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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
Tom Lee
Yukio Tsuji
Jeanette Yew
Chris Carcione
Linda Wingert
Koryū Nishikawa V, Yuko Kikuchi
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Tom Lee, Jaerin Son
Hekiuu Oda
Damian Wiseman
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Production Design & Direction
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Lighting Design
Shadow Puppetry Design & Animation
Puppet design
Calligraphy
Recording & Sound consultant
Production Translator, Asst to the creators
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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 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. 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. Yigokuhen (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 Wingerters’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

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