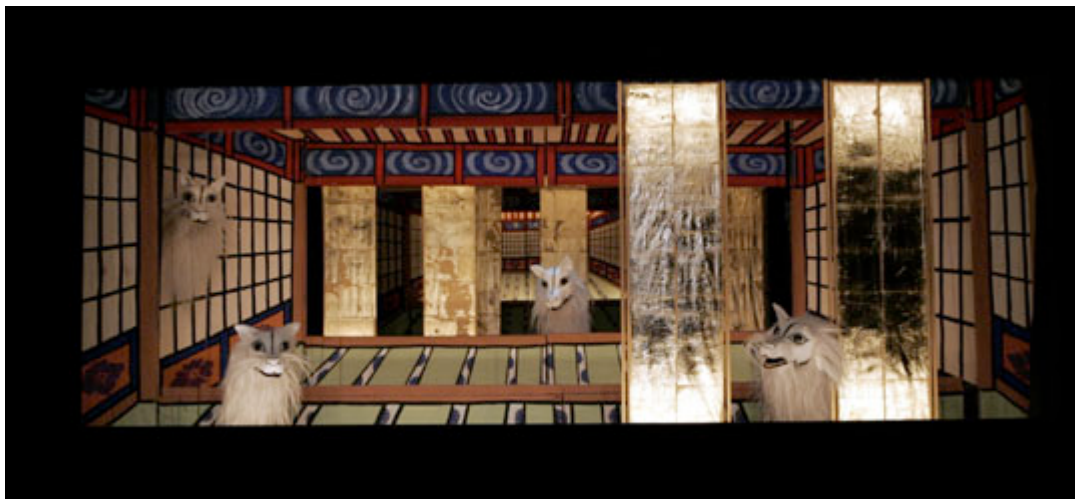


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In a project for The Japan Society, Basil Twist has re-created a traditional *dogugaeshi* puppet performance native to Tokushima Prefecture. Shamisen player Yumiko Tanaka (below) acts as narrator.

## Flipping screens

### U.S. puppeteer revives lost art

By D. H. ROSEN

Special to The Japan Times

If you've never heard of the form of Japanese puppet theater called *dogugaeshi*, you are in good company: The ancient tradition remains an obscurity even to puppet enthusiasts in the know. But American puppeteer Basil Twist is about to change all that with "Dogugaeshi," his production currently on tour in Japan.

In 2004, New York's Japan Society commissioned Twist to create a piece based on traditional Japanese puppet theater, but he was hesitant to take the obvious route of riffing on bunraku, the most well-known traditional puppet drama which developed in the Kansai region in the 17th century.

"As an artist I am always trying to do something unexpected," says Twist. "So I was like, 'They probably think I am going to do bunraku, but I want to do something different.' I remembered seeing an exhibit of puppets from Awaji, and they had a video playing of one performance that had these sliding screens, these flashing, flipping, opening screens, and it was just 30 seconds but it totally captured me. I never forgot it. I thought, 'I want to find out what those screens are, that's what I want to do.' "

When most people hear "Japanese puppet theater," they immediately think of bunraku, but Ningyo Joruri — as it is called in Japanese — actually exists in several incarnations that vary according to local traditions. One such tradition is Awa Ningyo Joruri, which is native to Tokushima Prefecture. Awa Ningyo Joruri is characterized by loud, simple narration and is typically performed with larger dolls than in bunraku.

But perhaps its most unique feature is the set itself, part of which is comprised of a series of *fusuma-e*, intricately painted screens that slide open to reveal image after image in rapid succession in a performance called dogugaeshi.

Twist's search for the screens on the video took him to the mountains of Tokushima. There he discovered Awa Ningyo Joruri and learned that the screens he had seen were in fact dogugaeshi screens, which were originally used in set changes, but later became performances in their own right.

Twist was enthralled by accounts by local farmers who recalled every detail of dogugaeshi they'd seen in candlelit, open-air theaters, and a legendary 88- screen dogugaeshi piqued his imagination.

But despite the art-form's former popularity, Twist was discouraged to find that the current reality was decidedly dismal compared with its fascinating folklore.

"Most of the screens I saw were torn, ripped, destroyed or rotted," explains Twist. "And that was kind of the state of the tradition itself."

Twist spent a total of four months in Japan researching the dogugaeshi craft and familiarizing himself with the intricacies of traditional Japanese puppet theater. One of his first orders of business was to find an appropriate *gidayu*, the puppet theater narrator who traditionally uses the shamisen to provide musical accompaniment.

Through the Japan Society, Twist met Yumiko Tanaka, a disciple of the late Kinshi Nozawa, the *gidayu* shamisen master who was also a Living National Treasure for bunraku. Tanaka performed as a *gidayu* for many years in local theaters and small productions, but the exclusion of women in formal bunraku prompted her to pursue new venues of expression for the shamisen.

Over the past 10 years, her collaborators outside the traditional realm have ranged from experimental rock bands to contemporary dancers. Her mastery of traditional techniques combined with a love of experimentation made her the perfect partner for Twist's project: Tanaka's sound design mixes tradition and the avant-garde to complement the contemporary take on an ancient art form.

"Dogugaeshi" received rave reviews in New York, and although both Tanaka and Twist feel some trepidation about their Japan debut, they remain positive.

"I think this is a really meaningful, thought-provoking project," says Tanaka.

"Dogugaeshi, while still around in certain areas, remains largely unknown — it's a lost tradition.

"I wonder how Japanese people will see this, how will they feel having a foreigner introduce them to a Japanese traditional performing art? I'm excited, but also a bit nervous."

Twist hopes that his Japanese audience will forgive any inaccuracies in panel designs where he directly borrowed traditional Japanese motifs. Although it was not his original intention, through his research and study of this dying art, Twist has become its inadvertent guardian.

"I've become this expert on dogugaeshi. When I went to Kawamata, the old men couldn't remember which way the screens went, but by that point I had seen so many that I could say, 'I think you have that one upside down,' " he says. "So I am aware that I am now a keeper of the tradition of some sort."

The tangible result of Twist's quest to uncover the dogugaeshi tradition is an hourlong performance that takes the viewer along that very same journey. It begins with the first tattered screens he encountered, introduces some of the characters he met along the way, and ends with a full 20-minute dogugaeshi performance on 88 screens designed by Twist himself. Don't forget to look for the white fox, Twist's recreation of a puppet he met at a museum on Awaji Island "guarding" the original screens he had seen on video.

With "Dogugaeshi," Twist is at once reviving a lost tradition and breaking new creative ground. This is one journey into the past and future you won't want to miss.

*"Dogugaeshi" will be at: the Kyoto University of Arts and Design's Shunjuza Theater on Nov. 29 at 2 p.m. (¥3,500; [075] 791-8240; [ticket@kuad.kyoto-art.ac.jp](mailto:ticket@kuad.kyoto-art.ac.jp)); Landmark Hall in Yokohama on Dec. 4 at 7 p.m. and Dec. 5 at 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. (¥4,000; [0570] 02-9999; [pia.jp/t](http://pia.jp/t)); and Kyodo Bunka Kaikan in Tokushima on Dec. 8 and 9 at 6:30 p.m. (¥1,000; [088] 622-8121; [www.kyoubun.or.jp](http://www.kyoubun.or.jp)).*



**Puppeteer Basil Twist**