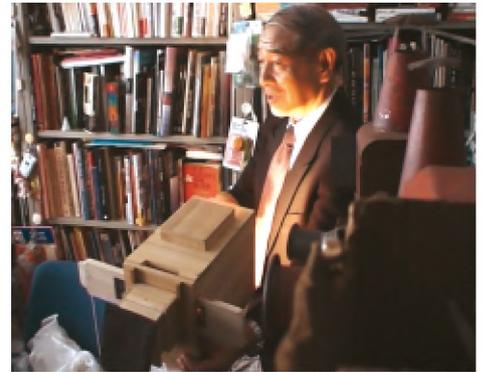


FUMIO YAMAGATA (1937-2024) and the Second Generation of *Edo Utsushi-e* Yoriko Iwata

Fumio Yamagata, the leader of the Minwaza company, passed away on 18 August 2024. Some members will still have vivid memories of their performance at the MLS International Convention in 2001. *Utsushi-e* is now well known as a different, oriental type of magic lantern show along with *Nishiki Kage-e* (see p. 2). The terminology differs between the east and west parts of Japan.



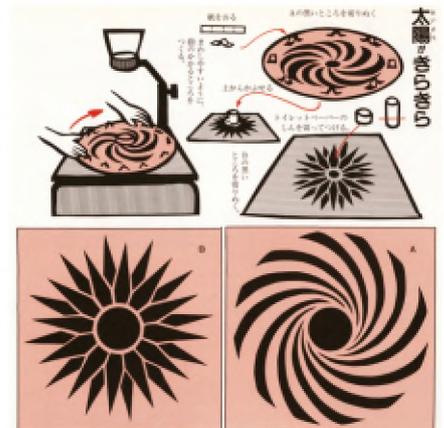
1. Fumio Yamagata with his furo

The first revival of *Utsushi-e* (Fig. 2) dates back to 1993, when the company, originally a silhouette theatre, celebrated its 25th anniversary. Yamagata had first encountered *Utsushi-e* about ten years earlier when he saw an article on this traditional art of Japanese projection in a photographers' magazine. He was then also deeply impressed by museum exhibits of *taneita* and *furo* (Japanese slides and lanterns).

However there was by then no tradition to follow for the technical aspects of performance so he researched the archives extensively in order to revive this type of entertainment. The anniversary programme included an ensemble show as an introduction, next a classical piece entitled *Kuzunoha* and finally a new show in this medium.

Minwaza visited mainly schools nationwide with its silhouette theatre – a familiar genre of Japanese theatre, especially for children. Yamagata thought at first the *Utsushi-e* method would solve some technical problems specific to shadow theatres. One example is that they used a plastic board with a bird attached on the top, pulling transparent strings on its wings to give a flying effect on the screen.

However, to their disappointment, even the transparent materials reflected some light and caused faint shadows. Yamagata thought by using *furos* and slides

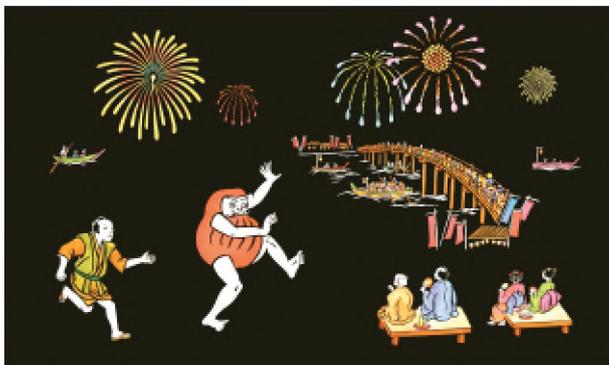


3. Using an overhead projector to make effect slides (from Yamagata's book on silhouette theatres)



2. Poster for the first performance, 1993

these would disappear leading to clear-cut visual images on the screen. Once they had overcome the challenge of almost no textbooks or manuals, they worked towards the revival of this old-style entertainment and developed new programmes of their own. The fact that they were professionals in managing lights and shadows on screens contributed most to the huge success of *Utsushi-e*.



4. From *Daruma Yawa* as seen at the 2001 MLS Convention

It was, Yamagata remarked, a great surprise to receive the loud applause at the Birmingham Midland Institute in 2001 with *Sanbaso*, *Daruma Yawa* (Fig. 4) and *Kanjincho*. He confessed later: "I was so thrilled that I almost trembled and then I couldn't utter a word in that honourable moment." The UK tour proved a tremendous encouragement and incentive for them to take the show abroad – the USA in 2008 and 2011, and an East European tour to Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria in 2011.

Erkki Huhtamo, himself in the audience at the 2001 International Convention, said: "It opened up a previously unknown and thoroughly exciting aspect of Japanese culture." In a letter to Fumio Yamagata of 2 February 2002, Professor Huhtamo points out that the recent

success of Japanese animation films is based on a long tradition of moving image culture, which is quite different from the Western one.

THE SECOND GENERATION

The second generation of the Minwaza company has just finished putting on a show on the third Sunday of every month from December 2024 to May 2025. The venue is not a theatre, but a café called 'Flying Teapot', with a gallery, performance space and 20 seats – rather like a pub theatre. The café is in suburbia, half an hour by train from downtown Tokyo. Admission costs 1,500 yen (about £7.70 or US\$10), including one drink – about half the price of a normal theatre (Fig. 6).

In this series, *Masatayu*, a leading artist of *Sekkyobushi* which is a style of recitation to a *shamisen*, a traditional Japanese guitar with just three strings, accompanies perfectly the Japanese-style

5. Furo and slides (below)
6. Poster for the café show (right)



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back projection. On 20 April, I saw *Kanjincho*, a well-known piece in their repertoire (Fig. 7). Junya Suzuki, a performer and project manager, commented that the slides made of acrylic plates painted in beautiful colours are quite easy to handle.

The final show in May, Suzuki told me, was to be more challenging with an electric Japanese guitar and the stories, not Japanese folklore, but works by more modern, popular poets: Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886-1942) and Miyazawa Kenji (1896-1933). Here is a taste of the poetry so you can imagine how *Utsushi-e* might represent it.

And in this forlorn grassy space far from the others
We shall have a good time just like snakes with each other.

(from *Love-Pity*, ll.13-4, by Hagiwara Sakutarō)

Oh, my pretty sister passing away so young in a day,
You by yourself dare to leave us behind in this world,
Why don't you ask me to come along, do you dare?

(from *Pine Needle*, ll. 19-21, by Miyazawa Kenji)



7. From *Kanjincho* performed in April at the Flying Teapot café

After this season I hope *Utsushi-e* and *Minwaza* will continue to find a new, original expression for the 21st century.