

Tied to a Slapstick: Kyôgen's Strangely Familiar Physical Comedy

狂言「棒しばり」：不思議な親近感を感じさせる 狂言の身体的コメディ

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the classical Japanese kyôgen play *Tied to a Pole* as an example of physical comedy. Henri Bergson's classic treatise on *The Comic* is used as a lens to view humor in kyôgen. By examining physical comedy devices at the heart of each scene, I attempt to relate the unfamiliar, medieval kyôgen form to world comic traditions.

Keywords: Bergson, clowning, commedia dell'arte, comedy, kyôgen

概 要

この論文は日本の狂言「棒しばり」を身体的コメディとして分析する。アンリ・ベルグソンの古典的批評『喜劇的』をレンズとして用いて、狂言のユーモアを観察する。各場面で中心となる身体的コメディの要素を議論しつつ、あまり知られていない狂言の中世的型を世界の喜劇の伝統のなかに位置づける。

キーワード：狂言 喜劇 身体的コメディ ベルグソン

Because of its medieval costumes, booming voices, and slow tempo, kyôgen may appear too stylized and “classical” to be considered on the same level as Western slapstick, satire, and clowning traditions. Yet as kyôgen in the post-War years sought to reestablish itself as elegant, folk comedy separate from the more martial, austere noh, it turned to Western practitioners as long-lost comic cousins¹. Marcel Marceau’s visit in 1956 inspired young actors to don leotards and present “Mime a la Kyôgen².” After a hiatus, kyôgen’s comic potential has been tested in experiments by Shigeyama Akira with Swiss clowns³, Nomura Mansai with Shakespeare and Akutagawa masked comedy adaptations (Foley 2007; Medlock 2007)⁴, Sekine Masaru with commedia dell’arte-trained actors and scripts (Suzuki 2007)⁵, and the Theatre of Yûgen’s adaptations of Grimm and Pirandello (Ehn 2005)⁶. My own work with the Noho Theatre Group, where I have directed adaptations of plays by Shakespeare, Beckett, Woody Allen, and the Brothers Grimm (Salz 2001, 2003), leads me to believe that kyôgen shares deep similarities with its continental comic cousins.

Comic universals?

On examination of historical comedy the world over, one is struck by the limited means through which a great variety of comic situations are created. These are called *lazzi* in the Italian comedy, *shtik* in modern Western parlance, or *kata* in Japanese.⁷ They arose undoubtedly from a need by a traveling, and illiterate group of multilingual improvisers to expand a repertoire to a public of growing connoisseurs⁸. This paper examines some of these patterns of physical comedy at the heart of the performance of the traditional kyôgen *Tied to a Stick*, hoping to identify the common tools-of-the-trade of comic theatre, thereby making the strange familiar to Western readers⁹. I hope to explain how each scene contains its own type of humorous device. These set-pieces are shared of course by other plays in the repertoire, but also with comic traditions far distant in time and place.

Mechanical repetition

The French philosopher Henri Bergson provides a much-referenced definition of the comic: “The mechanical encrusted on the living.”¹⁰ Drawing on numerous genres of literature as well as everyday life foibles, he distills the comic to a particular sensibility: it occurs whenever humans appear to be acting according to some mechanical rules, rather than to spontaneous, fluid behavior. He traces our shared sense of the comic to potent memories from childhood games:

- the jack-in-the-box suppressed explosion;
- the string-puppet marionette, whose seemingly spontaneous action is seen to be controlled by outside forces;
- the snowball of escalating events which drives a slight mishap into a disaster of epic proportions

As if to illustrate his theory by exemplifying it, he tries to capture the elusive comic with in a universal law: “Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement.” For Bergson, stage humor involves repetition (as an expression of “absent-mindedness”), inversion (topsy-turvydom), and “the reciprocal interference of series.” This latter refers to a variety of situations where a set of events are simultaneously misinterpreted as referring to another entirely (a foreigner mistakenly attempting to hail a police car instead of a taxi).

Kyôgen as expression of The Comic

While Bergson uses examples from jokes, stories, and everyday life, he also drew from Moliere's comedies, which of course were based firmly in commedia dell'arte traditions. How delighted he would have been had he turned his gaze to kyôgen! The childlike simplicity of these sketches of medieval quotidian life, expressed through mechanically precise techniques, would appear to be ideal actualizations of his principles.

Without falling into a comically mechanical point-by-point comparison of his theory with kyôgen, I would like to examine the classic farce *Tied to a Pole* as an expert combination of comic devices in the service to an escalating comedy of punishment and crime. First, some caveats are needed. Not all comic devices are present: there are few pure farcical elements in the comedy of manners found in *Futari Bakama* (Two in one *hakama*) or *Hagi Daimyo* (The Bush-clover Lord), in the wordplay of *Tsukuzukushi* or *Mikazuki* (For better or verse), or the absurd fantasy of *Tôzumo* (Chinese wrestling) or *Kusabira* (mushrooms). Yet there is an ample stock of familiar, polished comic patterns ("shtik"), artfully arranged to transform a rather simple story—despite being tied up by their Master, Servants manage to get drunk on his liquor anyway—into a twisting, wacky, pride-pricking comedy of almost constant interest and humor.

Tied to a Slapstick as segmented slapstick

Bôshibari (『棒縛り』) (translated variously as *Tied to a Pole*, *Tied to a Stick*) is one of the most popular plays in the repertoire¹¹. Easy to understand, primordial in its opposition of impossible constraints with unstoppable urges, it is a guaranteed laugh-riot on provincial schooltours, within noh programs, or on tours abroad¹². Eminently comprehensible from only a brief summary, it is popular with foreigners abroad and at home—a long-running version at Kyoto's Gion Corner distills the plot to a rollicking eight minutes of cut to the chase slapstick¹³. As Julie Iezzi has noted¹⁴, it is no accident that it has been translated so early and so often, as it works equally well on the page and stage as few other kyôgen do.

Precisely, because it is so well-known, however, I believe that *Bô-Shibari* may not be fully appreciated for its story-telling craft, and use of a variety of comic techniques. Kyôgen has polished these techniques into formal *kata* over the centuries until the codified forms are clear, potent, and beautiful. Within their controlled constraints, they retain frameworks for individual inspiration and ensemble spontaneity. When performed by masters or even inspired amateurs, it is silly and wise, predictable and surprising, in the way of the finest comedy.

The following segmented subheads refer to the comic device used in the sections of the play (here referred to as scenes). They are not so divided in the text or in rehearsal; they are my own nomenclature, seeking to use familiar principles to examine the unfamiliar (to Westerners) forms. In doing so, I examine this kyôgen not as an exotic, culturally-imbedded "classic comedy," but a series of recognizable, comic "bits." Thus I hope to remove obstacles to appreciation, to place kyôgen next to its cousin, commedia dell'arte as world-class, universally-understood, sophisticated Ur-physical comedy. First I will attempt to locate different types of humor, all familiar from European traditions such as commedia dell'arte clowns and their more modern descendants (Wilde, Chaplin, Lucy, Bean) in situation comedy:

Comic segments in *Tied to a Pole (Bôshibari)*

1. Confessing true motives
2. The Ruse: coaxing a confederate to enter the conspiracy
3. The Double-ruse: betraying a confederate
4. Bickering buddies reconciling
5. Absent-mindedly discovering the Key
6. Overcoming obstacles
7. Self-inflicting humiliation
8. Snowballing frustration
9. Eureka! Overcoming the impossible
10. Drunken singing and dancing
11. Mistaking identity: cat and mice
12. Rout, minor reversal, rout!

In the next section, I will discuss each pattern as a recurring motif in world comedy, show its use in *kyôgen* generally by referring to specific examples from the repertory of 200 or so extant plays, then elaborate on their expression in *Bo Shibari*. Each **boldfaced** phrase sums up the action of the segment.

The Confession of True Motives

The aside to the audience has been around since Aristophanes, a stage whisper intended to create a conspiratorial familiarity between speaker and spectator, to narrate plot points in a precise yet casual manner, and to give the illusion that we are hearing the inner thoughts of the lead character without distortion. They can be wildly comic tension-tamers (the drunken, equivocating Porter of *Macbeth*), or deadly serious (Hamlet's soliloquies).

Most *kyôgen* begin with a direct address to the audience, known as a *nanori*, or "name-taking" speech. The character announces who he is, what he is doing, then the play proper begins. Often his announcements are echoed in his subsequent instructions to servants or others, providing a reassuring confirmation of honesty.

Tied to a Pole begins with a name-taking speech by the Master, eloquent in its brevity: **The Master is going away, and since he doesn't trust his two servants to not drink up his liquor, he must somehow constrain them**¹⁵. The details of how to accomplish this are not provided in full frontal declamation, thus leaving the spectators with the riddle—how will he, a single man, manage to physically contain them? Having let us, the spectator, in on his true motive¹⁶, we sit up straight to witness how the plan will be executed.

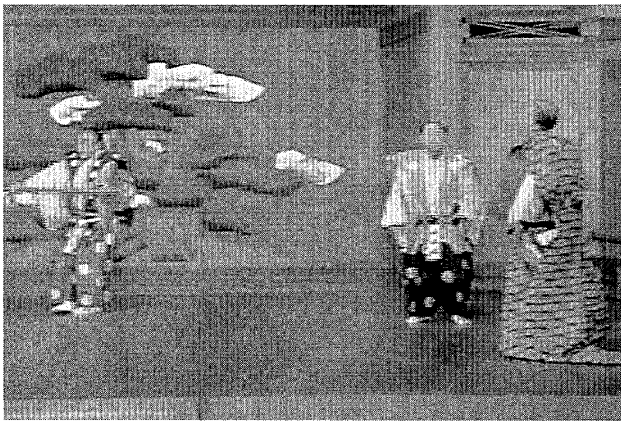
The Ruse

Comic protagonists often devise elaborate plans, presented to spectators in advance, who may then enjoy the outcomes both favorable and unexpected. Plots often begin with a lie, or misdirection, which we anticipate gleefully precisely because the antagonists do not share our superior vantage point.

Despite *kyôgen*'s full-frontal style of declamation, the motivations and identities are disguised with fine words, deceptive actions, and actual masks.

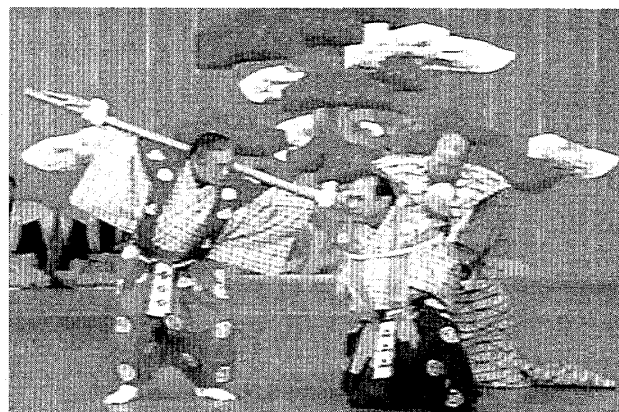


The Master in *Tied to a Pole* proceeds to carry out his deception, After **coaxing the gullible yet sneaky Tarô Kaja to brainstorm a feasible plan, they then cajole the boastful Jirô Kaja into demonstrating his stick-fighting maneuvers.** The two Servants' distinct personalities are thus coincidentally clearly introduced as, **with Tarô's help, the Master manages to tie up Jirô Kaja**¹⁷.



The Double-ruse: betrayal of a confederate

While it is enjoyable to watch characters act inappropriately because of misdirection (what Bergson refers to as *the reciprocal interference of series*), it is doubly so when there is a role reversal of perpetrator and victim. Somehow, as with tragedy, there is an ethical sense of villainy corrected when a deceiver is "hoisted on his own petard." Kyôgen often ends in an on stage scolding, off stage chase, or warning of excommunication: "you won't be invited to this year's festival."



In a near-perfect turning of the tables, now **the gloating Tarô holds Jirô down, while the Master binds him**. Again, the Master proves masterful in his utilization of the predictable boastful rivalry of the Servants. Having divided and conquered, **the Master sets off on his journey, confident that he has succeeded in protecting his storehouse, leaving the two Servants trussed and truculent**.

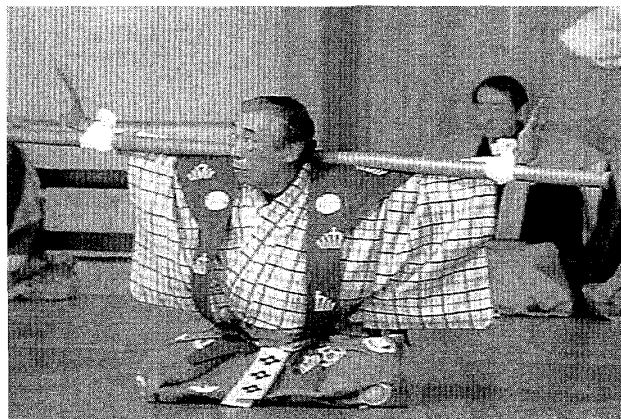
Bickering buddies reconcile

Buddy banter, often in duos of complementary characters, fuels eternal comedy. Whether “straight man and joker (comic and foil) of traditional vaudeville, or *boke* and *tsukomi* (fool and prod) of its Japanese version, a pair’s squabbles and reconciliations are the dramatic engine driving much comedy. Escalating and decelerating according to the twists in the plot, the tense relationship of friendly rivals is a steady source of amusement.

In *kyôgen* plays, two servants, a husband and wife, a con man and gull, a Priest and a believer, or two friends are pingpong partners in the comic banter.

In *Boshibari*, **the seemingly helpless Servants first blame each other’s greediness for their predicament, bickering like children until they realize how silly they are: they are both to blame**. They laugh, once more reconciled as brothers in oppression. This sudden exaggerated escalation of anger that then explodes with the prick of laughter again reestablishes the preeminently comic basis of the situation: workers united in brotherly affection against the abusive Master.

Absent-mindedly discovering the key



Bergson notes that repetition is funny in comedy because it betokens an absentmindedness to the flow of life around us. While preoccupied mentally, we fall into seemingly inextricable holes, then by similarly disoriented thinking manage to extricate ourselves. Thinking outside of the box, we manage to escape the box. The body is seen as more intuitively intelligent than the brain, and we laugh at this inherent contradiction.

Kyôgen heroes often turn the tables with spontaneous song and dance, poetry, plays on words, or inspired trickery. The casual manner in which things seem to turn out well creates a comforting sense of destiny and comeuppance detached from willful functional thinking.

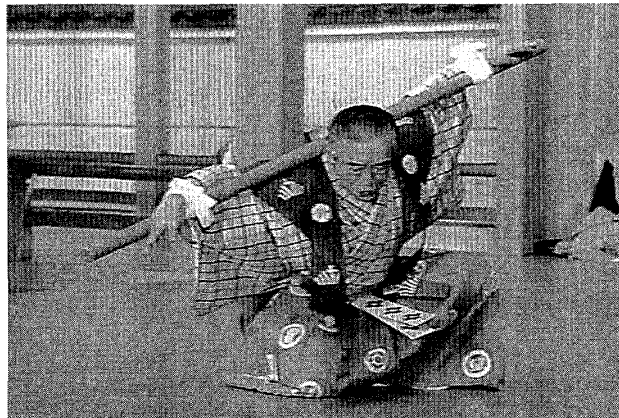
Now more than ever desirous of quaffing the Master’s sake, yet **having observed the predicament from all angles, the Servants seem resigned to their fate**. Then a chance flap of his hands while pondering his predicament reveals the answer to Jirô. Realizing that **with even meager mobility there**

is hope, he approaches his task.

Overcoming obstacles

Comedy depends on the hero or heroine being thwarted by hurdles, blocks, or complications from his or her desires. Humor can arise from an unnecessarily complicated way of solving a simple problem (Rube Goldberg style), by the escalation of number or difficulty of obstacles (snowball), or by the increasing intensity of the pursuit (jack-in-the-box). Each overcoming of a barrier is a crest in a growing wave of accomplishment and disappointment, a Sisyphean endless cycle of desire, delusory victory, and defeat.

In kyôgen Lords memorize abstruse poetry, Servants manage to purchase rare items, while Husbands escape their Wives' prying eyes, or even accomplish an effortless divorce. Yet just as quickly, their apparent victories are upended, and they are back to square one or even worse off than before, justly rewarded for their hubris, or simple mindedness.



Tied to a Pole reaches a peak as **the clever Servants, opening the storehouse door, loosen the lid off the sake-jug, pick up a large *sakazuki* cup and begin to drink**, employing kyôgen's signature onomatopoeic language: *garagara* to open the heavy storehouse door, *muri muri* to loosen the lid. The actions with sounds pose an enjoyable riddle, as audience members young and old delight in readily understanding the mime with accompanying sounds. The fact that the men are respectively pilloried and trussed while performing these delicate moves, then carrying a precious purloined liquid, provides a heightened sense of exhilaration. The appreciative gulps of Tarô completes (temporarily) this parody of a drinking scene as human desire seems once again to have overcome the constraints of society.

Self-inflicted humiliation

Pain is funny when:

- a) it is not too serious;
- b) inflicted on the strong by the weak;
- c) self-inflicted through foolish action (or inaction) ;
- d) happening to someone else.

Comic injury can hurt one's feelings or actual physical self. Yet unlike in tragedy, comic pain can almost always be avoided. Laughter erupts from the recognition that human desire coupled with stupidity (a temporary absent-mindedness) causes unnecessary pain.

Kyôgen stories have their share of comic agony. Tongue-tied Lords are made to recite poetry, beligerent and arrogant masters are frightened (*Buaku*), thrown from horses (*Shidohôgaku*), bested in sumo by servants or a mosquito (*Kazumo*) [Mosquito Wrestling], teased, bullied, insulted, and chased by wives (*Kagami Otoko* [Mirror Man], *Okô Sako*, *Kamabara*) [Suicide by Sickle], made foolish by children (*Igui*, *Iroha*). Gods fall on their rears (*Kaminari*) [Thundergod], robbers are bested by strong women (*Konusubito* [Child thief]), even the King of Hell is thrown ignobly to the ground by mere mortals (*Rubihiki* [Neck-pulling]). A small fissure in normal power relations gives way to escalating frenzy and failure, as grins become giggles and then guffaws.



Having conquered the handicap of being tethered, **Jirô attempts to drink, yet finding the bowl too far from his mouth, splashes his face.** That he would even *try* to drink in this way is patently absurd; that he does so even after obvious failure is hilarious.

Snowballing frustration

Bergson notes the childish pleasure at seeing tiny problems escalate into major ones, an errant thread from a sweater that proceeds to unravel the entire garment. Relying on the repetition principle, we know what to expect, but then the result goes beyond such expectations, causing extra ripples of laughter. Whereas life in reality is a pathetic declension into illness, old age, and torpor, comic life expresses a self-Stoking vitality of increasing exuberance.

Kyôgen contain numerous repetitions: lists, poems, songs, instructions, best-of-three sumo matches, escalating insults, and exchanges of sake, song, and dance. Spoken or enacted carefully and slowly the first time, the repetitions maintain interest through their speed, parody of the original, and variety. And escalation: the snowballing of comic agony is a fundamental source of kyôgen comedy. An attack by Owl-spirits (*Fukuro*) and giant Mushrooms (*Kusabira*) escalates into a total rout of the would-be *Yamabushi* Wizard. Con men posing as Jizo statues in *Rokujizo* (Six Jizos) and *Bushi* (The Sculptor) are forced into a manic frenzy of disguised poses by a picky patron. Bullying Lords (*Kobu-uri*, *Futari Daimyo*) and thieves (*Kakiyamabushi*, The Persimmon Thief, *Bonsan*, The Dwarf-tree Thief) are forced to imitate absurd songs and games and animals. Sometimes there is a doubling of this comic escalation along parallel tracks: the Master in *Sakka* and *Kuchimane*, Mouth-imitation grows increasingly incensed as his Servant follows his every word and action, which of course leads the Servant to greater violence; the Guest is in turn insulted, his ear pinched, his shoulder thwacked, then finally thrown to ground unceremoniously. Initially effective plays backfire in a series of spiraling explosions, ending in a chase, a rout, or an ultimate deviant action.

Not only does **the longed-for sake spray comically all over Jirô's sputtering face**, but he dou-

bles-up on this foolishness by **repeating the act, again and again**. This humiliating drenching provokes special pathos when we recognize in his plight an allusion to mythical elusive elixirs of fairy-tales and legend, a Sisyphean thirst taken to absurdity. Jirô's plight is reinforced through witness Tarô's seriousness, as he shakes his head and mutters, "What are you doing?! What a waste!"

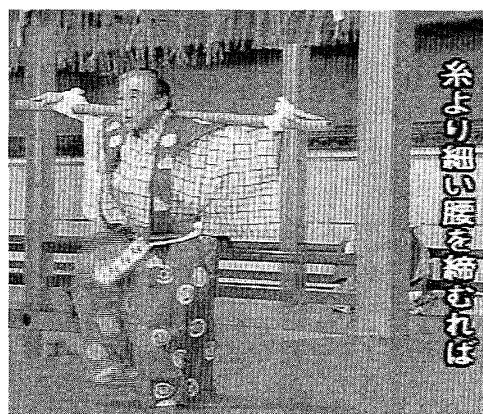
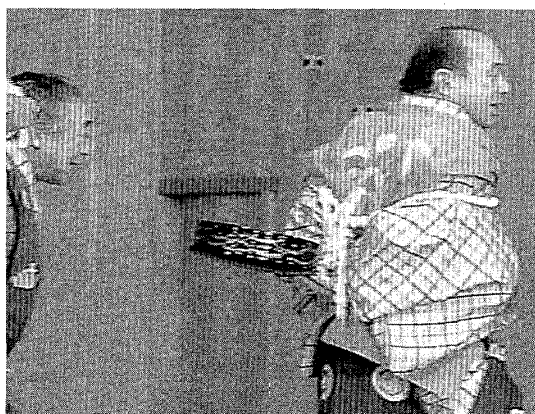


Tarô's abject humiliation is further debased by Jirô, sympathetic to his friend but still thirsty, who demands another cup of the delicious sake. A delightful cycle of comic slapstick ensues: Jirô attempts to drink with increasingly awkward results, even as Tarô cautions him not to spill the sake. Then as Jirô gratefully guzzles, he expresses delight that further fans the flames of Tarô's desire, who pursues the sake, and on and on...

Eureka! Overcoming the impossible (again) !

Once a pattern occurs in comedy, we are delighted by its reappearance. Familiar punchlines telegraphed in advance are appreciated, like old friends enjoyed for the anticipation of their visit as well as their expected arrival. They confirm our faith in the cozy, mechanistic world we are watching, while providing a comforting sense of appropriate symmetry.

While a few kyôgen end with a twist—*Busu* (Poison Sugar), and *Enmeibukuro* (Bag of Fortune) — that fools the audience along with the characters, most provide sufficient clues along the way to defuse any suspense. We know early on that the Husband, visiting mistress *Hanago* under pretense of a zen retreat, will get his comeuppance from his formidable Wife, who has replaced his servant hiding beneath a kimono pretending to meditate in his master's stead. Yet our enjoyment increases as we see how the Husband digs himself ever deeper in a hole with his post-coital reveries, anticipating how hard his wife will clobber him with the shovel.



Once again in *Tied to a Pole*, the Servants escape a seemingly impossible bind. Jirô discovers that although his hands are tied, he can move them behind his back. **Jirô holds the cup, serving Tarô**, an awkward (and by normal standards, rude) pouring posture that is nonetheless effective. We grin at the continuing exchange of sake between the two. With both drinking their fill, the “second act” comes to a close. Like *Busu*, where Servants gobble up prohibited sugar, we are delighted that they have solved the riddle, yet anxious for their sake, awaiting the imminent return of the Master.

Drunken parodies of singing and dancing



Drunken stumbling and recovery from inappropriate or inept words and actions caused by inebriation by drink or drugs, sleepiness, absent-mindedness, or plain stupidity are staples of physical and situational comedy. “Normal” spectators delight in their own distinction from and appreciation of the grotesque antics of these parodies of nature: illness and handicaps, nervousness and sleepiness, sloppiness and inability to control one’s tongue, limbs, or objects.

Kyôgen’s staple characters are either actually handicapped (blind, lame, stuttering), or they are physically or mentally incompetent, blinded by greediness, arrogance, or laziness to do foolish things, they then defend themselves from the consequences ever more foolishly. They are offered as an anti-model of what not to do, a corrective to morally crippled, abusive, protagonists lacking moderation and common sense of all kinds. Kyôgen often end with drunken singing, dancing, or other attempts at immensely challenging actions while under the influence (*Kirokuda*).

The increasingly tipsy Servants take turns pouring, with increasing sloppiness. Then they sing and dance for each other. Although other plays contain tipsy dances, these are not drunken parodies, but spirited renditions—yet without arm or fan movements¹⁸. The humor is one that appeals to our connoisseurship: those familiar with the original elegant *kata* are tickled by these truncated articulations, doubly-deformed by the constrictive ropes, as well as by drunken surges and off-balance lurches. Instead of pointing with a fan, Tarô points with his nose; Jiro’s graceful arm movements become exaggerated with arcs of the pole. Here is a medieval or Beckettian metaphor for humankind’s ability to achieve ecstatic release even with in restrictive shackles.

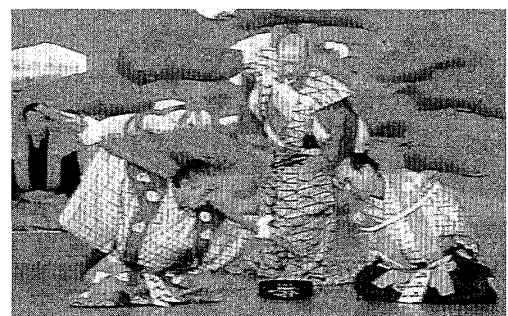
Mistaken identity

Disguise and its object, mistaken identity, or its grander frame, mistaken context, are central to comedy of manners, satire, and farce. Characters speak or act wildly inappropriately, assuming that they are

dealing with a different person or situation than they actually are. Spectator laughter stems from the gap between their own understanding and the characters' mistaken perception, as well as anticipation of a satisfying comeuppance. We enjoy seeing them making fools of themselves, because we know eventually they will discover their humiliating mistake and be appropriately punished. Unlike the aside and conspiracy of the Ruse above, to successfully prolong the agony requires a sleight-of-hand double-presentation, simultaneously revealing different things to the knowing audience and unaware protagonist.

Kyôgen characters rarely behave as one would expect. To gain what they desire, or more often, prevent punishment for what they've done, they often resort to lies, petty thievery, disguise, stolen identities, or false bravery and wisdom. Servants make up boldly convincing lies (*Shimizu*), while thieves (*Bonsan* [the Dwarf-Tree Thief],) become transparent imitations of animals. Con men portray merchants, merchants sell bitter persimmons, quack doctors false cures, and Servants in fear for their lives produce crocodile tears (*Nijuseki*) or become ghosts (*Buaku*). *Buaku* employs a mask for disguise, but at other times a magical transformation takes place: Foxes become Priests (*Tsurigitsune*) (Fox-trapping), Badgers transform to Nuns (*Tanuki no haratsuzumi*), and Mountain Wizard yamabushi pretend to be Snails (*Kagyu*). While Lafleur argues that such fluidity of station expresses the "gekokujo" (下克上) topsy-turvydom of medieval Japan (1983), I think it rather reflects the universal fascination for false fronts and confused mistaken identity of the comedy genre. Much of our enjoyment stems from the ridiculous disguise, but also from the inability of the Protagonist to see through so transparent a ruse.

Bôshibari effectively squeezes laughs from the Master's return by observing it on a "split-screen" with the drunken Servants. Arriving down the stage-right *hashigakari* bridge, **the Master announces his return as an aside, then enters the main playing area to surreptitiously observe the naughty servants.** This whets our interest in what will happen when the discovery is made, yet allows us to enjoy the Servants carousing a little longer. Our expectations are thwarted temporarily when the Servants, in turn, mistake the face of the angry Master in the sake cup for an apparition, perhaps they think a reflection of their own guilty consciences. The fact that they so readily believe this, and that the Master plays along, prolongs the final rout into an absurd, poetic moment, the drunk ballad parody of the noh play *Matsukaze* (Pihong Wond)'s reflection of the moon in the salt-buckets.



Rout, minor reversal, rout

How to end a farce is inevitably problematic. Tying up neatly all the loose ends provides a certain satisfaction of ethical propriety, aesthetic harmony, and order restored. Yet leaving them dangling can draw out the laughter, and provide a potentially happier (or at least debatable) end. Finally, a braided ending may show that the crimes and punishments will continue ad infinitum, an eternal comedy of action and reaction.

Most kyôgen plays end in a chase scene, where the duped or insulted antagonist chases off the pro-

tagonist, shouting “Someone catch him! I’ll get you yet!” (*yarumaizo!*) until all are off the bridgeway and through the curtain. Occasionally a severe scolding will complete the play cleanly (*shikaridome*), as characterization ends on stage, players leave the stage as actors. Only in a few plays is there a deep transformation at the end, such as in *Akubô*, where a villain decides to trod the path of devotion after having his garments exchanged while he is sleeping by a Priest he has abused. This results in a deep comedy that goes beyond mere farce perhaps.



The typical “*yarumaizo*” chase that concludes most *kyôgen* is, in *Tied to a Pole*, given a twist. **The pilloried Jirô, too drunk to care about his Master’s authority or wrath, swings at him with his stick, temporarily beating him back. Newly enraged, the Master beats the tethered Tarô, who now raises his arms in laughing, drunken surrender.** The play thus ends with a nice symmetry, Tarô parodying his prowess with the stick-fighting, now pilloried to the pole, and drunk to boot.

Conclusion

We find in *Tied to a Pole* a vast repertory of comic devices used in independent segments accumulating to tell a coherent story. The techniques of humor are shared with comedy the world over: ruses, reversals, betrayals, mistaken identities, escalating repetitions, sudden crests and subsidings of emotion, and drunken parodies. *Tied to a Pole* is a particularly refined and varied exemplar of *kyôgen*’s comic verve. Each scene is polished and psychologically-motivated, at least according to the aberrant psychology of the obtuse characters. Unlike the verbal banter and punning of many *kyôgen* plays, the physical comedy is especially varied and exciting:

- stick-fighting
- binding the servants’ hands
- stealing into the liquor storehouse
- exchanging cups of wine
- singing and dancing
- mock-serious battle ending in a rout

Yet the spontaneous vigor of slapstick is framed in rigor: *kyôgen*’s *kata* shell. Outrageous humor is encased in a precise, minimalistic, elegant, and supremely codified form. This can frequently become dry mummification when uninspired professionals perform it by rote (yet understandable when its popularity for school tours means a single actor can perform the same play 200 times per year!). When performed by masters able to infuse individual flavor into these tried-and-tested recipes, or amateurs less interested in

smooth form than in getting laughs, the results are always a delicious surprise.

Kimono and fans, archaic language and feudal customs, formal hierarchies and stylized physicality may place kyôgen at a classical and cultural remove. I hope here to have proved that its familiar, physical humor shares with world comedy an energy and precision, simplicity and absurdity, that resonates as profound, popular physical comedy.

Notes

- 1 Kobayashi Seki's history of post-war kyôgen (2007) is the best available in English.
- 2 Shigeyama Sensaku IV writes rather ashamedly of his leotarded experiment in *Sengoro Banashi*.
- 3 Beginning in 1989, Akira Shigeyama has produced tours by the Swiss traditional clown performers, demonstrated comparative clown technique with actors from Kyoto's sister city Prague, and is currently attempting a joint performance of commedia dell'arte and Kyôgen.
- 4 Mansai's critically acclaimed direction of *Rashomon* (Yabu no naka) and Takahashi Yasunari's *Comedy of Errors* (Machigae Kyôgen まちがえ狂言) have been popular tour-de-forces employing quick-changes, a majority of masked-actors, and much physical comedy (see Medlock and Foley in ATJ Spring 2007).
- 5 Sekine has directed amateur and professional actors in Italian-comedy based new kyôgen plays. His version of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* is reviewed in Suzuki ATJ Spring 2007.
- 6 This San Francisco-based fusion group, founded in 1981, has performed plays by Aristophanes, Beckett, Pirandello, Shakespeare, Yeats in noh-kyôgen style. See founder Doi Yuriko's article in the 25th anniversary book (Ehn ed., 2007).
- 7 *Kata* have much broader meaning than mere comic bits, referring to patterned forms of any sort that occur in music, dance, acting, or stage business in performing and martial arts.
- 8 Dario Fo's analysis of the touring craftsman of early Italian comedy is exemplary.
- 9 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 狂言とコンメディア テッラルテ国際フォーラム (Kyôgen Commedia Dellarte International Forum) held Sept 28-30, 2007 at the Instituto Italiano di Cultura in Tokyo.
- 10 *The Comic*. (Lerire), 1901.
- 11 The profusion of published translations in English attests to this popularity:
 - 1882. *Pinioned*. Anonymous. *Chrysanthemum*. 2, 8: 353-361.
 - 1968. *Tied to a Pole*. Translated by Richard N. McKinnon. In *Selected Plays of Kyôgen*. Tokyo: Uniprint Inc., 13-26.
 - 1988. *Tied to a Stick*. Translated by Eileen Kato. In *Twelve Plays of the Noh and Kyôgen Theaters*. Edited by Karen Brazell. Cornell University East Asia Papers, 50, 169-186.
 - 1989. *Tied to a Stick*. Translated by Don Kenny. In *The Kyôgen Book: An Anthology of Japanese Classical Comedies*. Tokyo: The Japan Times, 37-48.
 - 2002. *Bôshibari*. Translated by John Kuzel. In "Reflections in a Bowl of Sake: The Kyôgen Play *Bôshibari* as a Window into Muromachi Society." Ikenobo Junior College Bulletin. 32, 15-24.
- 12 Both Shigeyama Sengorô (now Sensaku IV) and Sennojô devote chapters of their reminiscences to these school tour performances in their youth, citing them as formative of their eventual style.
- 13 Gion Corner was founded in 1969 to entertain foreigners with little to do in the evenings during the Osaka Expo. It now presents seven different traditional arts, including maiko dance and tea ceremony, at the hall next to the Gion Kaburenjo in downtown Kyoto.
- 14 Iezzi 2007.
- 15 There is minor variation in the play's text, but great differences in performance. I use the NHK video documentation of a performance by brothers Sengoro and Sennjô Shigeyama with Shigeyama Chuzaburo as a base for most of the following.
- 16 Compare this with *Busu*, Poison Sugar, where we are every bit in the dark as the servants are as to the true nature of the fearful barrel of "poison"—it turns out to be precious molasses).
- 17 In the Izumi school. Tarô is the lead, demonstrating the stick-fighting. In the Okura school version this is the only kyôgen play where the second servant, Jiro Kaja, is the main player. One actor told me that this was devised to insure that a younger son of a certain historical actor could get larger parts.

- 18 "It takes more than two drinks to get drunk," explained Jûrô Zenchiku (discussion, Commedia and Kyôgen Symposium, Tokyo, Sept 2007). He also noted the hilarity of the disjunction between the pinioned Jirô's dance and the lyrics to the *kouta* short-song *17 year-old*, which is about a man's longing for a young girl whose kimono flutters on a long drying pole, and who is so thin when he hugs her. The verbal humor of the play here, and in the *Matsukaze* parody below, go beyond the scope of the present paper.

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