



Rakugo storyteller Sanyutei Ryuraku on stage

RAKUGO

Enriching the Imagination

Rakugo storyteller Sanyutei Ryuraku shares the power of his art with audiences around the world.

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translate rakugo in Japanese into foreign languages and to record the foreign language version on a tape. He writes it in katakana, which is often used for loan words, and he reads it aloud repeatedly to learn it by rote.” However, Ryuraku said that in rakugo performed in foreign languages, words only form part of the expression.

“It sometimes happens that the more I describe the culture and customs indigenous to Japan with words, the more difficult they are to understand. The important thing is to stimulate the imagination of the audience using gestures and facial expressions. I think that words are just a tool for encouraging the imagination.”

“For example, in a scene where a character in a story is smoking a cigarette, if a rakugoka explains what a *kiseru* (a Japanese pipe for smoking) is, the audience will pay attention to the explanation and fail to enter into the story. However, if he or she brings a Japanese paper fan to his or her mouth, saying ‘I am going to smoke a cigarette,’ the audience imagines a pipe based on their own experience, and continues to enjoy the story. With only a Japanese paper fan and a towel on stage, a rakugoka is able to cross cultural barriers easily. This is the advantage of rakugo, ‘the art of imagination.’”

Ryuraku said that the stories that are popular overseas are those that express the characters in the stories with gestures and facial expressions. Take a well-known classic rakugo-story, “*Chiritotechin.*” A man wants to teach a lesson to one of his friends

RAKUGO is Japan’s comic storytelling art, and it has a history dating back around 250 years. It is characterized by a *rakugoka* (storyteller) sitting alone on a mat on stage and playing multiple characters in a story. Performances are held every day in *yose* (storyteller theaters) in Tokyo and Osaka.

Sanyutei Ryuraku, a rakugoka, gives performances not only in Japanese, but also in French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, German, English and Chinese. He has visited about fifty cities overseas and given more than 170 performances of rakugo in these foreign languages.

Ryuraku began giving performances in foreign languages in 2008.

Ryuraku said, “The teacher from whom I learn *sado* (the Japanese art of the tea ceremony) was going to make a presentation of *sado* at the Japan Festival in Florence, Italy. He suggested that I should also give a performance of rakugo. This was the beginning of my performances in foreign languages.”

He memorizes the foreign language version of the rakugo by rote. He asks native speakers he knows to

who has a know-it-all attitude, and offers him rotten tofu (bean curd) as *chiritotechnin*, a rare Chinese delicacy that does not actually exist. As expected, the friend says that he knows it, and eats it in agony as he keeps saying, “This is delicious!” This is a scene that attracts loud laughter.

“The scenes described in *rakugo* are the everyday lives of ordinary people. The characters in *rakugo* are people who can be found close by, anywhere in the world. The laughter that *rakugo* expresses is ‘humor that every one of us has.’ This is common around the world, beyond borders and cultures.”

Ryuraku is confident of the possibilities of *rakugo* on the basis of his numerous performances overseas.

“In *rakugo*, the storyteller plays multiple characters as he or she turns left and right, and each member of the audience imagines the face, figure and



Sanyutei Ryuraku performs at the Universität Leipzig in Germany, 2013.

clothes of the characters, and the background. The storyteller says to the audience inwardly, “Imagine. Let’s make a story together,” and the audience gives the story liveliness in response. Many of the things that are currently happening in the world, including terrorism and conflicts, are caused by “the lack of imagination for others.” Ryuraku believes that spreading *rakugo* to the world will foster “rich imagination” and bring relief to the world.

In 2020, Tokyo will host the Olympics and Paralympics. Ryuraku says that he is currently preparing a new style of *rakugo* for this opportunity, when many people from overseas will visit Japan.

“I am thinking of placing a screen on the back of the storyteller performing the *rakugo* and projecting *ukiyo-e*, Japanese woodblock prints onto it. The imagination of the audience will be enhanced as a result. For instance, a scene of watching fireworks in the Edo period (1603-1867) is easy for Japanese people to imagine, but it is difficult for people from other countries. However, when *ukiyo-e* depicting a scene of watching fireworks are projected onto the back of a storyteller, the audience will be taken to the city in the Edo period instantaneously. Last year, I performed it in France, which was highly successful.”

People around the world have an image of Japanese people as “serious people who do not understand humor.” However, *rakugo*, which has been making serious Japanese people laugh for 250 years, has undergone a new kind of evolution and is currently spreading a new type of laughter around the world. **1**



Sanyutei Ryuraku alongside French *rakugo* performers at the Festival d'Avignon in France, 2014.

All photos: COURTESY OF SANYUTEI RYURAKU