

Bunraku Japanese Puppetry

Activity 1: The history of Bunraku puppetry

In this activity, students will:

- learn about Japanese Bunraku puppetry, which involves life-size puppets controlled by three puppeteers
- create a puppet, practice movements and play a sculpture game.

Key inquiry question: What is Bunraku puppetry? And which characters are the best to tell the traditional stories of Bunraku?

About Bunraku

1. Explain that the class will be looking at a traditional form of Japanese puppetry called Bunraku.

This slideshow will be playing with music as students enter classroom <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00064>

1. Ask your students the following questions:

- Who has seen a puppet show?
- What was it like?
- What puppets were involved?
- Where did you see it?
- What story was performed?
- What is the biggest puppet you have seen?
- How did it move?
- What role did it play?
- What do you know about Japan?

2. Watch video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TKt67ouaqM> (9mins) Or the one on the UNESCO website, [Ningyo Johruri Bunraku Puppet Theatre \(Opens in a new window\)](#). also in windows media player. (4mins30sec) YouTube <http://youtu.be/kEUQVn8EJQ> Whilst watching video take notes on anything they found **interesting** or puzzling and how the performances compared to puppet plays they have seen in Australia. Also write notes on Qs below.

3. After watching the video and reading through the notes on traditional Bunraku puppetry and ask the class to respond to the following questions:
 - **Why do you think the artists use puppets to tell a story?**
 - **What other art forms are involved?**
 - **How do you think the puppets are operated?**
4. Ask your students to break into pairs and write five questions about the Bunraku puppets. For example, a question could be: how does the head move?
5. Look at [An introduction to Bunraku \(Opens in a new window\)](http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/bunraku/en/index.html) website
<http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/bunraku/en/index.html> - with the class to find answers to these questions.

Learning about Bunraku puppet theatre – Create a puppet with a group of three

1. View the video *Japan's puppet theatre: Bunraku in 1957*, showing a traditional performance.
<http://youtu.be/HJDd7KC1cju> 3min12sec
2. Ask your students to form groups of three and select three movements that they have identified from the puppets' performance.
3. Each group creates a flat paper puppet by drawing around the silhouette of a student and cutting the shape into the puppet parts.
4. The group then performs the movements they observed in the performances.
5. You will need to remind the group that each member of the group should take on the specific role of one of the three Bunraku puppeteers.
6. Students are encouraged to recreate the movement and feeling of the style they saw in the video.
7. Their puppets should reflect the characteristics of one of the stock Bunraku puppets, for example, the **old man**, the **young girl** and the **mother**.
8. Students can include the details of the wigs, the costumes, the postures and the facial expressions.
9. After all groups have performed their movements, ask them to write on their blog or in their electronic journal words that capture the movements. They could, for example, describe whether the movements were big or slow.
10. Watch the video of a 1957 performance of Japan's Bunraku puppet theatre. The video shows a rare performance by the old masters of the old Bunraku puppet theatre on the Isle of Awaji followed by a performance in the Bunraku-za of Osaka.

Differentiation/Extension: Sculpture game (for those that finish early or request more work or are not able to do the puppet activity.) Also dramaturgy work can be provided if a student is unable to physically participate on the day for some reason.

1. Ask your students to pair up to play the sculpture game.

2. One student is A the **sculptor** and the other B the **clay**
3. A gently shapes B into the character they have been sketching.
4. Then B has a turn and shapes A into the character they sketched.
5. Once completed ask the class the following questions:
 - **How realistic were the sculptures?**
 - **Could the audience easily see who the character was?**
 - **Were the facial expressions and gestures stylised and bigger than normal?**

----- end of activity 1

Go to blog **activity 2** on my teaching website <http://kutsikarts.weebly.com/drama-student-blogs---bunraku-japanese-puppetry.html#/>

Can join forum/blog with email or Facebook

Notes for students

Traditional Bunraku puppetry

The origins of Bunraku puppetry

Bunraku puppetry began in Osaka, Japan, in 1684. It merges the two traditional forms of storytelling and puppetry performed by travelling storytellers and puppeteers and was established as a performance genre when the narrator, Takemoto Gidayu, set up a puppet theatre in Osaka.

Bunraku reached its height of popularity in around 1744, when it experienced a golden age. The plays often focused on historical stories from feudal times. The stories were about love affairs, social duties and the moralities of loyalty.

Most plays were written by the famous playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725) who wrote approximately 140 plays. He also wrote for the Kabuki theatre and is often called the Japanese Shakespeare.

Bunraku puppetry performance

Pronounced boon-**rah**-koo, the puppets are also known as *ningyo joruri* in Japanese. They are life-size, beautifully hand-carved wooden rod puppets with elaborate costumes and individualised facial expressions. Visible puppeteers manipulate them to present dramatic plays.

A traditional performance includes puppets, **puppeteers**, the **tayu** or **narrator** who tells the story and the **shamisen musician**, who accompanies the narrator. The shamisen is a three-stringed musical instrument played with a plectrum or pick.

Three puppeteers control different parts of the body for each puppet. They are dressed in black and carefully coordinate the exact movement of each body part of the puppet.

The three puppeteers are:

- ***Omo-zukai*** – the head puppeteer, who operates the doll's head and face by holding a stick with levers in his left hand, also operates the doll's right hand with his own right hand
- ***Hidari-zukai*** – the left-hand puppeteer, who uses his right hand to operate the doll's left hand
- ***Ashi-zukai*** – the foot puppeteer, who uses both hands to suggest the movements of the doll's legs and feet.

The puppeteers merge with the puppet in order to control it and move as a team to the sounds of the narrator and musician.

To train as a Bunraku puppeteer takes many years. Puppeteers start their training with simple puppets, advancing to more complex ones as they become more experienced.

Bunraku today

During the 20th century, Bunraku's popularity waned for many decades but began to be revived with the establishment of the National Bunraku Theatre in 1966. The use of life-size puppets, the placement of the puppeteer in full view of the audience, and the visible manipulation of the puppet by puppeteers are all key elements included in theatre today.

Bunraku performance in Australia

In 1972, Australia experienced its first Bunraku performance when the National Theatre of Japan performed at the Adelaide Festival of the Arts. Many companies over the years have included aspects of Bunraku theatre style in Australia. For example, the Australian puppet theatre company [Dead Puppet Society \(Opens in a new window\)](http://deadpuppetsociety.com.au/productions/) uses many of the above conventions in its productions.

Their website has images of the life-size puppets they used in *The Harbinger* with the puppeteers manipulating the puppets from the sides. Australian theatre director Peter Wilson has also included life-size puppets in productions for children such as *The red tree* and *The flying orchestra*, at the Out of the Box Festival in Queensland's Performing Arts Centre.