

National Bunraku Theatre

Summer vacation Bunraku performance, 2026

Date: Saturday, July 18 – Sunday, August 9, 2026 *No performance on Jul. 23 & 31 *Part1 on Jul. 24 is fully booked.

Time: Part 1 11:00-13:00 / Part 2 13:45-17:20 *End times are estimates and could vary.

Part 1

Introduction to Bunraku

Bunraku performers describe, in an easy-to-understand manners, their puppets on the stage.

Bunraku is a form of theatrical entertainment that the people of Osaka have enjoyed since the middle of Edo period (1603-1868). This section introduces its appeal.

Yuki wa Konkon Sugata no Mizuumi (The Kind Hunter and the Female Fox)

This is a story themed on the legend of Lake Suwa in Nagano Prefecture. Shirayuri the Fox fell in love with hunter Genza, who had saved her life. Using the mysterious power of a precious orb, Shirayuri transformed herself into a human being, eventually living a happy life as Genza's wife while hiding her true nature. One day, however, Shirayuri learns that Genza shot her brother fox and she passes out from shock. Trying to save her, Genza's mother touches the orb, only to see Shirayuri turn back into a female fox — her true identity. Desiring to remain Genza's wife, Shirayuri struggles to turn back into a human being while chasing the flying-away orb. Unfortunately, the story comes to a tragic end when Shirayuri sinks into the lake.

Part 2

Gempei Nunobiki no Taki (The White Banner of the Genji Clan)

The farmer Kurosuke gives shelter in his home to Aoi Gozen, the pregnant wife of Kiso Yoshikata, a warrior of the Genji clan. Saitō Sanemori and Senō no Jūrō of the opponent Heike clan appear in search of her. The two men threaten to kill the child Aoi Gozen is carrying if it is a boy, but the wife of Kurosuke tells them that the baby has already been born and shows them the arm that Kurosuke and his grandson Tarokichi found in the river. Despite being on the side of the Heike, Sanemori secretly feels a debt of obligation to the Genji. He pacifies the enraged Seno'o, quoting a tale of ancient China, and Seno'o departs.

Sanemori reveals to Aoi Gozen that from the start his intention in coming to the residence was to save her and her baby. Just as he is recounting how Koman died, her body is carried into the room and joined to the severed arm. For a brief moment Koman comes back to life and says something to Tarokichi, but she then expires. At this point, Kurosuke and his wife disclose, for the first time, that Koman was not their real daughter; her father was a Heike but she had been an abandoned child.

Aoi Gozen gives birth without trouble to a boy, Komaōmaru (later aka Kiso Yoshinaka, who distinguishes himself in battle against the Heike). Kurosuke and his wife hope that Tarokichi can become a retainer of Komaōmaru, but their wish is refused. Given that his mother had Heike blood ties, it is now impossible for Tarokichi to serve as a retainer of the Genji; unless he were able to demonstrate distinguished service to them. Seno'o, who has been listening in on the scene, reappears from the shadows and tries to snatch away Komaōmaru. After he kicks the body of Koman, however, he is stabbed by an enflamed Tarokichi. In actual fact, Seno'o was Koman's father. He sacrifices himself so that his grandson can earn the merit needed to become a retainer of Komaōmaru. Having succeeded in becoming a retainer of Komaōmaru, Tarokichi (later aka Tezuka no Tarō Mitsumori), despite his youth, closes in on Sanemori to try and avenge his mother. Sanemori reassures the young man by prophesizing that he will one day be slain in battle by Tarokichi, after he has grown up and raised an army with his master Komaōmaru.

Koimusume Mukashihachijō (The Story of Okoma and Saizaburo)

At the residence of the Hagiwara family, a commotion broke out after the family heirloom tea caddy went missing. Meanwhile, their retainer Saizaburō and *koshimoto* (female servant) Okoma are in love with each other. However, Saizaburō was disowned for having an illicit affair and ordered to search for the tea caddy. Okoma was sent back to her parents' home, Shirokiya. In the cash-strapped Shirokiya house, a marriage arrangement between Okoma and nouveaux riche Tsukudaya Kizō was making good progress, although Okoma and Saizaburō reaffirmed their love for each other. But, moved by Okoma's father Shōbē, who tearfully explains the situation, they consent to the marriage between Okoma and Kizō. What they didn't know is that Kizō was the mastermind of the fraud case, with the Shirokiya residence's clerk Jōhachi as his accomplice.

Okoma kills Kizō and is then ordered to go to the Suzugamori execution ground. However, things turn out well, as Okoma is found not guilty and acquitted after Saizaburō makes Jōhachi confess his and Kizō's part in the tea caddy fraud case.

Bunraku Summer Festival

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Kotobuki Hashiradate Manzai (The Manzai Ceremonial Dance)

Hashiradate is a ceremony to celebrate the erection of the first pillar during the construction of a new house. This Bunraku piece features Tayū and Saizō performing a Hashiradate ceremonial dance at the entrance of a house while holding a small hand drum and folding fan in their hands, dancing energetically in prayer for the prosperity of each household.

Machi no Hi, based on Charlie Chaplin's Film, "City Lights"

In Osaka at the end of the Edo period, the vagabond Yojirō encounters Ohana, a beautiful, blind flower girl. Ohana assumes that Yojirō is a kind, rich man. On one occasion, Yojirō had saved the life of Kan'emon, the master of the large merchant house Daimonjiya stopping him from killing himself. Nevertheless, the next morning he found himself kicked out of the residence by Kan'emon, who forgot Yojirō because he couldn't remember what had happened while he was drunk.

Yojirō finds out about the predicament of Ohana and her mother. He promises Ohana that he will come up with money for her eye treatment and to help ease their financial hardship. He then enters a sumo match for the prize money, only to lose. Drunken Kan'emon, who happened to see this, takes Yojirō back to his residence and hands him a fortune after hearing about Ohana. However, Yojirō gets into trouble with Tōhachi, Daimonjiya's clerk who has his eye on the money. In addition, Kan'emon loses his memory again. Yojirō runs off with the money, and after handing the money over to Ohana is arrested and locked up.

Fast forward to the Meiji period — Ohana is cured of the eye disease and her flower shop is also doing well. One day, Yojirō, who served his term in prison, happens to see Ohana and he stands motionless. Meanwhile, Ohana does not recognize Yojirō — the person she has long been waiting for. Trying to give him flowers, Ohana takes Yojirō's hands, when she notices through the touch of his hands that he is the one she has been indebted to. At last, they get to connect their hearts to each other.

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INVITATION TO BUNRAKU

—Guidance for Japanese Puppet Theatre Appreciation—

*This website is provided in Japanese / English / Simplified Chinese / Traditional Chinese / Korean / German / French / Spanish.