

## NISHIKI-KAGE-E IN BUNRAKU

### A Collaboration of Ikeda-gumi and Traditional Puppetry in Japan

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Mitsue Ikeda, who has impressed audiences in both the UK and USA with her stunning back-projected Nishiki-Kage-e shows (see *TML* 16 and 18), entertained a Bunraku audience in Japan this summer. Bunraku is a type of traditional Japanese puppet theatre founded in Osaka, where Mitsue is based, at the beginning of the 17th century. The National Bunraku Theatre offered a summer holiday programme for a fortnight focusing especially on children. The morning programme consisted of three parts. First, a brief dramatic scene from *Hidakagawa Iriai Zakura*, famous for the transformation of the princess into a monstrous white boa; second, a short workshop 'Guidance for Bunraku Beginners' including the opportunity for the children to operate a Bunraku puppet; and third, *Kaminari Daiko* (the story of Torokichi of Thunder and the Tora-chan family), in which Mitsue projected a series of beautiful firework slides in the final scene using two furos – Japanese wooden lanterns.

While traditional Bunraku repertoire lacks comedy in general, *Kaminari Daiko* by Sadao



The back-stage set-up, showing the two furos for the fireworks slides in detail (bottom)



Osada, a revised version of the first production in 2014, was intended as a comedy suitable for children. In Japanese folklore, a particular kind of god makes thunder and lightning. In this story, a trainee god is not good enough at making thunder so he falls from the sky. After some hard training, however, with the Tora-chan family who sell drums as a business, he flies back to the sky as an expert drummer – quite an educational plot! As his return coincides with the Tenjin Matsuri Festival, beautiful fireworks accompany his journey back to the sky.

When she accepted the invitation, Mitsue faced two challenges: rear projection is impossible in the Bunraku theatre and the screen is blue in colour, not of white/beige Japanese paper. She put a great deal of effort, throughout the months of preparation, into realising the beautiful night sky just as she imagined it, designing and making all the firework slides especially. Personally, I was hugely impressed by the final result and my memory of seeing, with my family, her fireworks in the show stays firmly in my mind. Mitsue commented: "I felt like I was projecting a beautiful and fun dream ... it was hard work but fulfilling." She adds that the show was not without risks – the large cloud seen in the illustrations appeared as soon as the fireworks were over, and sometimes Mitsue did not get out of the way quickly enough!

The National Bunraku Theatre is located in downtown Osaka, a great tourist spot nowadays for its vivacity and friendly atmosphere. They prepare free leaflets in English as well as Korean and Chinese if you are visiting there. Mitsue was delighted to introduce them to the art of the magic lantern – and she learnt a great deal in return.

Mitsue's beautiful fireworks slides

