

Hachiōji Kuruma Ningyō, The Koryū Nishikawa Troupe and
Yara Arts Group in association with
The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival
present

AKUTAGAWA

芥川

Japan/Chicago

January 27-29, 2023, Chopin Theatre

CREATIVE TEAM

Created by Koryū Nishikawa V & Tom Lee

Performed by Tom Lee, Koryū Nishikawa V, Yukio Tsuji and Josh Rice

Master Puppeteer	Koryū Nishikawa V
Production Design & Direction	Tom Lee
Music	Yukio Tsuji
Lighting Design	Jeanette Yew
Projection Design	Chris Carcione
Shadow Puppetry Design & Animation	Linda Wingerter
Puppet design	Koryū Nishikawa V, Yuko Kikuchi, Linda Wingerter, Tom Lee, Jaerin Son
Understudy	Chris Ignacio
Calligraphy	Hekiun Oda
Recording & Sound consultant	Damian Wiseman
Production Translator, Asst to the creators	Kanako Hiyama
Tour Lighting Supervisor	Jonathan Cottle
Koken Stagehand and Dramaturgical Support	Yiwen Wu
Managing Producer	Anna Okuda

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Our production of Akutagawa explores the life and works of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), one of Japan's foremost literary stylists, whose stories continue to be read and celebrated today in Japan and the world. I was first introduced to Ryūnosuke Akutagawa through Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashōmon*, though I only began to understand his influence on Japanese literary history through working with my teacher Koryū Nishikawa V. Nishikawa-sensei has been deeply interested in Akutagawa's writings since a young age. One of the strongest resonances of Akutagawa's short and volatile life is the process of artistic creation — a process in which the ecstatic energy of making something new runs headlong into insecurity and self-doubt. The pressures of making work and addiction, which led to Akutagawa's suicide, are present in many creative souls and this is one entry point into the work which we hope to explore.

As puppet artists, Koryū-san and I are tasked with adapting a literary form into a theatrical one, and in the case of puppetry, the forms are quite different. We are interested in the parallels between the writer creating a character on the page and the puppeteer inhabiting the emotional life of a puppet figure. We hope that witnessing the artistic process, beyond the cultural framework of Akutagawa's time and legacy, proves a compelling experience. Trying to adapt any "classic" work, even from the beginning of Japan's modern literary tradition, begs the question, what does this work mean now? Each of the stories we have chosen concerns a character in solitude, forced to deal with their alone-ness in starkly different ways. This theme will no doubt be familiar to all of us who have lived through the years of the global pandemic.

The puppets onstage represent both the characters from Akutagawa's stories and the writer himself. In one of the first images of the production, Akutagawa is seated at his writing desk and puts pen to paper. As he does so, Koryū Nishikawa enters and begins to assemble the body parts and costume of a puppet, exposing the technique of building a puppet structure that audiences usually never see. From this image, we try to create the parallel between a writer creating a character through text and a puppeteer creating a puppet for performance. In the final moment of the sequence, Nishikawa-san adds the puppet head to the figure and the figure becomes alive. Using similar techniques where video projection and live music interact directly with the puppet action onstage, we hope to create a theater piece that is not merely a representation of a writer's work onstage, but tries to embody the process by which the work is created.

The short stories used in *AKUTAGAWA* have been chosen for two reasons. The first is to tell a chronological story of the writer's path from his early works to one of his last. The second objective is to showcase the particular mindset and emotional underpinnings of each story as they relate to the artist's state of mind. *Rashōmon* (1915) is the first story and touches on themes of desperation and being pushed to the edge. *Jigokuhen* (*Hell Screen*, 1918) is next, and takes us into the destructive flip-side of an artist's creative output. The third story, *Ryū* (*Dragon*, 1919), shows how human beings can believe in almost anything if they put their minds to it — a funny and foreboding commentary on the current state of our divided politics and the alternate realities available through social media. *Toshishun* (1920), adapted from a Chinese short story, offers perhaps the most spiritual journey of all the stories and ends on a hopeful note of monastic clarity. Finally, *Kappa* (1926), delves into Akutagawa's mental breakdown and death, probing an alternate underwater world where all our customary social mores are upside down. Through the production, elements of Akutagawa's other writings,

including *Haguruma (Spinning Gears)* (1927) and *Kumo no Ito* (1918), appear as visual reminders of Akutagawa's world.

Koryū Nishikawa and I are grateful to share in this collaboration with many outstanding artists. Composer Yukio Tsuji is a master multi-genre musician whose sensitivity in accompanying live performance is astounding. Projection designer Chris Carcione is a longtime collaborator, whose gift for creating immersive video environments will fill the storytelling space. Shadow puppet master Linda Wingerter's gorgeous shadow figures and animations help illustrate each story. Josh Rice, gifted puppeteer and performer is an essential part of devising the movement and puppetry for AKUTAGAWA. Finally, lighting designer Jeanette Yew helps tell the story of the piece through her evocative use of light and knowledge of puppetry.

- Tom Lee, Chicago Fall 2022

BIOS

KORYŪ NISHIKAWA V (co-creator, master puppeteer) is the fifth-generation master of Hachiōji Kuruma Ningyō, The Koryū Nishikawa Troupe, a Japanese traditional cart puppet company with a 160 year history. He received training in cart puppetry from his father Koryū Nishikawa IV and later in bunraku-style puppetry at The National Bunraku Theater. He is one of a small number of puppeteers who manipulates both types of puppets. Since his international debut at the Congress of the Union Internationale de la Marionette in 1976, he has been invited to more than forty countries and regions to perform. He received his stage name Koryū Nishikawa V in 1996. Koryū-san has collaborated with Japanese and international artists from many backgrounds, in addition to training the next generation of kuruma ningyō puppeteers. His recent work includes *Shank's Mare*, co-created with Tom Lee.

TOM LEE (co-creator, production design, direction) is a puppet artist, designer and director. His work explores manipulated objects, puppet figures, animation and miniatures in dialogue with traditional puppetry. Mr. Lee grew up in Hawai'i and began his career at La MaMa Experimental Theater. His collaboration with Japanese master puppeteer Koryū Nishikawa V, *Shank's Mare*, has toured the U.S., Japan and France. He appeared as a puppeteer on Broadway in *War Horse*, at the Metropolitan Opera in *Madama Butterfly* and at Chicago's Lyric Opera in *The Queen of Spades*. He is the recipient of Jim Henson Foundation grant awards for his original puppetry work and is co-director of the Chicago Puppet Studio and Chicago Puppet Lab. Tom teaches puppetry design and performance nationally and internationally. www.tomleeprojects.com

LINDA WINGERTER (shadow puppetry and animation) is an artist and third generation puppeteer performing, filming, teaching, and building puppets and kinetic art as The Stringpullers Puppet Company in Ithaca, NY. She attended the Rhode Island School of Design and apprenticed in puppet building and performance with Puppetsweat of New Haven, CT. In 2011 she revived her family's puppet company, The Stringpullers, with *Luna's Sea* which debuted at the American Museum of Natural History. She has taught puppetry arts at multiple universities including Yale School of Drama and Cornell University. Linda began putting her work on film in 2019 and received a 2021 Micro-Commission from Heather Henson's Handmade Puppet Dreams film series to produce *Misophonia*, a shadow and paper puppet short film. <http://www.stringpullers.com>

JOSH RICE (puppetry) is a multidisciplinary artist specializing in puppetry. He is the Producing Artistic Director of the NYS Puppet Festival. Puppetry: Dan Hurlin's *Demolishing Everything with Amazing Speed*; *Shank's Mare* by Tom Lee & Koryū Nishikawa V; *Petrushka* with the NY Philharmonic Orchestra; *The Scarlet Ibis* (HERE); and Shake on the Lake's puppet-infused *A Christmas Carol* (designer/director). His new work-in-progress, *Kayfabe*—a puppet wrestling entertainment spectacular—is the recipient of a 2023 Jim Henson Foundation Workshop Grant & a 2022 NYSCA Individual Artist Grant. MFA, Sarah Lawrence College. More at joshriceprojects.com

JEANETTE OI-SUK YEW (lighting design) is a lighting designer and a puppetry artist. As designer, Jeanette has worked with Tom Lee on several productions including *Shank's Mare*. Additionally, she designed for Automata's *Frankenstein*, Torry Bend's *Paper Hat Game* and *Dreaming*, and Alison Heimstead's *Saint Plays* and *Hidebound*, both by Erik Ehn. She served as the lighting director for several Great Small Work's International Toy Theater Festival. Jeanette also devises interdisciplinary productions through contemporary puppetry aesthetics and technique. NY Times described her project with Target Margin, *Act 4 of The Iceman Cometh* as "consistently inventive and *Are They Edible* premiered at La MaMa as "bold". Jeanette is the Associate Arts Professor NYU Tisch Drama. www.jeanetteyew.com

CHRIS CARCIONE (projection design) is a theater artist, arts administrator, and educator. His work aims to incorporate live and digital media into performance in surprising, interactive, and meaningful ways. As a projection designer and live-feed operator, Chris has worked on Dan Hurlin's *Demolishing Every with Amazing Speed*, Sam Gold's *All Vows*, Shayna Strype's *Antrak*, and numerous projects with Tom Lee including *place(no)place*, *Sounding the Resonant Path*, and *Shank's Mare*, developed with and featuring Koryū Nishikawa V. Chris is an Adjunct Professor of Theater at Manhattanville College and Westchester Community College, and the Managing Director of CO/LAB Theater Group. www.christopherjcarcione.com

YUKIO TSUJI (composer) has been working as a composer and as a performer for more than 200 productions over the years. He worked with Estelle Parsons, Ellen Stewart, Jerome Robbins, Julie Taymor, Sir Peter Hall, Late John Dexter, Andre Serban, Elizabeth Swados and many other major theater directors. He has been the house composer/musician at La Mama Experimental Theatre Club in New York for over twenty five years, and he performed on Ellen Stewart's famous *MEDEA*, *ELECTRA*, *TROJAN WOMEN*, *SEVEN* and a countless number of productions since 1980. He composed more than twenty-five hours of music for Kei Takei's *MOVING EARTH* Dance Company alone. He composed and performed on Broadway production *SALOME* with Al Pacino, directed by Estelle Parsons, and two more productions with Al Pacino, *OEDIPUS* and *FATHER*. Other productions he participated in include *MACBETH* and *NIGHT OVER TAOS* directed by Estelle Parsons, the Broadway production *M. BUTTERFLY* whose music he co-arranged and performed, *TRANSPOSED HEAD* directed by Julie Taymor, The Royal Shakespeare Company's *TANTALUS* directed by Sir Peter Hall, and New York City Ballet's *WATERMILL* directed by Jerome Robbins. He also composed and performed on the title music of the movie *YEAR OF THE DRAGON* and composed music for Shanghai Expo's. Yukio is a member of New York based group Sara Galas Band with Sara Galassini.