

When to speak and when to shut up: the art of a Japanese â??benshiâ??

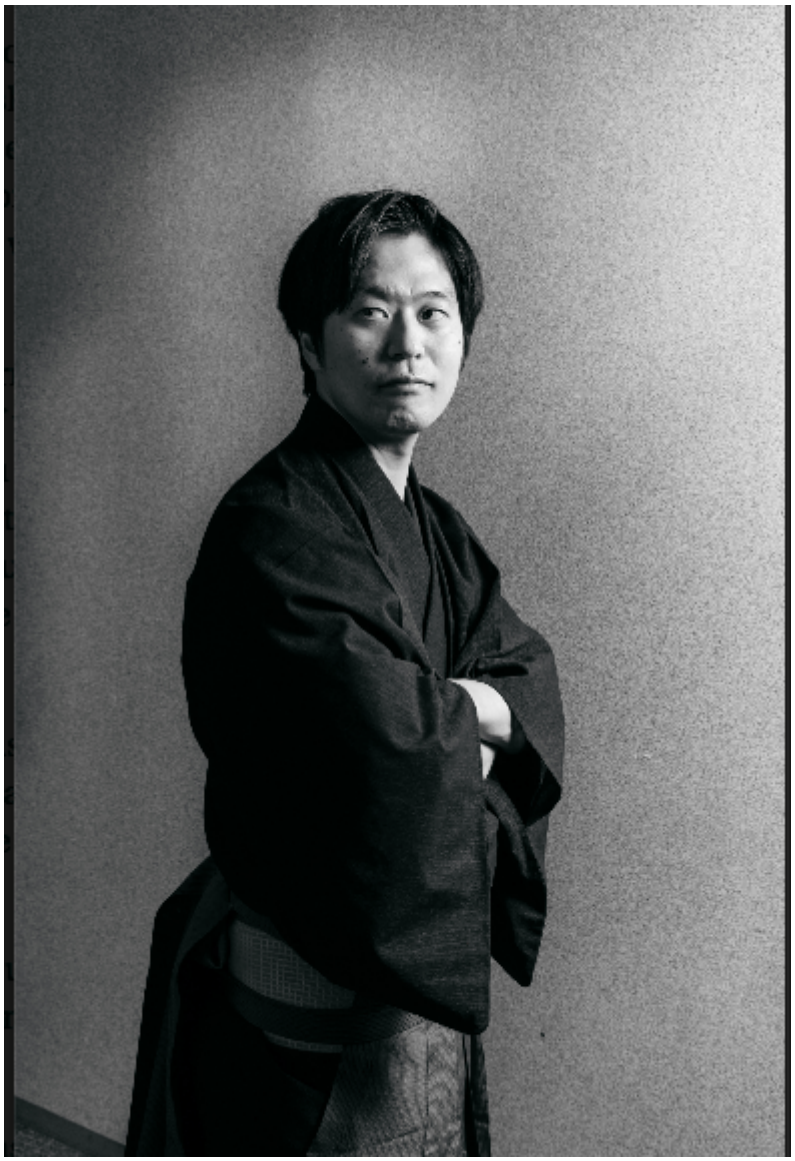
Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

By Alisa Yamasaki

The silent films screened in Japan from the 1920s to â??40s were never completely silent. *Katsudo-shashin benshi*, or benshi for short, delivered live narration that provided everything an audience might need to appreciate a film â?? from commentary to translation. Derived from Japanâ??s many narrative art forms, benshi were an effective way to introduce cinema to Japanese audiences.

Though the era of silent films is gone, the art of narration lives on through a handful of professionals. Ichiro Kataoka is one of the countryâ??s few active benshi, and he will provide narration for Tomiyasu Ikedaâ??s 1926 classic â??Chushinguraâ?• at the Tokyo International Film Festivalâ??s Special Night Event at Kabukiza Theatre. The event will also feature narration by guest benshi Ichiro Furutachi and a special performance by kabuki actor Onoe Kikunosuke.



Modern day benshi, Ichiro Kataoka (Photo credit: Dan Szpara)

â??I had known about benshi but I thought that it was a long lost profession,â?• Kataoka tells The Japan Times. â??When I was 18, I happened to attend a benshi performance by Midori Sawato and it made me want to learn about being one.â?•

At age 38, Kataoka has built an impressive career out of the art. The professional benshi has narrated more than 300 films and has been invited to perform at events around the world.

â??When I perform overseas, Iâ??m asked to narrate classic Japanese films, but I do films from any country: Japanese, European, American, Chinese, anything,â?• Kataoka explains. Are non-Japanese films more challenging to narrate than domestic ones?

â??Thereâ??s a specific pacing with classic Japanese films that makes it easier for benshi, since Japanese silent film directors were aware of the benshi and filmed their work with them in mind. With foreign cinema, mostly European, the director tries to convey as much as possible through the cinematography,â?• he says.

â??At the end of the day whether itâ??s Japanese or not, the film Iâ??m narrating is old. But Iâ??m a modern person and my audience comprises modern people, so I need to constantly think about how to communicate the old film from one modern person to another â?? what themes to bring up and what scenes to emphasize â?? in order to present it as a terrific piece.â?•

While Kataoka has a compelling tone and presence to him, he says itâ??s crucial for benshi to understand they donâ??t have the leading role.

â??A good benshi always remembers when to shut up and let the images do the talking,â?• he says. â??Silence can be more powerful than words.â?•

TICKET GIVEAWAY

Special Night Event at Kabukiza Theatre will be held on Oct. 27 and is sold out. However, The Japan Times has two pairs of tickets to give away to readers. To apply, send a postcard by Oct. 23 with your name, address, postal code, phone number and the word â??TIFFâ?• to the Life & Culture section of The Japan Times, 4-5-4 Shibaura, Minato-ku, Tokyo 108-0023. To apply online, visit jtimes.jp/film.

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