WHAT'S MANZAI?!!!

Artwork for the documentary *What's Manzai?*
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Who better to ask than *manzai-shi* Stephen Tetsu!

GAVIN BLAIR

FAR and away the most popular style of comedy in Japan is *manzai*, a form of performance that can trace its roots in New Year celebrations back around a thousand years. The basic premise is similar to comedy double acts seen across the globe, with a *tsukkomi* "straight man" and *boke* "funny man/fall guy," but with the emphasis in manzai heavily on rapid-fire delivery, puns and deliberate misunderstandings.

The particular style of manzai now dominant in Japanese show business hails from Osaka and was brought to the fore by Yoshimoto Kogyo, which is headquartered in the city. The popularity of the style helped turn Yoshimoto into a giant entertainment company with most of the famous comedians in Japan on its roster.

So when American-born Stephen Tetsu decided to undertake the ambitious challenge of becoming a *manzai-shi* (as performers are known) he knew that Yoshimoto's New Star Creation school was the place to go. The year-long course molds aspiring comedians into shape, teaching them skills such as voice control and comedy writing, as well as dancing and stage sword fighting.

Tetsu, who grew up in California but got a taste for the style via his Japanese mother, says he was, "taken off guard" by the dance classes and sword fighting, but found performing routines in front of the demanding instructors, "taking notes and not laughing" the toughest element.

Forming and breaking up around ten double acts during the course, Tetsu — who plays the boke role — linked up with his current partner, Leo Togawa, to form "Iruka Punch" ("*iruka*" means dolphin in Japanese) shortly after its completion. The duo have been signed up by Yoshimoto Creative Agency, part of the entertainment conglomerate, and are currently paying their dues and honing their craft by performing on the manzai circuit.

In spite of the challenges, being one of less than a handful of foreign manzai performers in the field has brought advantages to Tetsu and Iruka Punch. Yoshimoto Kogyo has a content creation partnership with Netflix, and Tetsu became the narrator and star of *What's Manzai?*, a documentary for the global online video platform last year. The film followed Tetsu through his training at the manzai school as well as

Stills from the documentary "What's Manzai?!!!" featuring Stephen Tetsu
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introducing the form, how it works and how it differs from Western comedy.

"Japanese and Western comedy start from different places. Japanese comedy is more about just making people happy, whereas Western comedy is about saying what you want to say, a kind of confession," says Tetsu in an interview at Yoshimoto Creative Agency's Tokyo offices.

"There are a lot of political jokes in the United States, but Japanese comedy steers away from politics," notes Tetsu, who admits his attempts to include political elements in his act have not gone down very well with audiences.

"I don't know if it couldn't work, but in Japanese comedy and manzai you want everyone to laugh. With political jokes there will always be someone who's mad at you," he adds.

While acknowledging the advantages that being a novelty brings, Tetsu says he "doesn't want to be considered funny just because I'm American." Nevertheless, he does use his otherness in his shows. "I tried not to play on it at first, but we got a lot of pressure from producers and other people to use it more, and the truth is that it does work," he says.

With his career still in its infancy, Tetsu's future goals include to perform at the Namba Grand Kagetsu (NGK) Theater in Osaka, a manzai Mecca, operated by Yoshimoto, and to win the M-1 Grand Prix contest. The end-of-year competition, broadcast nationally, and naturally organized by Yoshimoto, comes with a 10 million yen (90,000 US dollars) prize and the potential to catapult winners to manzai stardom.

"And in terms of performing, I want to see if manzai would work in English," says Tetsu. "I would really like to know if it could." ⫿