now.

Fall comes, the ugly duckling has become a lovely swan and goes swimming in a lake represented by a blue ribbon. His real mother, the big white swan who had left him in the duck's nest watches him from the sky; when another bird comes, too, the swan leaves the ugly duckling. The ugly duckling cries.

The Japanese, not to be outdone by the American avant-garde, really plunged into this movement in the 1960's. In the U.S., Japanese performers were at the vanguard of the avant-garde, and their counterparts in Japan surged ahead with the butoh movement which became very popular in France and then in the U.S. The butoh dancers painted their faces and bodies with white chalk,

hung from ropes, writhed in unusual movements, and some audiences felt that they just wanted to "epater le bourgeois" (shock the bourgeois). Be that as it may, the most famous group in the 80's and 90's was Sankai Juku, and it traveled all over the world. One of the founders of this movement was Kazuo Ohno. He had two disciples in Tokyo, the husband-and-wife team Eiko and Koma, who went beyond the butoh movement and created something completely original, completely their own. It is hard to describe what they do. They seem to be elements of nature and move to their own natural clock - very slow-moving, very intense, in an outer-worldly fashion. I was fortunate enough to be their first presenter in the United States in the 1970's. They have since gotten many prizes here including the so-called genius award which the MacArthur Foundation provides to outstanding artists. You shall now see "By the River" by Eiko and Koma.