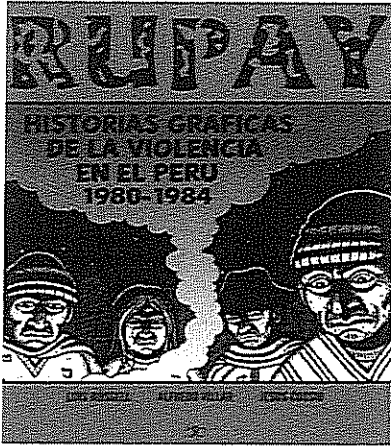


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## A Puppet's Life

Kawamoto Kihachirō

Translated by Hiroko Takada Amick and Linda C. Ehrlich

Kawamoto Kihachirō (1925-2010) was one of the world's premier puppet animators, his works among the classics, such as "Demon" (1972), "Dojiji Temple" (1976), "House of Flame" (1979), "To Shoot without Shooting" (1988), and "Briar Rose" (1990). This essay on Kawamoto's views of puppetry was originally published in *Sangokushi Hyakutai*, Jan. 26, 1984, and, according to translator Linda Ehrlich, contains material not readily available in English. -- Editor's note.

Recently there was a newspaper column about the puppet play "Sangokushi" (Romance of the Three Kingdoms). It said, "The play conveyed the personalities of the brave characters in the story in a vivid and profound manner." It was a very favorable review, but I felt a complex emotion upon reading it because, at the end of the review, the writer said, "even though *Sangokushi* was merely a puppet play, it shows that -- if the creator puts a lot of time and energy into it -- such a performance can become more than just a typical television historical drama (*taiga dorama*)."



Fig. 1. A merging of the ~~sacred~~ and the profane in "The Book of the Dead" (*Shisha no sho*).  
Sacred

In the first place, this columnist thought that a puppet play was nothing but child's play which is placed on a lower level than other forms of drama. Therefore, he probably inadvertently wrote "merely a puppet play." But it is too simplistic to discuss puppet theatre in terms of differences between high

and low levels [of art]. On the contrary, when one spends time with puppets (*tsukiatte iru to*), somehow or other we realize that puppets are not as simple as they might seem.

Even though I have been working with puppets for close to 40 years, puppets do not easily reveal their true form, no matter how much time I spend with them. Each time I begin my work, I always am just feeling my way. Only after I see the results can I distinguish what works with a puppet and what doesn't. Through this process, as I discard what isn't appropriate for the puppet through a process of elimination, something like the indistinct outline of the puppet begins to appear.



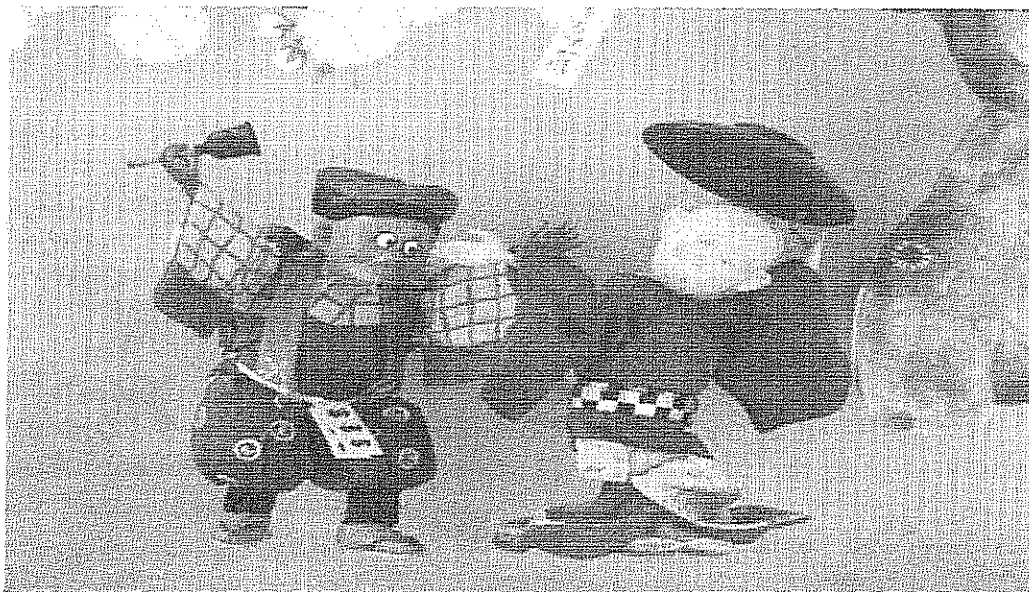
Fig. 2. Kawamoto Kihachirô in his atelier.

In 1974, approximately 10,000 life-sized ceramic horses and soldiers were discovered in China, buried near Rizanryô Mountain in the tomb of Qin Dynasty Emperor Shihuangdi (reigned 246-210 B.C.). Of course, those figures were buried to protect the emperor after death and as a substitute for living beings. Prior to that time, during the Kofun period (approx. 250-530 BCE), Japanese *haniwa* were also buried as a substitution (*migawari*) for servants who were made to follow their master to the grave. These figures were not buried just as lifeless things with a human shape; rather they must surely be considered something with a spirit to help take care of the deceased after death. It might be the case that those figures were made to resemble soldiers and servants who used to take care of the deceased when he or she was alive.

In the medieval period, a doll might appear in theatrical productions as a substitute for a person who had been cursed. In the Noh play “The Iron Crown (Kanawa),” a wife who was abandoned by her husband goes to Kibune Shrine around 2 a.m. or so and curses the lifelike straw figures of her ex-husband and his current wife, saying “Take their life.” She flogs the figures with a whip. This practice of pounding an (approximately 15-centimeter) nail into a straw figure of a hateful person, or burning the figure in a fire, has continued up to modern times.

The act of *migawari* is not limited to curses. Parents praying for the happiness of their children place all the misfortunes that might fall on children onto a *Hina* doll and float it away in the sea or on a river.

In ancient beliefs, it was thought that *kami* (gods) came from somewhere to reside in a specific place like a mountain, tree, or rock (a process called *yorishiro*). Even now, a Shinto priest performs a rite of purification by waving a *gohei* paper wand made of strips of paper or linen tied to a sacred *sakaki* branch. They say the spirit is invited to that branch. Among creations made by humans, dolls/puppets are especially considered to be *yorishiro* that can easily house a spirit.



**Fig. 3. A drunken dance, transcending good and bad, in Kawamoto’s “The Breaking of Branches Is Forbidden.”**

Puppet theatre is said to have originated in the belief in the patron god of silkweaving, Oshirasama, which can be found here and there along the Pacific coast of the Tohoku region. In this belief a shrine maiden called *itako* holds in her hands a pair of primitive dolls made of pieces of mulberry wood and chants an invocation to the gods to make the spirit come down onto the dolls. Afterwards, this invocation was recited mainly as a tragic story

concerning a young maiden and a horse. This became the more common story, and pieces of mulberry wood were shaped like a young maiden and a horse, with layers of cloth called *osentaku* draped on the two figures. A long time ago it was said that they fastened long strips of linen or paper to the dolls. This demonstrates well that those dolls were the *yorishiro* where the spirit resides.

Since ancient times, our special feeling towards *ningyō* as *yorishiro* where the spirit resides is passed down to the present and continues to live in the puppet play. Needless to say, the one who mainly breathes the spirit into the *ningyō* in the puppet play is the puppeteer. I said “mainly” because spectators unconsciously also have a feeling for the doll as *yorishiro* where the spirit resides. This differs from their feeling for plays performed by human actors. When spectators say, “It’s like the puppet is alive,” they are giving themselves to the world of the primitive *yorishiro*, and are directly participating in the formation of the puppet play.

This form of participation by spectators of performing arts does not occur when it is a performance by human actors, even in the case of the masked theatre. The participation of spectators of a puppet theatre is something special. That occurs because the *ningyō* itself is an inanimate *yorishiro*. This makes the puppet play fundamentally different from other forms of performing arts performed by humans.

Puppets that perform whole-heartedly are quite admirable and have a wonderful power of expression that no living actor can come close to. To illustrate this, note the famous scene of Ohatsu’s revenge in the *bunraku* play “Kagamiyama” in which the servant Ohatsu discovered that the cause of the suicide of her master Churō Onoe was the lady-in-waiting Iwafuji. Ohatsu was mortified and, unable to control her feelings, she frantically stood up to Iwafuji in retaliation, with a short dagger in her hand. Another example is in the play called “Hirakana Seisuiki.” In the scene called Sasabiki, when Ofude (lady-in-waiting) is besieged by the enemy’s pursuing party, the puppet of Ofude tries frantically to drag the dead body of her master Yamabuki Gozen out of the siege. Not knowing what to do, she hacks off pieces of bamboo, makes a conveyance, and frantically pulls the body to safety.

The strength of expression apparent in the heroism and devotion of the *ningyō* who act whole-heartedly and in a highly focused way, somehow relates to the way their real nature is originally an inanimate one. When actors play the role of a protagonist in a drama, they live the life of the protagonist while performing. When no longer performing the role, actors have lives of their own. For a *ningyō* in a puppet play, the moments the puppet is performing is all of its human life (*jinsei*). They have no human life of their own. When the *ningyō* leaves the role, they just return to being a wooden figure, an inanimate object. The *ningyō* is born to play that role and only when playing the role, life (*seimei*) is breathed into it and it lives its unique life earnestly.