

Man of Bunraku

Tamao Yoshida (Interviewer: Shizuo Yamakawa)

Yamakawa: Hello, everyone, I'm Shizuo Yamakawa. Let me explain what I'm doing here on this stage. Master Tamao became a puppeteer in the first place because he was not good at speaking. He chose puppeteering because it was not necessary to talk, and that is why I'm here today to help by interviewing him. Master Tamao, is it true that you don't like to speak?

Tamao: Yes. I am just not a talker. I'm also tone-deaf, you know, so trying to memorize the cues in the *shamisen* accompaniment takes me much longer than you might expect. That's why I'm a mediocre puppeteer.

Yamakawa: This hall is certainly a little different from Osaka's National Bunraku Theatre. I've been told that it seats 1,800 people. So, although I see a few empty seats, the audience in this hall is incredibly large.

Well now, where shall we start? I've heard that you're an avid fan of the Hanshin Tigers baseball team.

Tamao: For the moment, yes. (laughter) I'm actually a Nankai Hawks fan, you see. (applause) But right now I'm a Hanshin Tigers fan. Even though the team has been renamed the Daiei Hawks, when I say 'Hawks' I mean the Nankai Hawks.

Yamakawa: I see. Daiei and Hanshin were pitted against each other in the Japan Series, weren't they?

Tamao: That's right.

Yamakawa: That must have been awkward.

Tamao: Yes, it was. I still can't help wondering why the Hawks had to become the Daiei team.

Yamakawa: Were the Nankai Hawks better?

Tamao: Yes, they were. The Nankai Hawks were real hawks.

Yamakawa: Real hawks? Is that right?

Tamao: Yes, they had all the qualities of the Japanese hawk, though their name came from the English, of course.

Yamakawa: Anyway, Master Tamao, I know you are a great baseball fan because when

I visited your home even the slippers had the Tigers emblem on them.

Tamao: Ah, the slippers, yes. When you came to my house, I was wearing those Tigers slippers all the time. Only they aren't really slippers. They're sandals. (laughter)

Yamakawa: Right, sandals.

I'd like to ask you a little about your art. You have had an extremely long career with many accomplishments, but not being a talker wasn't your only motivation for becoming a puppeteer, was it?

Tamao: No, it wasn't. After graduating from school I worked at a company for a year as an office boy. It was a manufacturing company, so if you had graduated from a technical college you could conceivably become president one day. College graduates certainly did excellent work. They were going on business trips to Tokyo for the boss just two or three months after starting at the company. They did a great job and were given lots of responsibility.

But after about a year there, when I looked around me I noticed that office boys didn't get promoted to very good positions. They wound up in charge of office supplies or some trifling job like that. I learned that night school wouldn't get me anywhere in the company either, so I couldn't see any point in working there. I was getting restless and thinking of quitting, and that's when our neighbor, the wife of Tamakoh (later named Tamasuke) and a good friend of my mother's, said, "Well, if that's the case, why don't you have him join Bunraku?" I'd never even seen Bunraku. Monjuro (Monjuro Kiritake) lived in our neighborhood, as well as Tamatoku, who later became Tatsugoro (Tatsugoro Yoshida). People like that, as well as the man who later became Eiza (Eiza Yoshida). You could say it was a puppeteer village, there were so many living in the area.

So thanks to our neighbor, my mother suggested that I at least have a look at Bunraku. I've never spent a single day unemployed in my life. As soon as I left school, I took my CV down to the employment agency and immediately joined a company. I kept working there while I went to watch Bunraku every Sunday, straight through until I changed jobs. Saturdays weren't holidays like they are now. I must have gone about three times when the puppeteer who later became Kanjuro (Kanjuro Kiritake)—he was the one I felt closest to—and all those who were around my age said, "So are you going to be a puppeteer?" as if they were really eager for me to join them. And I thought,

“Well, if all of them are puppeteers, I should be able to do it, too. Maybe I’ll give it a try.” Puppeteers don’t have to talk. To be a *gidayu* (narrator) or a *shamisen* player—*shamisen* players don’t have to talk much either—requires skill and you have to start practicing from childhood. They told me that with puppeteering you start with the legs. So being a puppeteer, which meant you could get away without talking, seemed like a good idea.

Although I hate talking, I really wanted to become a policeman or something like that. But this puppeteering seemed like a good job, so I joined.

Yamakawa: I see. So when you first joined Bunraku, what type of work do you do?

Tamao: Well, first of all, although it’s called *ashizukai* (leg puppeteer), you start out as the *ashimochi* (leg holder).

Yamakawa: The *ashimochi*?

Tamao: Yes. You hold the puppet’s legs and walk. You walk, then stop, then sit, and once you sit you hold that pose without moving for about twenty minutes. That’s holding the legs.

Yamakawa: For twenty minutes?

Tamao: That’s right. The *omozukai* (main puppeteer) is on the right, and the *ashizukai* is in the very middle holding the legs. If the puppet is sitting, he holds the legs in a sitting position for as long as twenty minutes. He’s just holding them, so he’s not an *ashizukai* at all: an *ashizukai* moves about the stage in various ways in time to the *shamisen*. When you start out, though, you spend about a year and a half as an *ashizukai*.

Yamakawa: That sounds like really hard work.

Tamao: It certainly is.

Yamakawa: Were you able to stand it?

Tamao: Yes, I was.

Yamakawa: Didn’t you ever want to quit?

Tamao: Oh, no. You see, I couldn’t quit anyway, and I just figured that this was part of the training, so I held the legs.

Yamakawa: Do people still do that today?

Tamao: Yes, even today. You start out with immobile legs—holding the legs of a puppet that doesn’t move much or doesn’t have much action is the first step. Then, if you have some skill, from about the second year you can begin manipulating the legs.

Once you start on moving legs, you've made it past the worst part and you start to enjoy it. When you first start holding the legs you don't understand a word the *gidayu* (narrator) is saying, but after being an *ashizukai* for about two years you naturally start to catch on.

Yamakawa: So that's why people say it takes ten years as an *ashizukai*, ten years as a *hidarizukai* (left hand puppeteer) and another ten years as an *omozukai* (main puppeteer) to become a full-fledged puppeteer.

Tamao: Yes.

Yamakawa: And before that, you have to endure one and a half to two years as an *ashimochi*.

Tamao: Yes, you have to be able to get through that.

Yamakawa: That must be very difficult.

Tamao: It is. That's why today we have a training system where the trainees are *ashizukai*. They start their training with that.

Yamakawa: I see. So they actually skip one step of the traditional training.

Tamao: Yes, but once they've finished the training program where they learn how to operate the legs, when they finally begin performing on the Bunraku stage, they still spend quite a long time holding legs. So at the beginning of their careers as professional puppeteers, they work as *ashimochi* for quite some time. Some people get fed up with it.

Yamakawa: How about you? Did you get fed up with it?

Tamao: No, no, because there was no training system then. I started off as an *ashimochi* from the beginning. With our trainees, we teach them to manipulate the legs at the start because if they spent every day just holding legs still, they wouldn't stay.

Yamakawa: No, not today.

Tamao: No. Some *ashimochi* quit right at the beginning of the training program.

Yamakawa: I have a puppet here named Osono. She doesn't appear in the play currently being performed at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka. She's from the scene with the sake shop in the play *Hadesugata Onna Maiginu*. Master Tamao, as you usually perform the *tachiyaku* (male characters), I am sure you hardly ever manipulate puppets like this one now.

Tamao: That's true.

Yamakawa: Would you consent to manipulate this puppet for us today, as a special favor? (applause)

Tamao: A favor? It's not a one-man puppet, so I can't manipulate it by myself. You need three puppeteers before you can really say that you are operating the puppet.

Yamakawa: Yes, you're right. (laughter) You're right, but seeing as this is such a special opportunity, couldn't you possibly give us a little demonstration?

Tamao: Well, you know, when we puppeteers use a puppet, we usually dress it ourselves. The puppet is not stored like this. First, we attach the *boeri* (neckband stuffed with cotton) to the torso and then we dress the puppet. The costume is draped over the torso and attached to it with a few stitches in crucial spots.

A wide futon needle is threaded with two threads, so that in the end you have four strands of thread. If you thread a needle with two regular threads and tie the ends together, you just have two strands, right? But we use four strands to sew the costume to the torso at each critical spot. The collar is stitched in about five places and then the costume is attached over it. The kimono is adjusted so that it fits properly across the front, and then the *obi* (broad sash) is fastened over that.

Yamakawa: You are holding the *dogushi* (rod supporting the head) in your left hand, aren't you?

Tamao: Yes, I'm holding the *dogushi* in my left hand.

Yamakawa: And the right hand of the doll is in your right hand.

Tamao: I use my right hand. This is the *omozukai* (main puppeteer) position.

Yamakawa: So the *hidarizukai* (left hand puppeteer) uses his left hand.

Tamao: And the *ashizukai* is in the middle.

Yamakawa: Female puppets don't have legs. Because they have no legs, the hem of the kimono is used to make it look like the puppet is walking with mincing steps. This is known as *fuki*, and there is a special technique for this, isn't there?

Tamao: Yes, you start to train as an *ashizukai* for female puppets. Since female puppets don't have legs, the puppeteer bunches the cloth at the hem and stitches it in two critical spots that are used to give the appearance of walking feet. You know, like the kind of kimono used in the past with a long hem that drags behind. It's the same idea. You move it like this, left, right. In the stylized walking movement for male characters, the right foot is moved forward first, but female puppets start from the left foot. By draping the kimono over your fists, you can create the illusion of knees. If you do this at the right height, you can make it look like the puppet has legs.

Yamakawa: Could you show us how to use the *dogushi* next?

Tamao: The puppet head has whale barbels inside it. These act as springs. In the past we didn't have springs like today so we used carved whale barbels. There are many different types of heads, and all of those whose eyes move right or left use such springs. Nodding is the same. The movement is very smooth and natural. When we couldn't catch whales after the war, we used regular springs, but they didn't last very long. They lose their resilience too quickly.

Yamakawa: This puppet has a needle in its mouth. The needle is used for biting a hand towel, right?

Tamao: Yes. If you hook the towel on the needle and pull, the puppet looks like she is clenching her teeth. If the towel is unhooked immediately, the audience can tell that it was hooked on something, so we remove the towel inconspicuously while the puppet is crying. While she wipes her eyes, the towel is unhooked from the needle. It can also be used to hook the sleeve of the puppet's kimono.

Yamakawa: Oh, the sleeve, too?

Tamao: For example, you can make the puppet sob into her sleeve and wipe her eyes on it—clenching her teeth like this.

Yamakawa: So this little needle is actually extremely effective.

Tamao: Yes.

Yamakawa: Thank you very much.

Tamao: When we performed overseas, one man came up and kissed the puppet here because he thought she was so cute. He cried out, "Ouch, ouch." (laughter) I remember that.

Yamakawa: So Bunraku women are prickly. (laughter)

Tamao: Yes, that's a good way of putting it. You're very clever.

Yamakawa: Thank you so much. But your wife is not like that, is she?

Tamao: She doesn't have any thorns, no. (laughter)

Yamakawa: Thank you very much for showing us how to manipulate the puppet. Next, could you show us how to work the left hand?

Tamao: All right. The left. Once you become a *hidarizukai* (left hand puppeteer), you've pretty much made it.

(Master Tamao holds the rod for the puppet's left hand and demonstrates.)

Yamakawa: Now I understand. Thank you very much.

It is best to have three puppeteers working one puppet, but during a performance you run out of people. It takes three people per puppet and if those puppets appear on stage many times, then you need a lot of people. So if we want Bunraku to flourish, we need to encourage more people to become puppeteers.

Tamao: That's right.

Yamakawa: It is my sincere hope that the Inamori Foundation will support these efforts. Please have a seat. Thank you for your demonstration.

Master Tamao, today you perform *tachiyaku* (male characters), but around 1975 you actually performed *oyama* (female characters) many times, didn't you?

Tamao: *Oyama*, yes. Everyone did domestic and international tours, but I didn't like going overseas. It was in 1975, when I was fifty-six. All of the *oyama* puppeteers were gone, so I wound up doing the female roles. In the afternoon I did Masaoka from *Sendaihagi*. The late Koshiji Dayu was narrating for it. In the evening, he also narrated the *Sankatsu Hanshichi* sake shop scene from *Hadesugata Onna Maiginu*, and I manipulated this puppet, Osono. So I did Masaoka, then in the evening I did Osono, followed by Akoya.

Yamakawa: So you performed three parts.

Tamao: All of them were *oyama*, just like an *oyama* puppeteer. At that time, Bungo was manipulating Osato from *Tsubosaka*, even though he too was a male puppet manipulator.

Yamakawa: When you don't have enough manpower, puppeteers who normally perform *tachiyaku* (male characters) also have to do *oyama*. That's why your training has to cover all aspects of Bunraku.

Tamao: That's right. I had already manipulated Osono in the most dramatic parts of the play many times. I manipulated her in the parlor and many other scenes.

Yamakawa: Minosuke is very good at that, isn't it?

Tamao: Yes, he is.

Yamakawa: You know, dolls aren't very expressive. A puppeteer has to give the puppet expression. How does he do that? With people, our faces change.

Tamao: It's the movement of the head. We can create numerous expressions with the subtlest movement of the head. And these movements can be done in many ways—

elegantly, maliciously, and so forth. So it really depends on the puppeteer's nature. To enact a role means to express your character, and what's in your heart just flows out naturally.

Yamakawa: I see. So when you hold a puppet, you want to move, you want to make it move, is that it?

Tamao: Yes, that's it.

Yamakawa: It must have been very hard to suppress that urge.

Tamao: Yes. When I was young, sometimes they made me perform *shimbo tachiyaku* (male character expressing patient endurance), where I had to hold the puppet for a long time.

Yamakawa: Meaning what?

Tamao: I had to be patient. The roles were static, so I just had to be still and endure it. I performed the roles of court nobles, many different types of court nobles—like Denbei of *Horikawa Sarumawashi*. When I was young I also performed the handsome Choemon in *Ohan Choemon*. These were all *shimbo tachiyaku*.

Yamakawa: *Ohan Choemon*—isn't that a love story about a naive young girl and an elderly man?

Tamao: It's the love story of Choemon, who is almost forty, and a thirteen-or-fourteen-year-old girl.

Yamakawa: They fall in love and commit suicide together in the end.

Tamao: Yes, in the Katsura River.

Yamakawa: They throw themselves into the river. And you say that that is a *shimbo tachiyaku*?

Tamao: Yes, it is. You have to stay still.

Yamakawa: He did such a terrible thing that he had to stay still.

Tamao: In the kimono sash shop scene, he hardly moves at all. There is one place towards the end where his emotions are roused and he gets a bit wild, but other than that, it's a fairly immobile role.

Yamakawa: Then there are the very high-ranking parts. For example, the role of Kanshū Sugawara no Michizane, to whom Tenman Shrine is dedicated. This is one of your greatest, most successful roles. The dignity of this character could only have been achieved by someone like you, and it certainly demonstrates the importance of remaining motionless.

Tamao: Yes, this is a part that you cannot possibly teach someone, no matter how hard you try. In my time, Eiza Yoshida I performed it. Of course, even though he was our troupe leader he manipulated the legs. If you manipulate the legs and then the left hand, you understand most of the nature of the role. At the time, I had just graduated from *ashimochi* to *ashizukai*. That was when I was conscripted into the army. It was right when I had to do military service. The way I hold the puppet now is based solely on my memory of what I saw him do.

Yamakawa: Is that so?

Tamao: I bring up images of Master Eiza as I manipulate the puppet, thinking, “Here he would do this.” If I was doing the legs, I would feel them as part of the body. When you move the legs, all the movements of the character must be engraved in your mind.

Yamakawa: In other words, an artist, even if he is manipulating the legs, must move as one with the *omozukai* (main puppeteer), must feel with his own body and observe carefully the breathing and pauses of the puppeteer manipulating the main character.

Tamao: Yes, because your body must remember. You can’t memorize your part by reading words. You have to remember with your body. You go from the legs to the left hand. And once you have become the *hidarizukai* (left hand puppeteer) you must have enough skill to step in as a replacement.

Yamakawa: Even if you are an *ashizukai* or a *hidarizukai*, the important thing is to observe the art of the *omozukai* puppeteer and make it your own.

Tamao: That’s right.

Yamakawa: In your case, then, you learned from the great master Eiza Yoshida, although he did not actually teach you.

Tamao: Yes, Eiza was very good friends with my teacher, Tamajiro Yoshida, although Eiza was a little older. This was the first Eiza. Because they were good friends, I was allowed to manipulate the legs for him three years before I had to join the army. So for three years I worked as an *ashizukai* under the first Eiza. Later I was able to glean things from that experience.

After that I spent about three years and two months in the army. I was away from Bunraku for that period. During that time, Master Tamajiro died, and although Eiza was still well when I returned, he was much weaker. At that time, Tamakoh, who helped me become a puppeteer, became Tamasuke. He was performing lead roles and such, and I began manipulating the left hand under him. So, although you are supposed

to spend ten years as an *ashizukai*, I graduated from that job in seven.

Yamakawa: You were very good.

Tamao: No, I wasn't particularly good. That's just the way it happened. After I returned from the military, I was told to practice the left hand. My next teacher was the *ningyo todomi* who was responsible for making many decisions, such as who would be *hidarizukai* (left hand puppeteer) or *ashizukai*. He passed away, and I was his only apprentice. There were no other apprentices, so Tamaichi, who had performed many jobs and errands for him, became *ningyo todomi*, and because he told me to be a *hidarizukai*, that's what I did.

Yamakawa: It must be a process in which you learn that even if you work under a great teacher or experienced senior puppeteer, you cannot simply imitate them. Even if you tried, you couldn't copy them because each person has a unique personality.

Tamao: Yes, that's true.

Yamakawa: What do you do at times like that? There must be times when no matter how hard students try to imitate someone, they can't, simply because they are different.

Tamao: Yes, and in that case there's no point in teaching them. (laughter) It all boils down to the fact that if you like something, you can become good at it. If you don't have a desire to do it, you cannot possibly improve. If you haven't got to the point where you really want it, it's no good to just accept what comes to you. When you are a *hidarizukai*, while you are working with the puppet you have to be watching the performance and thinking, "I'm ready any time, any time," prepared to take over that part at any moment.

Yamakawa: Really?

Tamao: You can't just be thinking, "It's good enough if I manipulate this character's left hand this way." You shouldn't just be manipulating. You should be thinking, "If it were me, I'd do it like this." *Omozukai* (main puppeteer) aren't infallible. They are bound to make mistakes, too, and you won't get anywhere unless you are looking for their faults and studying them, thinking, "He's doing it like that, but when I get a turn, I think it should be done like this."

Yamakawa: Yes, I see. First, patience is important, then motivation, then enthusiasm for study. That must be why you have reached the level you are at today. But surely, even for you, Bunraku training must have been hard and you must have had some difficult times. Did you ever try to quit?

Tamao:I tried to quit twice. (laughter)

Yamakawa:When was that?

Tamao:Once was when I was manipulating the legs for Master Tamajiro. Around the time I was apprenticed to him, his legs began to weaken. He often suffered from neuralgia and complained about the pain a lot. It seemed to get worse when it rained. His legs were very unsteady and when someone had to dash down the corridor to get something, he'd cling to the wall and shout, "Hey you! Stop running. It's dangerous!" That's how feeble his legs were.

I manipulated the legs of his puppet when we were traveling, the legs of the old man Magoemon in *Ninokuchimura*. There's a place in that play where the puppet puts on a cloak and climbs into the bottom of the boat. Master Tamajiro was wearing his stage *geta* (wooden clogs) and he fell as he climbed down, and scolded me for not reaching out and to stop his fall. If the *omozukai* falls, the *ashizukai* has to quickly grab him and the doll by the waist or support his shoulders—or do something—but I didn't have time to do anything.

Yamakawa:No, there wouldn't be time.

Tamao: I noticed that he seemed to be getting closer and closer, and suddenly he toppled over. (laughter)

Yamakawa: And the *ashizukai* was blamed for that?

Tamao: Yes, that's the fault of the *ashizukai*. If the *omozukai* puppeteer falls, it's because the *ashizukai* is doing a lousy job.

Yamakawa: I see.

Tamao: Anyway, he was carried immediately to our lodgings. We were on the road, in a place called Nakatsugawa in Kyushu. When I got back, I went to his room right away and stayed by his side. The performance was over so everyone came to visit him. They'd say, "Master, how are you?" and he'd say, "It can't be helped with an *ashizukai* like that." Everything was my fault. He said the same thing to everybody, "What can you do with an *ashizukai* like that?" (laughter)

Yamakawa: So even you...

Tamao: I got fed up and decided to leave the next day.

Yamakawa: And did you?

Tamao: No. Tamaichi, who was a senior apprentice, and everyone else told me I

couldn't. So I gave up the idea of leaving.

Yamakawa: But it must have been very hard.

Tamao: Yes, it was. There were times when I thought about quitting.

Yamakawa: Management tends to be very unreasonable. But even when your boss makes unreasonable demands, you just have to grin and bear it.

Tamao: That's right.

Yamakawa: At any rate, you undergo extremely rigorous training. Puppeteers must listen to the *yoruri* (the narrative), to the *gidayu* (narrators) as they work, right?

Tamao: Yes, yes of course.

Yamakawa: So the quality of the narrative, the skill of the *gidayu*, whether they are good or bad, is also extremely important.

Tamao: Yes. The puppeteers depend entirely upon the *gidayu*. Bungoro often told young narrators, "Do your job well. The puppeteers' performance depends on you." "If you want to make good puppeteers, you need good *gidayu*." That's what he always said.

Yamakawa: A good narrative also affects the *shamisen*, also known as the *aijamisen*, and these blend with puppetry to create Bunraku.

Tamao: Yes.

Yamakawa: In other words, the *shamisen* accompaniment, the narrators and the puppeteers work together as one to produce good art.

Tamao: Yes, that's right. That's why an expert *ashizukai* who has spent a fair amount of time operating the puppet's legs can tell whether a narrator is good or bad. In most cases, they have heard recitations by famous masters a generation before their own. We often feel that recitations by people of our own generation lack something. That's because our ears retain the memory of what it felt like when we listened to the narrators that came before them. Even when someone of my own generation becomes head narrator, I often feel that something is missing from his performance. If you told me to do it myself, I couldn't, but I can sense that the melody of a certain part was different before, and that it sounded better than the way it is being performed now.

Yamakawa: I'd like to congratulate you on the fact that Bunraku has been designated a world heritage.

Tamao: Thank you.

Yamakawa: It really is very auspicious, since this means that the three components—*shamisen* accompaniment, narration and puppeteering—have been acknowledged as a single, comprehensive world heritage.

Tamao: Yes, they have.

Yamakawa: We must work to further consolidate Bunraku.

Tamao: Yes. These three components make up one whole, even when just preparing for a performance. We cannot perform with the puppets alone. The narrator has *sugatari* (narration alone), and you can have a performance with just the narrative, but the puppeteer must have a narrator. Some say we could perform to *naniwabushi* (recitation and singing of stories to *shamisen* accompaniment), but I can't imagine it, because in a Bunraku performance, the puppeteering is so perfectly in tune with the narrator. If someone forced me onto the stage with only a puppet and told me to perform, I couldn't do it. I couldn't do the narration myself.

Yamakawa: I'd like to hear your opinion on the very difficult problem of training the next generation. Young people today are said to be very impatient and quick to anger. How is it in the world of Bunraku? When you are teaching young people, do you ever feel like they need to be more patient?

Tamao: Long ago, every puppeteer had scars somewhere—they were always getting kicked or smacked with props. The training was very strict. Apparently, they were subjected to various kinds of drastic treatment. When I joined the Bunraku troupe, however, things had become more gentlemanly. I never experienced that kind of violent treatment, and we certainly don't teach that way now. If a student has a problem and comes to me for instruction, I will teach him, but many of the young people in Bunraku today can't do it even if you teach them how.

Yamakawa: Why is that?

Tamao: The stage is serious business. We have to teach on the spot, yet there are many things that cannot be taught one thing at a time. There's the stage and the narration and the timing, and if you could teach it right there that would be fine. Now we have tape recorders, so if you listened repeatedly it wouldn't be impossible, I suppose. Anyway, you can't teach by just holding the puppet and telling someone to do this or do that. Also, it's the *ashizukai* who is usually taught, and he is taught how to operate the legs.

Yamakawa: That's the foundation, isn't it?

Tamao: The legs are the foundation.

Yamakawa: So a person who observes carefully while he is an *ashizukai* will come out a winner.

Tamao: Yes. You have to remember to your own satisfaction while you are an *ashizukai*. Remember it naturally.

Yamakawa: You can't just take it easy in the dressing room.

Tamao: That's right. You won't get anywhere by spending your time warming the cushions in the dressing room.

Yamakawa: You have to find a role and get out on stage and work hard.

Tamao: Yes.

Yamakawa: In Bunraku the assistant is often called *tettai*, right?

Tamao: Operating a puppet's left hand or legs is called *tettai*.

Yamakawa: I see. So you should assert yourself and do as much *tettai* as you can.

Tamao: Yes. You should grab opportunities to operate the legs. In the past we often used to go to the *ashizukai* and beg him to let us handle the legs. I wanted to try manipulating the legs in the story *Kumagaijinya* for the first Eiza, and when it was time for the Kumagai puppet to appear on stage I looked at the Master and then looked at the legs of the puppet and made an expression with my face as if to say, "Please let me operate the legs," trying to appeal to him as much as possible.

Yamakawa: You didn't come straight out and ask him, but you pleaded with your eyes.

Tamao: In the end, I used to crawl along in front of the stage, along the railing that hid the *ashizukai*, and I'd lie down and watch the performance on the stage from there. I showed him that I really wanted him to let me try. So finally he said, "You're always watching, aren't you? Would you like to try it once?" And that's how I got him to let me operate the legs.

Yamakawa: If you stay in the dressing room, your teacher will never understand how you feel. But if you are gazing up at the puppet like that, yearning to try it, the teacher is bound to say, "Would you like a turn?"

Tamao: Yes. At the time, Master Eiza's apprentice, Eizaburo, was manipulating the legs. He was an expert *ashizukai*. He was eleven years older than me, and he was still operating the legs. He told me to tell Eiza myself. He just couldn't bring himself to say, "Master, Tamao wants a chance to manipulate the legs." It was too difficult. He himself was a bit afraid of Eiza, so he urged me to go and ask him. He was ready to quit doing the legs at that point. (laughter) He was a really good *ashizukai*, you know. He operated

Benkei's legs in *Kanjincho* and did other stories.

Yamakawa: Eizaburo was a marvelous puppeteer, but he died very young, didn't he?

Tamao: Yes, he died when he was thirty-eight.

Yamakawa: That was a great loss. You loved him like an older brother, didn't you?

Tamao: Yes, I did.

Yamakawa: We are running out of time, but I would like to mention the book published the year before last in which I wrote about Master Tamao based on what he told me. It's called *Bunraku no Otoko (The Man of Bunraku)*. At the time you told me, "I knew how to get ahead."

Tamao: Did I say that?

Yamakawa: That expression can also suggest cunning, but I didn't take it that way. I believe you meant not wasting any time on unnecessary labor.

Tamao: Yes, that's true. I hate waste. I don't waste effort.

Yamakawa: That's what I meant. You focus constantly on one thing and study it thoroughly, but there shouldn't be any waste involved—that's what I think you wanted to say when you said that you knew how to get ahead.

Tamao: I think you're right. I am not actually that efficient, but what you are saying is true.

Yamakawa: What do you think the future of Bunraku is?

Tamao: You know the saying, *hanataremo shidai okuri* (even a runny-nosed child grows up sometime).

Yamakawa: "Even a runny-nosed child grows up sometime." Yes, I know it.

Tamao: "Grows up sometime." Well, I was a runny-nosed child but over many long years I've gradually grown up.

Yamakawa: I see.

Tamao: Although by growing up, I've become the oldest puppeteer.

Yamakawa: Yes, it's the same with announcers.

Tamao: So great men will appear in due time. I don't think we have to worry about it too much. In each age, people will carry Bunraku on in their own way, using means that fit their times. They will inherit it.

Yamakawa: Take, for example, the Kabuki actor Nakamura Utaemon VI. He was very imposing. All the Kabuki actors respected him highly and stood in awe of him. He was like the hoops that hold a barrel together. But when he passed away, it fell apart and no

one was able to take over leadership. Everyone went their own way. If that happens, it will be a problem.

I hope that you will be able to serve as a uniting force for as long as possible. A barrel without the hoops is just a pile of planks, each one separate. So please take care of your health. I am so grateful to have heard your energetic voice and seen you looking so well today, and I thoroughly enjoyed your entertaining stories.

Tamao: Thank you very much.

Yamakawa: Thank you very much. Do you have any resolution to share with us?

Tamao: A resolution? Well, I am after all getting very old, although when I think of Bungoro I still consider myself young. Puppeteers who perform *oyama* (female characters) live longer, just like women in the real world. Bungoro, too. Being a female role puppeteer is easier in Bunraku. The puppets are easier to handle. Recently I operated Tomomori, which weighs seventeen kilograms.

Yamakawa: That means you supported seventeen kilograms with your left hand.

Tamao: It was quite exhausting.

Yamakawa: It must have been very hard.

Tamao: So at my age I'm over the hill. (laughter)

Yamakawa: You could always switch to female puppets.

Tamao: Female puppets. It would be good if I could, but there are a lot of female puppet manipulators right now.

Yamakawa: Yes, there are. Well, I hope that my lack of experience as an interviewer didn't make things too hard for the audience to follow. I am very happy that Master Tamao was with us today, and had such lively things to say. Did everyone enjoy it? (applause)

Thank you very much.

Tamao: Thank you, everyone. Thank you very much.