落語 Rakugo

Popular form of comic monologue in which a storyteller (rakugoka) creates an imaginary drama through episodic narration and skillful use of vocal and facial expressions to portray various characters. Typically, the storyteller uses no scenery; the only musical accompaniment is the debayashi, a brief flourish of drum, shamisen, and bamboo flute that marks his entrance and exit. The storyteller, dressed in a plain kimono, crosses to stage center and seats himself on a cushion before his audience, with a hand towel and a fan as his only props. There he remains until he has delivered his final line, usually a punning punch line (ochi; literally, “the drop”). This is the characteristic ending from which the term rakugo was coined, the word being written with two Chinese characters meaning “drop” (J: raku, also pronounced ochi) and “word” (go).

In a rakugo performance the interplay between performer and audience is extremely important. Since the repertory of classic rakugo is small, aficionados have heard the basic story many times. They delight in the storyteller's particular version, his arrangement of familiar episodes, and appreciate his timing and the verisimilitude of the details he adds, such as the sound of sake as he pours it into his imaginary cup. The introduction to the story proper must be completely original. The plots of the stories are never as important as the characterizations in them, for rakugo pokes fun at all manner of human foibles.

A regular entertainment feature at roadside shows, private banquets, and makeshift stages set up at restaurants during off-hours, this vagabond art found a home in 1791 when the first permanent Japanese-style vaudeville theater, or yose, was opened in Edo (now Tokyo). Soon afterward the popularity of yose spread to Kyoto and Osaka. By 1842 there were 200 yose in Edo, and between 1854 and 1860 as many as 392. Between then and 1912 the number of yose stabilized at around 80, approximately one for each of the city's neighborhoods. The admission fee to these accessible and intimate theaters, which accommodated about 100 people for a three-hour performance, was an extremely reasonable 36 mon, or the equivalent of a few pennies.

After surviving the challenge of cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, which significantly reduced yose attendance, rakugo performers met with increasing official disapproval during World War II, because they did not adapt their material to complement national ideology.

With the resumption of civilian broadcasting at the end of World War II, rakugo recovered its popularity. Although the proliferation of new entertainment media has greatly reduced the number of yose, the adaptability of rakugo to both radio and television has ensured its survival. There are still four traditional yose in Tokyo. In many universities there are rakugo clubs whose members study and perform rakugo for their own entertainment.

Source: *Encyclopedia of Japan* (Kodansha)