"I'll Create My Own Precedents": Female *Rakugo* Performers on Tokyo's *Yose* Stages

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Books or websites introducing traditional Japanese stage arts to people from other cultures often include photos or videos of kabuki actors in gorgeous kimono, masked noh performers sliding along a cedar floor or the bunraku puppeteers together with the musicians accompanying them. While women do perform in these arts (see Coaldrake 1997; Kano 2001; Edelson 2009; Geilhorn 2011), the performers shown are generally men. This is also true for *rakugo*, a simple stage art, where one performer kneels on stage and enacts stories. Usually, though, *rakugo* is not introduced in monographies on Japanese stage arts. Within the National Theater complex, however, *rakugo* has its own stage—the National Engei Hall. It is performed there as well as in various privately run theaters which specialize in *rakugo*, called *yose*, and are located in Ueno, Shinjuku, Ikebukuro and Asakusa in Tokyo. It can be performed anywhere with an elevation, even just a table or a few beer crates; thus *rakugo* shows

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are on in countless smaller venues around the city. And female *rakugoka*[1] have taken hold.

By 2021, women made up 5% of Tokyo's *rakugoka* (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021) and no doubt, more will have started their *zenza* training by the time these sentences are printed. In *yose* line-ups and *rakugo* shows, the number of female performers has increased and female performers have become more prominent and popular in the last decade.[2] One woman, Ryūtei Komichi, made it into a list of twenty performers with the most *yose* engagements in 2020 (Gokurakurakugo 2021). Her solo shows regularly fill the 300-seat auditorium of the National Engei Hall.

In this chapter, I will analyze the obstacles which female performers face over the course of their career and during performances—and the various strategies they take in order to overcome these.

1 Introduction to *Rakugo*

Throughout the Edo period (1603–1867), *rakugo* never had the same support of the ruling class or aristocracy that other arts had. It was the entertainment of ordinary people: Edo's male population, mainly tradesmen and artisans (*chōnin*) (Nagai 1971; Teruoka 1979) spent their evenings at the *yose* after a hard day of work. About 200 performers were estimated to perform in these venues in the Bunka-Bunsei years (1804–1830: Yushima de rakugo no kai 2017, p. 9). According to Katō (1971, p. 266), there are sources which count as many as 700 *yose* in Edo. Quoting the Ōedo Tokai Aramashi Nichiyō Kanjō (likely authored around 1854–1860), Katō states that each of the 400 *yose* had 100 visitors per day on average. The *yose* was an "extension of home in an era when most families had minimal living space" (Brau 2008, p. 65). The audience members knew each other, as they all lived within walking distance from the venue.

[1] *Rakugoka* themselves refer to their profession as *hanashika*, emphasizing the character of their performance: stories (*hanashi*). In order to make the connection to the art called *rakugo* more comprehensive, I have chosen to refer to the profession and performers as *rakugoka*.

[2] In addition to Tokyo, the Kansai region has a very rich *rakugo* tradition with a slightly different training system and different approaches regarding commercial shows (Shores 2021a).

Up until the early Shōwa period, performers were held in contempt by the general public, but in the 1950s critics elevated *rakugo* to a traditional performing art to improve its standing. Prefixes such as *koten* (traditional repertoire) and *dentō* (tradition) were added to give it more dignity. Today, with a total of 859 performers in all of Japan, of which 594 reside in Tokyo (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021), there are more performers than ever in the history of the art. The annual number of shows held in Tokyo has nearly tripled from 4,907 in 2005 to 11,137 in 2015 (Morishige 2016).

The appeal of the art, both for audiences and performers, possibly lies in the fact that at any given time, there is only one performer on stage. *Rakugo* is often introduced in English as "story-telling," as *rakugoka* act out their stories (*hanashi*) mainly through dialogues between characters. The performance never follows any standardized scripts, scenarios or patterns, nor does it shy away from scatological jokes and indecent topics. A rapid dialogue unfolds between the protagonists and there is no time to change costumes or pick up props. Kneeling on a cushion, a *rakugoka* wears the same kimono during the entire performance and only uses a handkerchief-like cloth called *tenugui* and a folding fan for props. *Rakugoka* show that they are switching characters by turning their head left and right and by using vocal and physical attributes such as changes in posture, gesture or dialect/sociolect and linguistic registers or by employing role language (*yakuwarigo*). A samurai is shown with straight posture, talking in the sociolect of the samurai class; a young boy is portrayed with shoulders dropped and fiddling hands, face slightly looking up to the adults of the *hanashi*. While the number of repertoire pieces in traditional *rakugo* is limited, performances vary greatly depending on numerous factors, ranging from the performer's career, stage experience, portfolio, interpretation and make-up to time restrictions, gender, age and experience of audience members, the season and position within the line-up (Stark 2017).

Much like fans of classical music do not tire of listening to the same Beethoven sonata many times, even if performed by the same pianist, *rakugo* audiences enjoy listening to the same *hanashi* many times, even if performed by the same *rakugoka*. It is perhaps this freedom left to the interpreter that appeals to audiences and *rakugoka* alike. While a sonata has a score to be followed, *rakugo* is much freer and performers can arrange the *hanashi* as they see fit. This space for self-expression and individuality creates an incentive for performers to create a strong *Kunstfigur*.

Many fans today follow specific performers rather than going to a specific venue (Weingärtner 2021).

While this description of *rakugo* seems to offer many opportunities for female performers, they face a number of obstacles. *Koten rakugo's* stories were created by men and performed by men for male audiences, depicting a world of men (*otoko no sekai).* Many stories revolve around the "three pleasures" (*sandōraku*), literally "drinking, gambling, whoring" (*nomu*, *utsu*, *kau*). And yet, the number of professional female performers[3] is steadily increasing.

2 Women on *Rakugo* Stages

Female *rakugoka* have not always performed on Tokyo's *yose* stages. There was opposition to women performing *rakugo*, so they appeared on stage but as *iromono,* in arts such as juggling, magic and *manzai* (funny dialogues)[4] that would not spawn much tension or strain audiences' listening capabilities. There had been women who started training or performed at the *yose* as *rakugoka*, but none reached master status. Women had been banned from public performances since 1629. The ban drove women "into alternative private performance venues and radically affected not only the involvement of women in music and dance but also the character of the Japanese theater" (Foreman 2005, p. 40). Only the rich could afford female stage performers, asking geisha to give private evening performances (*zashiki).* This ban was never officially lifted, but the mention of female performers in early police statistics (Keishichō ed. 1912–1926) shows an (at least tacit) approval. Some entries in Uemura (1965) and Yamamoto and Kokuritsu Gekijō Chōsa Ikusei-bu's (2015) lists of historic performers and their relations are marked as *onna*

[3] In this chapter, *professional* female performers are defined as members of one of Tokyo's four associations, the Rakugo Kyōkai, the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai, the Godaime Enraku Ichimonkai and Rakugo Tatekawa-ryū. Female performers, some active in university *rakugo* clubs (*ochiken*), amateur *rakugo* clubs or listed as *furī no engeika* (freelance artists) in Tōkyō Kawaraban (2021), are excluded from this analysis.

Gender is not listed as a category in Tōkyō Kawaraban (2021), and the categorization as "female *rakugoka*" in this chapter is based on the performer's legal name and the gender they identify with in interviews.

[4] In the Meiji period, this included *gidayū* (narrative performances) *rōkyoku* (melodic and narrative recitations); and after post-war focused on *tejina* (magic), *mandan* (funny monologues), *manzai* (funny dialogues).

(woman/female), but it is not clear whether these were female *rakugoka*. It is highly likely that they were *onna dōraku*, i.e., female performers who played *shamisen* and drums on stage alone or with other women.

The first printed reference to female *rakugoka* is in a transcribed discussion between *rakugoka* Kosan IV, Saraku V, Konan I,[5] journalist Ōtei Kinshō, critics Imamura and Iketani in 1947. The five men reminisce about female *yose* performers from the Meiji period and Imamura refers to Yajirōbei and Iroyakko as *rakugoka* (Ōtei Kinshō et al. 1947, p. 17). Both women, however, quickly seem to have disappeared from the stage: Yajirōbei became a *geisha* and Iroyakko married En'yū I (ibid). Female *rakugoka* appeared again in the Taishō period (Tabe/Tanabe 1966), but there are no records mentioning their names.

In the 1950s and 1960s, two women caught the attention of Japan's mass media. Shunpūtei Shōkyō was 17 when she started training under Ryūkyō VI in May 1952 (Fujin Kurabu 1957; Yomiuri Shinbun 1957). Nine years later, she married fellow *rakugoka* Baikyō (Shūkan Myōjō 1961) to become a mother and a homemaker (Shūkan Heibon 1969). In 1964, a young woman with the stage name Momono Hanayo started training under Momotarō III (Shūkan Yomiuri 1966). However, no information can be found on her after 1969. There are a few sources mentioning other female *rakugoka*, leading to the conclusion that these did not train in the profession very long (Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], p. 39; Kōriyama 1999, p. 147).

Although the above-quoted newspaper and magazine articles about Shōkyō and Hanayo were positive and enthusiastic, audiences and performers did not see women fit to perform the art: Blogger Hangan published mimeograph prints on their blog—likely dated 1965–1969. These show audience survey responses to watching the professional female *rakugoka* Hanayo performing *Sutokuin*, a *hanashi* created around the beginning of the nineteenth century, about a servant walking around Edo trying to find the girl his master's son fell in love with, using only a poem as a clue in his search. Feedback on Hanayo's performance ranged from: "[She] is destroying the beauty of the original *Sutokuin*" to "It's embarrassing to watch a woman play female characters" (Hangan 2011).

[5] Japanese performing artists are referred to by their personal names rather than their family names. 90% of *rakugoka* have either San'yūtei, Yanagiya, Kokontei or Shunpūtei as "surname." As only very few family names are in use (Stark 2022), sources are cited here with their full names in Japanese order.

By post-World War II, the number of *yose* had decreased dramatically and *rakugo* was no longer available in Tokyo neighborhoods as part of everyday life. Why audiences and male performers did not see women as fit to perform *rakugo* was perhaps due to the fact that by then, many *rakugoka* did not improvise and almost all did the same version of *hanashi* (Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], pp. 38–42; Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], pp. 51–54). Only in 1993, San'yūtei Karuta and Kokontei Kikuchiyo became the first two female performers promoted to "*shin'uchi*" master status (Tōkyō Kawaraban 1993). During her *zenza* training, Karuta had to endure spectators jeering and heckling "Get off stage! This is no place for a woman!" (*Mainichi* Shinbun 2016). Still in 2010, when Tokyo's *yose* stages were already home to approximately 20 female *rakugoka*, Shinkyō claimed that "the female voice lacked the capacity to impersonate the protagonists portrayed in rakugo" and "therefore, women in general were not capable of performing rakugo well" (Sahin 2021, p. 5).

Male *rakugoka* also claim that one of the reasons why women cannot be adept at performing *rakugo* is because representation of women in *rakugo* is based on kabuki techniques (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], pp. 52–53), including the use of voice. However, female characters in kabuki are very diverse (Leiter 1999–2000), and male-kabuki actors of female characters (*onnagata*) have constructed "an ideal fiction of 'female-likeness'" (Mezur 2005, p. 1), a feminine beauty which has "little to do with the anatomical body of the actor" (Kano 2001, p. 31). As the *onnagata*'s use of voice is often quite different from the one used to depict women on *yose* stages, and only very few female characters in the *rakugo* world show a similar idealized image of women, this argument is fallacious. Moreover, Balkenhol (1972) showed that the voice pitch of male *rakugoka* portraying female characters did not vary greatly from the one employed for male characters.

3 Difficulties

There are a number of obstacles for women choosing a career as *rakugoka*. Let us follow a fictional woman called Sakura, born in 2001, on her journey to become a professional *rakugoka*. In March 2023, Sakura would graduate from university where she had been a member of the *rakugo* club (*ochiken*). By performing herself and attending shows of female *rakugo* masters like Ryūtei Komichi and Benzaitei Izumi, Sakura would be well aware of the many obstacles facing her.

Portraying Female Characters

Sakura would know that long-time audience members have for most of their life only seen male performers, so with older spectators in particular, female performers portraying female characters "do not seem right." In portraying female characters, male performers use gestures (folding hands, picking their kimono's collar) and linguistic features associated with women, but they do not raise their pitch (Balkenhol 1972). Even though these conventions can be adapted by female performers, women portraying female roles are criticized. For example: "I can't believe you are a woman and so bad at acting women" (*Yomiuri* Shinbun 1987); "It was extremely unnatural" (Shimazaki 1995, p. 54); "[She] is destroying the beauty of the original" (Hangan 2011).

Sitting in the audience and reading fans' comments on Twitter, Sakura knows that a major obstacle for female performers was and is the linguistic expectations of audiences. In *rakugo*, a conversation between the characters is played by the same performer. With the exception of *ninjōbanashi* (emotional stories depicting certain traits of human nature), many dialogues do not have a narrative arc, or it is secondary. A performance of Chōtan (the long-fused and the short-fused) can last over 20 minutes, built around a dialogue between a patient man trying to tell his impatient friend his kimono caught fire. *Oyakozake* (below) consists mostly of a man trying to convince his wife to give him more alcohol. Audiences are captivated by the unfolding dialogue, which depends greatly on the performer's skill in depicting the characters. The focus on the dialogue also means focusing on language. Japanese speakers use a variety of nuanced gendered first-person singular pronouns in order to indicate power or position. This means that in conversations between male protagonists—who make up the majority of *hanashi* dialogue—*rakugoka* make frequent use of male language and male-gendered pronouns.

As Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2004) and Nakamura (2014) have shown, the notion of masculine and feminine language is a social construct. The desired femininity in linguistic behavior reflects self-control, modesty and deference (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019) and although for female *rakugoka*, the use of male language is not a performance of a linguistic self but merely of a character, it is often not seen as such. This is possibly one of the reasons why audiences initially rejected female *rakugoka* and why female *rakugoka* are still under

more scrutiny than their male peers: their language was deemed unbecoming. Kokontei Engiku, who raised Kikuchiyo, the second woman to ever become *shin'uchi*, recounts that when initially teaching her a story, he changed the main characters into more politely talking female characters as he did "not like women talking crudely" (Zorozoro 1993, p. 5).

Navigating Androcentricity and Misogyny

We can imagine Sakura thinking long whether she should become a *rakugoka*. She would be well aware of the androcentricity of the *rakugo* community and its *hanashi* and also know about the audiences' and producers' misogyny. As the stories unfold in the audience's imagination, as Beichō states, "the slightest reluctance or resistance would become an issue" (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 53). Without any background and no variety in costumes, make-up and props, *rakugo* audiences rely on the performer's appearance, visual expressions, gestures and voices. On stage, *rakugoka* often cite good-looks as an obstacle for they may potentially distract audiences.

Similarly, women performing *hanashi* written for men can potentially distract audiences. The *rakugo* repertoire has been created over centuries by men for mainly male audiences, the story lines and performance conventions are thus androcentric, and somewhat misogynistic: *Jisankin*, for example, centers around a man who agrees to marry an ugly and pregnant maid he has never met in return for having his debts paid; *Bunshichi Mottoi* tells the story of a plasterer who sells his daughter to the pleasure quarters for 50 *ryō*—with the promise to take her back still a virgin a year later upon repayment—only to give away the very same money to a young man in order to prevent him from committing suicide. Many male *rakugoka* do not shy away from bragging about their sexual or romantic conquests, even when they pay for that sexual activity.

Sakura would also be well aware that in many *hanashi,* female characters are absent, have few lines or are flat characters, and only a few characters in general are called by names. Many *hanashi* in Tokyo *rakugo*, for example, feature carpenter Kuma/Kumagorō, his craftsman friend Hattsan/Hachigorō or the carefree simpleton Yotarō. Others are simply identified by their profession or status: the landlord (*ōya*), the old retiree (*goinkyo*), the merchant house master (*danna*) and his son (*wakadanna*), a number of craftsmenartisans, *daimyō* and nameless samurai. With

the exception of women in *ninjōbanashi*,[6] female characters are mostly defined through their relation to male characters in the story: there are Kumagorō and Hachigorō's wives, the merchant house master's wife, an artisan's or craftsman's wife or daughter, the old woman living next door and a samurai's daughter or a Yoshiwara prostitute. If a female character bears a name, it is usually to help understand the dialogue, as in the case when she is called to do something.[7]

Many of the popular (i.e., often performed) *hanashi* do not have one single female character, or when one appears, her lines are usually very few or reduced through a technique called *denwa-ma* ("telephone pause"). This technique stresses the perspective of the main character: the audience only hears one half of the conversation as in a phone conversation. The performer adds brief pauses after each line leaving time for the audience to imagine an answer or reaction.

Female characters are often expressed as *denwa-ma* in a conversation, i.e., an incision during which the performer ceases to talk and in which the audience imagines the other character's (often female character's) lines (Balkenhol 1972, p. 217; Welch 1998, p. 26). As a result, the percentage of lines for the female characters can drastically decline, as is shown in the scene below where a man is trying to trick his wife into allowing him to drink more alcohol—even though he has promised his family that he would stop drinking.

> What? We don't have any more alcohol?
> You say this is enough?
> No way can this be enough.
> Bring more. What? What are you saying?
> I'm drunk?
> Who, me?
> You must be kidding. I am not drunk. Look at me, this isn't drunk!

[6] Emotional stories depicting certain traits of human nature in order to express these in a way for the audience to be deeply moved by a story, female characters play a big role in the unfolding of a *hanashi,* and in return also receive a name.

[7] Morioka and Sasaki (1990, p. 43) list a number of female names, but these are rarely heard in contemporary *rakugo*. Irifunetei Sentatsu (2022) stated that a large number of female names might be mentioned in a row in order to evoke the presence of many maids and in turn imply the wealth of a household.

> I have only started drinking.
> Don't be ridiculous.
> Seriously, I am not drunk. I am fine. (Yanagiya Kosan 1966, p. 90)[8]

Performers can choose to leave out the wife's lines as her opposition may easily be imagined by the audience. This might be because the performer decides to focus on the description of the main character, i.e., the drunken husband, or because the performer is not too confident portraying women or simply due to time constraints. From the performing perspective, fewer characters are easier to perform—and from the audience's point of view—easier to understand.

Rakugo's female characters are not as differentiated as for example in kabuki. The women who appear in *hanashi* are almost all fictional (Horii 2009, p. 92) and can be grouped in roughly two categories: portrayed as elegant and sexy such as the ones in Edo's pleasure quarters, or as daughters and wives of respectable craftsmen, affluent merchants or noble samurai families. The latter "absolutely must not be portrayed as sexy or elegant" (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 51). Exaggerating female traits in the former is easy, and will leave lasting impressions with the audiences, especially if a skilled male performer is sturdy, stout or below average beauty standards. Women not working in the pleasure quarters are considered more difficult to perform. Here, femininity is often portrayed through posture (giving the impression of heavy head accessories in the character's top knot or a broad obi restricting movement), gestures (folding hands to make them look smaller) (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 52), looking down or bending one's head slightly to the side (Tatekawa Danshun and Yanagiya Sanza 2012, p. 10) as well as using linguistic registers.

Who to Imitate?

In Sakura's *rakugo* club, there probably would have been a number of female students—but when it came to the actual art, all students

[8] The version chosen here is indeed from 1966. 2022 interpretations do not differ much.

would be learning *hanashi* from recordings or transcriptions of professional male *rakugoka*. The *rakugo* way of life is learned by imitating senior performers—and for women, there are currently few female *rakugoka* they can observe and learn from. The limited number of female performers thus turns out to be another obstacle.

Sakura would start out her *rakugoka* career as *zenza*. The word *zenza* is a compound of the logographs 前 "before" and 座 "stage," i.e., "before the main act," as *zenza* opens the show. Tokyo's *yose* theaters do not have dedicated backstage staff; shows are run by *zenza*. Once Sakura has been accepted by a master, she and her *zenza* peers would do everything from dressing senior performers and pouring them tea to performing part of the background music. Even though they are given this responsibility, they are not yet considered full members of the *rakugo* community. Even though *hanashi* are taught in one-on-one sessions, delivery techniques such as pacing, dynamics, diction, timing, emphasis and pauses, the different variants and patterns of a *hanashi* are not actively taught, but in literal translation are to "stick to the body" (*mi ni tsuku*), i.e., are acquired through immersion (Inada and Morita 2010, p. 69). *Rakugoka* in training intently listen and observe differences in delivery, thus learning how to read and react to audiences. This type of learning, however, becomes an obstacle for female trainees who are not exposed to the performances of senior performers of their own sex. Female *rakugoka* learn from their own (in the majority of cases male) *shishō* (master) or from male peers in their *mon*, the socio-artistic family of *rakugoka* under the same *shishō*.

That Voice of Yours Is Gross

Although *rakugo* was developed around the timbre and pitch of the male voice, characters are not differentiated by changing voices the same way an adult might read differently the grandmother's and wolf's lines in a fairy tale such as "Little Red Riding Hood." The lines of female characters in *rakugo* are not reproduced at a high pitch (Horii 2009, p. 115; Balkenhol 1972, pp. 117–20). Instead, a higher pitch is foremost reserved for situations when characters get excited (Horii 2009, p. 116).

However, as audiences are used to hearing male *rakugoka*, and because the female vocal range is higher than the male (Traunmüller and Eriksson

1995), the higher vocal range of females was long considered a problem, especially with *hanashi* whose *protagonists* are mainly men; female *rakugoka* often were told their voices were "gross" (*kimochi warui*) (Kanno 2018). Sakura would know well that audience members may have such prejudice against female *rakugoka* and would then avoid shows with a female line-up.

Training

Another hurdle to Sakura's career as *rakugoka* would be finding a *shishō*, a master to raise her. Without a *shishō* to vouch for her education, she cannot start training. For the first years of their career, Sakura and her *zenza* peers would always be paying attention to what is happening on stage, despite being extremely occupied with miscellaneous backstage chores such as pouring tea, folding kimono, storing away and putting out shoes, playing the taiko and opening and closing the curtains. Since the outcome of a performance depends on audience reaction and interaction, *zenza* acquire and improve their skills by observing both the audience and the ways in which senior performers steer around mishaps and difficult audiences.

At the *yose*, *zenza* encounter a wide variety of *hanashi* of differing complexity levels[9] and naturally remember storylines and different interpretations, variants and patterns including pacing, timing, emphasis and pauses of a *hanashi*. This experience "naturally cultivates the understanding of *hanashi*" (Hirose 2016, p. 168; see also Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], p. 90) and is "not implemented to learn how to do *rakugo*, but to learn how to become a *rakugoka*" (Inada and Morita 2010, p. 125). Since knowledge and skills are expected to be absorbed, senior performers rarely give direct advice to their younger apprentices, and newcomers might not even receive any feedback from their masters, be it negative or positive (San'yūtei Enjō et al. 1986, p. 131).

Zenza training is often described as very hard, as *zenza* are to obey any senior performer no matter what they are told. Although training at the

[9] The same ten to fifteen *geinin* (artists) perform at the *yose* per *shibai* (here: performance event); eight to ten out of these are *rakugoka*. A *zenza*, if only working one *yose* shift per day, can be exposed to as many as hundred different *hanashi* over the course of this ten-day run. However, many stories, especially seasonal stories, may be repeated in the run of a 10-day *shibai* (Nagai 2003).

yose and exposure to the art is considered to be of utmost importance, the first female *rakugoka* in the 1950s to 1970s were not given the opportunity to train there. They were taken into their masters' households to learn good manners (*gyōgi minarai*) until they were eventually allowed to perform as *futatsume* (Yanagiya Tsubame V 2009 [1967], p. 39). The fact that the generation of Shōkyō and Hanayo missed out on the training made them miss the chance to become a member of the *yose* community and also denied them the opportunity to cultivate their understanding of *hanashi*. This is possibly one reason why audiences and peers alike did not consider them full-fledged performers. When Karuta was taken in by Enka in 1981, she insisted on going through the same *zenza* training as her male peers and she declined to be promoted to *futatsume* early. Since then, all *rakugoka* have undergone the same *zenza* training at the *yose*. Comparing the length of training of female performers to that of their male peers who started training at the same time, we can say that in general, it does not differ much (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021). Assuming that Sakura could start *yose* training right away, her training would take approximately 14 years. During their career, *rakugoka* also learn *hanashi* from senior performers outside their *mon*—this approach to the art strengthens the bonds forged among peers, no matter their gender.

In 1993, when Karuta and Kikuchiyo were promoted to *shin'uchi* status (though not necessarily for their artistic accomplishments) (Brau 2008, p. 144), audiences had become less interested in *rakugo* (Hirose 2020, pp. 14–36). The promotion was an attempt to catch the audience's waning attention and attract more female spectators (Asahi Shinbun 1993; Mainichi Shinbun 2005). Female performers are still differentiated as *josei (no) rakugoka* and *joryū rakugoka*—female *rakugoka* and lady *rakugoka*, respectively—by media, audiences and producers although the distinction of the official title was abolished by the Rakugo Kyōkai in 2000 (Asahi Shinbun 2011). The use of prefix is significant as it implies that *rakugo* performers are male; and female *rakugoka* are a deviation from the male standard (see also Kano 2001, p. 32). Some young female *rakugoka* reject the genderizing prefix (Hirose 2016, p. 218) but eventually seem to care more about audiences appreciating their art (Ryūtei Komichi 2021; Benzaitei Izumi and Shunpūtei Ichihana 2021).

Whatever the prefix, the fact that they were promoted ahead of their peers (Zorozoro 1993) due to their gender caused ill feelings toward Karuta and Kikuchiyo (Asahi Shinbun 1991; Brau 2008, p. 144). Today, both men and women go through the same length of *zenza* training.

Fig. 1 Tachibana Renji tweet showing male performers inside the green rooms of venues and yose theaters (Tachibana Renji 2021)

Both are promoted to *shin'uchi* once they have completed approximately 14 years of training (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021). The fact that all *rakugoka* are going through exactly the same training (Hirose 2016, p. 218), has likely also increased the acceptance of female performers among their peers and audiences alike.

Backstage, Sakura and her *zenza* peers of both genders learn how to exercise *kizukai*: they acquire the skills of recognizing people's needs which are not communicated in a direct way and learn to act accordingly,

either by serving or by self-restraint: for example, as part of her training, Sakura would be expected to carry the bags of any senior performer she accompanies. For outsiders, however, it looks like an old man is making a young petite girl carry his heavy bags, putting him into an uncomfortable position; she might even be mistaken for his girlfriend or mistress (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019).

As can be seen in the photos of the tweet quoted above (Fig. 1), *yose* theaters and venues usually have only one place, called the green room, where all performers stay before and after their performances and change from street clothes into their kimono. If physically possible, some male performers leave the room in order to give female performers some privacy when changing their stage clothing (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019). This means that their mere presence already inconveniences (male) senior performers, i.e., makes them feel uncomfortable due to their gender.

Harassment and Abuse of Power

Reading *rakugoka* biographies and interviews, Sakura would know well that, while the *yose* could not be run without *zenza*, they are not yet considered full-fledged members of the *rakugo* community. They are "trained to endure contradictions" (*mujun ni taeru shugyō*) (Inada and Morita 2010, p. 156)—even if asked to undress and dance naked, *rakugoka* in training obey (Yanagiya Kaeru 1973, pp. 43–44). It is also not unheard of that *shishō* resort to corporal punishment (Kokontei Shinchō Ichimon 2006, p. 19; San'yūtei Enka and San'yūtei Karuta 1994, p. 134). It is easy to imagine that male performers might take advantage of their female peers and especially *zenza*, the lowest in the hierarchy. As the *shishō*'s authority is absolute, if she would resist his sexual harassment, he could excommunicate (*hamon*) her, which would mean the end of her *rakugo* career (Kawayanagi Tsukushi 2010, p. 14).

There are no interviews in which a female *rakugoka* stated to have been a victim of sexual harassment. As female performers are still a minority, few are willing to speak out or take action. For instance, in an interview upon their *shin'uchi* promotion, Karuta and Kikuchiyo downplayed sexual harassment:

> There was no vicious sexual harassment, it was more like something between a lingering touch and a brush. […] After all, it was us who

> choose to join this world. So, we shouldn't be surprised at this [...] There are women, who want to be touched but aren't, so we are actually lucky. (Zorozoro 1993, p. 4)

The above quote is from an interview conducted by the interviewees' male seniors published in a magazine edited and self-published by the Rakugo Kyōkai, to which both interviewers and interviewees belong. Under such circumstances, it is unlikely that the two young women would have openly said how they truly felt. Close to thirty years later, female interviewees tend to perpetuate male views: "There really is no world without sexual harassment"; "A little sexual harassment puts the ladies in a good mood. That's how we women are."

The survey "Hyōgen no genba harasumento hakusho 2021" [2021 White Paper on Harassment in the Field of the Arts] interviewed artists of all genders from contemporary art to musicians, actors and anime creators regarding harassment at their workplace. Since the *rakugo* community is even more male-centered than contemporary arts, design and anime/manga/photography mentioned in the survey in which 80% responded to having experienced sexual harassment in some capacity (Hyōgen no genba chōsa-dan 2021), it is highly likely that female *rakugoka* also have experienced sexual harassment, even from their own *shishō*—who are supposed to protect their *deshi*. While Enka claims that some male peers refrained from molesting Karuta, he also openly admits to having groped Karuta himself:

> It's not that I do not touch her myself. I'm not afraid to say something like, 'Let me touch you.' It would be rude for her master not to touch her when other masters are freely touching her. (laughs) (San'yūtei Enka and San'yūtei Karuta 1994, p. 134)

With the publication of the 2021 survey, sexual harassment has become a focus of the media. In summer 2021, a female *rakugoka* in Osaka filed a sexual harassment lawsuit against a male peer, stating that he had made her drink alcohol and then had committed an "indecent act" (*waisetsu na kōi*) against her in December 2017 and harassed her repeatedly between 2018 and 2019 (Chūnichi Shinbun 2021). Power harassment also is an issue likely to be discussed further, as San'yūtei Tenka filed a lawsuit against his own shishō seeking 3 million yen in compensation for abusive language and violent behavior (Yahoo Japan news 2023). While these

cases might be an extreme, it can be assumed that female performers have found ways to ward off unwanted remarks and sexual advances. In her interview, Komichi asserted: "If you want to harass me, I'm going to turn tables and harass the harasser."

4 Strategies for Female Empowerment

While men are put in categories of *shinsaku* (own stories)/*koten* (old repertoire), *wakate* (young performers)/*kanban* (old and popular performers), media and fans are likely to categorize women only by their sex—as *josei*/*joryū* (women/female). But there are a number of strategies female *rakugoka* can implement to overcome the above-mentioned obstacles.

Choosing Your Own Portfolio

> You have to find stories that only *you* can do. [...] In a line-up of 12 performers, you do not want the audience to think: 'Oh, is that all women have to offer?' (*onna no hito, konna mon ka*) (Ryūtei Komichi 2021)

Rakugo imposes comparatively few limitations on its performers compared to its sister arts of *jōruri* (narrative ballads accompanied by *shamisen*), *kōdan* (recitations of military or historic tales) and *naniwabushi/rōkyoku* (melodic and narrative recitations accompanied by *shamisen* born in the early twentieth century). Performers "speak with an everyday voice, use everyday tone (*kuchō*) and everyday language" (Yano 2016, p. 21). Any *rakugoka* has the choice to perform either traditional *koten* or *shinsaku rakugo*. *Koten hanashi* are set in the Edo, Meiji or Taishō period and are well-known, to the point that experienced audience members can correctly guess the *hanashi* just by listening to the first lines or the free-talk section before the *hanashi* starts (*makura*). *Koten hanashi* are androcentric, but many of their other characteristics have clear merits which female *rakugoka* can use to their advantage. For instance, *hanashi* do not have a copyright and there is no original script or scenario which performers must adhere to. Character names are more of an in-group code shared with the audience (Horii 2009, p. 22), i.e., not all character types are meant to be the same in all version of one and the same *hanashi*: in one version the main character can be married, in another the character

of the same name is a teenage apprentice living with relatives. Only the characters' personalities are static: a hothead is always a hothead; a stingy person is always stingy; there are few dynamic characters, which make *hanashi* easy to perform.

Once performance permission (*age no keiko*) has been given, the cues which indicate different characters of a *hanashi*, may be freely modified and adapted to fit the performer. *Rakugoka* may also add characters to a *hanashi*, like a main character's partner or child, or a character who comments on the storyline. If they feel that a character is not adding meaning to their interpretation or is difficult to perform (see *denwa-ma*), or that the performance must be shorter than usual, *rakugoka* may cut side-characters or reduce their lines. In stories that are set in the Edo period, they may choose to let a character comment on current affairs. The fact that any *rakugoka* may perform any *hanashi* and enjoys "flexibility in terms of how to present the material" (Shores 2021b, p. 464), works in favor of female *rakugoka*.

Not all stories are *koten rakugo*, i.e., created and set in the chronotopic frame of Edo-period Japan, with its characters codified to belong in that period through behavior, narration techniques and linguistic registers. There is also the possibility of doing *shinsaku*: new *hanashi* which have been created by the performer herself. They can be set in any time period. With popular *rakugoka*, these *hanashi* have become somewhat like their performers' trademark.

While most female performers start their training with the goal of performing *koten*, some end up finding a niche performing *shinsaku*. Benzaitei Izumi, for example, initially started out with *koten*, but when her *shinsaku* were well received both by audiences and senior performers, and when producers offered her stage opportunities, she gradually became a *shinsaku*-only performer (Benzaitei Izumi and Shunpūtei Ichihana 2021). Kawayanagi Tsukushi was taken in by her master under the condition she exclusively performed *shinsaku* (Kawayanagi Tsukushi 2010, p. 10).

Role Models: Master and Peers

> Picking the right master is as difficult as picking the right life partner. (Sumiyoshi 2022)

In order to become a *rakugoka*, young men and women have to be taken in by a performer of *shin'uchi* rank. Doing so, they join his *mon*, the socio-artistic family of *rakugoka* under the same *shishō*. The formerly mentioned associations are mainly administrative units arranging, for example, stage opportunities at the *yose* theaters (Horii 2009, p. 173), functioning as a point of contact for media outlets but they cannot prevent a *shishō* from taking in a *deshi*. It is the *shishō* himself, and often also his family who decides whether he accepts to train somebody. However, even though male *rakugoka* have known female peers or senior performers since the mid-1980s and do not condemn female participation on the *yose* stage, many declare that they do not take in female *deshi*. They feel the same as Beichō, who stated in 1975 that he did not have the confidence to train them properly: "It is about as difficult as creating a new performing art" (*sore ha atarashii gei o hitotsu tsukuriageru gurai muzukashii na no desu*) (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], p. 54).

There may also be personal reasons as in the case of Maruko, whose wife was opposed to him taking in a female *deshi* (Tatekawa Koshira et al. 2018). Another male *rakugoka* stated in a private conversation that he would not trust himself enough to make sure not to molest (*te o dasu*) her under the influence of alcohol or when traveling to remote venues and spending the night at the same hotel, even though in different rooms. Apprentices spend hours every day with their *shishō*.

Thus, performers with a career of under five years often sound like carbon copies of their masters. With female *deshi*, this is different. For example, Karuta, who had nobody to imitate, tried out a number of approaches such as changing male protagonists into women or using a lower-pitched voice, observing what worked with audiences (Mainichi Shinbun 2005). Even today, with 91% of female performers receiving training under a male master (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021), we can assume that they have difficulties finding role models and that imitating their own masters might not be a good choice. Karuta, who was aware of these difficulties, repaid her own *shishō*'s kindness (*ongaeshi*) by raising female *rakugoka* (Mainichi Shinbun 2005)[10] and to date, two of her own female *deshi* have been promoted to *shin'uchi*.

Rakugoka always stress that the *shishō* is imperative for success. Indeed, if someone's *shishō* is popular, or his fellow *deshi* under the same *shishō* do

[10] At times, male peers consult female performers on how they see specific *hanashi* from a female point of view (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019).

not have any *deshi* of their own, a young *rakugoka* is likely to receive many stage opportunities, even at the *yose*. Here they can connect to peers, both with similar or longer careers, which in turn may create new stage offers and/or new fans. *Rakugoka* educated in the Rakugo Kyōkai and Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai learn their craft at the *yose* where they are constantly exposed to other performers' *hanashi*. These associations, however, in 2021 had only eight and six female *shin'uchi* respectively (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021). Of these, Komichi is the only woman to receive regular *yose* engagements.

The *yose* line-up is arranged to provide maximum diversity for the audience's enjoyment. *Iromono* arts are included in between *rakugo* and *kōdan* for diversity. On the *rakugo* side, there are usually a junior followed by senior *rakugoka*, one known for funny stories followed by a performer known for quiet stories, a *rakugoka* known for their *shinsaku* followed by one known for their *koten* interpretations. For any *rakugoka*, it is important to differentiate themselves enough to catch the attention of *yose* directors and be regularly cast for the ten-day run (*shibai*).

Audiences also demand diversity. Performers only decide the *hanashi* they will perform while on stage (Shores 2021b; Stark 2017): one featuring thieves may be followed by a quarreling couple, then a samurai followed by a *hanashi* about a drunkard. Ideally, there should be no two *hanashi* about the same topic. A young female performer in this context provides for variation in the line-up. A look at current programs, however, reveals that usually only one female performer can be found in a twelve-to-twenty-person line-up.[11]

Voice Production

The first female *rakugoka*, with no role models to imitate, tried out many different approaches from falsetto voices (*uragoe*) to depicting women in their own natural voices (*jigoe*) (Shimazaki 1995, p. 54) or in a low-pitched voice (Mainichi Shinbun 2005) to depict multiple male characters. In 2009, cultural critic Horii stated that their high vocal range would be an obstacle for women: if they forced themselves to produce lower pitches for male characters, this would "be a burden for the spectators and probably also a burden for the performer" (Horii 2009,

[11] This excludes female *zenza* and the rare occasion when a female *shin'uchi*'s female *deshi* is promoted to master rank.

pp. 120–121). But with more and more female performers, it is possible that Horii has become used to listening to female voices on *rakugo* stages or female performers have become more skilled in their interpretations as a consequence of an increasing number of role models. When Kamigata's Katsura Niyō became the first female performer to win the prestigious NHK award for *rakugo* newcomers in 2021, Horii commented to the NYT: "I have never seen anything as good as her version of the story she performed" (Rich and Hida 2021). Katsura Niyō had received full marks from all jury members.

Rather than the pitch, it is a *rakugoka*'s ability to create a melodic line which grabs the audience's attention and a rhythm and pace which moves the storyline forward in a way that is easy and comfortable to listen to. Performers of both genders mostly only use unexpectedly high-pitched voices to draw the audience's attention.

Appearance on Stage

Unlike other Japanese stage artists, whose plays are announced to the audiences in advance, *rakugoka* decide which *hanashi* to give on the spot (Horii 2009, p. 64; Shores 2021b; Stark 2017). *Rakugoka* do not wear costumes to match their roles but use one single kimono per *hanashi*, in which they perform all characters—from little boy to old woman. Most performers, though, have a number of kimono to match the season and/or the different *hanashi* they perform: *rakugoka* who create *shinsaku*, might for example choose to wear a bright red kimono for a *hanashi* set on Christmas Eve. If a samurai is the main character of a *hanashi*, a *rakugoka* is likely to wear *hakama* pants over his kimono. In a story with a *wakadanna* (a merchant house son), he might choose to wear elegant stripes (Yanai 2018, p. 23).

In everyday life, different kimono are worn for different occasions. Kimono have different levels of formality, only visible to the informed. The same way we can choose to wear jeans or an evening gown to the opera, a kimono wearer selects their kimono by cloth, dye, color and pattern. A *tsumugi* kimono, for example, is considered casual, the equivalent of denim. Its thread is first dyed and then woven and sewn. Kimono with the artistic family crest on the textile, *kuromontsuki* (black), *iromontsuki* (non-black) are worn for formal occasions such as weddings. While in the past, most *rakugoka* chose *kuromontsuki*, today many choose

to wear tones of blue, green, gray and brown or to combine these with accents of another color (Yanai 2018, p. 23).

As a rule, the color of a kimono should not distract the audience. Therefore, the majority of performers choose to wear a single color and for the most formal occasions, such as *shin'uchi* promotion shows, *kuromontsuki*. A *rakugoka* might wear *tsumugi* for the intro at their own show, but would never wear *tsumugi* in a guest appearance with a senior performer. For most performances, male *rakugoka* would wear *somemono* or *orimono*.[12] The choice of kimono can also depend on the performer's position in the line-up. A younger *rakukoga* should not wear an expensive kimono of high-level formality, but the kimono's formality should match his own ranking. Younger performers might even confer with senior performers in the same show about what they intend to wear, so as not to end up with similar color combinations (Yanai 2018, p. 35) (Figs. 2 and 3).

With all the above choices, female performers have the possibility to make one more choice: to wear either men's or women's kimono. While patterns for both seem similar, the latter have side-slits below the armpit called *miyatsukuchi*. These openings help to adjust the hem and with it the layer around the waist (*ohashori*) to adjust for a female wearer's bust as shown in Fig. 4. Another visible difference is the *obi*. The women's *obi*-sash sits right under the breast and is about 34 cm wide. Male *rakugoka* use *kaku-obi*, a stiff cloth about 10 cm wide, which sits very low, just below the navel. This location makes moving both on stage and backstage easier (Satō and Tamura 2014). Certain stories cannot be performed if a *rakugoka* wears a women's kimono. For example, gestures to indicate that a character is looking for their *tenugui* cloth inside the kimono are difficult, if not impossible, to portray wearing women's kimono because of the obi width. Performers who decide to wear men's kimono need to dress with under-kimono first (*nagajuban*), wear a collar-pin (*eridome*), *shitajime*, *obi*, *hadagi* undershirt, *tabi* socks and *zōri* sandals. Wearers of the women's kimono require at least *kimono, nagajuban* (or alternatively *hanjuban* undershirt and *susoyoke* underskirt), *koshihimo* string belt, *datejime* (fabric belt worn between kimono and obi to secure kimono

[12] *Somemono* are kimono first woven using white thread with the resulting cloth dyed, whereas *orimono* are kimono made of pre-dyed threads which are woven into a pattern.

Fig. 2 Miyatsukuchi as shown in Komichi's kimono

and *nagajuban*), *obi* (tied in *taiko-musubi* style),[13] *obijime, obiage* sash, *obimakura* (pad to make obi look fuller), *obiita*-plate, *hadagi*, *tabi* and *zōri*.[14] With fewer items, the men's kimono makes it easier and quicker to dress and undress. As *zenza* move around the *gakuya* (green room) all day and most are inexperienced *kimono* wearers, female *zenza* today wear men's kimono. Upon promotion to *futatsume*, they may choose to wear women's kimono.

[13] Female *rakugoka* who wear women's kimono usually choose between *fukuro-obi* (pocket obi) or *Nagoya-obi*.

[14] *Zenza* of either gender are not allowed to wear *haori*, they dress casually (*kinagashi*, i.e., without *hakama* and *haori*). For *futatsume* and *shin'uchi*, *haori and haorihimo* may be added as per the performer's decision.

Fig. 3 Women's (left) and men's (right) kimono as worn by Komichi (left) and Ichihana (right) in comparison, showing the position of obi, haorihimo and mon

In modern Japanese society, women wearing a women's kimono are usually seen as the embodiment of Japaneseness and femininity (Goldstein-Gidoni 1999). And some female *rakugoka* are thus advised to do so by their own *shishō*, such as Komichi:

> When I started training, my master told me to train in a woman's kimono. 'If you wear a man's kimono, you will show that *rakugo* is a man's art. Don't pretend you are a man [*otoko no kawa o kaburu na*]. When you go up on stage and appear in front of the audience, it's you, Komichi, a woman, who plays the role of *goinkyo*, it's Komichi, a woman who plays the role of Hattsan. There is no way to hide the fact that you are a woman, whether in the green room or on stage. (Ryūtei Komichi 2021)

The choice, what to wear, like the choice between *koten* and *shinsaku*, is personal and each performer decides herself what is easiest to perform in and what signal she wants to send to her audiences.

Another such signal is hair and make-up. The majority of male *rakugoka* chooses between short-back-and-sides, crew cut or buzz cut. If the

Fig. 4 Ichihana demonstrating gestures of stowing away a tenugui inside the kimono

forehead and ears are shown, audiences can easily imagine male characters in the Edo period when men shaved their pate and tied up their long back-hair into a topknot onto the top of their head; if a performer wore their long hair down and unconsciously flicked it away from their face, audiences would imagine a samurai wearing his long hair down. If a performer decided to go on stage with glasses, beard, earrings or eyeshadow, audiences would imagine a samurai with glasses, beard, earrings or eyeshadow. Just like their male peers, many female *rakugoka* wear their hair short; some wear their hair so boyish that elder performers mistake them for boys (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019). If they have longer hair, they tie it up so that there is no hair that can get in the way of their hands or the audience's imagination.

As for make-up, gestures touching the face or sweat under stage light might smear the make-up (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019) or it

might rub-off on the *haori* or kimono sleeves and ruin the expensive silk garment. Therefore, many female *rakugoka* refrain or reduce make-up to an absolute minimum.

Stage Persona: Playing with Femininity

Rakugoka of either gender have the choice to accept/refuse professional stage engagement offers or produce their own shows. Small-scale organizers usually receive a head-shot or stage photo from the performer to be used in advertising, but for self-produced shows, the photos used on fliers are often curated specifically for the show. With 594 performers (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2021) competing for the attention of approximately 10,000 audience members in Greater Tokyo[15] and about 44 shows staged every day in pre-pandemic days (Tōkyō Kawaraban 2020), fliers need to stand out visually to catch the audience's attention. Some female *rakugoka* play with femininity or adopt *aidoru* imagery. One of the photos used for fliers for Kingentei Nonoka (Kokontei Yūsuke since February 2022) showed her posing in a kimono reminiscent of a high-ranking courtesan (Kingentei Yonosuke 2020). Chōkarō Momoka's fliers of her early *futatsume* days (when she was still named Pikkari) often were very feminine, like Fig. 5. showing her in a bridal dress.

However, finding the right balance of appealing to a diverse fanbase without deterring existing fans is difficult. Since the majority of Tokyo's *rakugo*-fan-population regardless of the performer's gender is male, the atmosphere of an all-male audience might deter potential spectators. Some male fans see female performers as potential girlfriends or partners—as attested by *rakugoka* Ichihana: "When I got married most hardcore-fans disappeared" (Benzaitei and Shunpūtei 2021).

5 Conclusion

There are a number of factors which possibly have helped women's acceptance on the *yose* stage. Unlike kabuki, *noh* and *bunraku*, *rakugo* is in general not passed down through family lines.[16] *Rakugo* also does

[15] Tōkyō Kawaraban, the monthly magazine listing all *rakugo* shows in Greater Tokyo, issues 10,000 copies each month of which 5,000 are read by subscribers.

[16] There are a number of *rakugo* who followed in their father's or uncle's footsteps, but their number is less than the number of female performers.

Fig. 5 Shunpūtei Pikkari flier for May 2014 shows. Copyright Chokaroh Momoka

not apply the *iemoto* (headmaster)-system.[17] Since the Meiji period, women have performed in *yose* shows in other arts such as *gidayū* (narrative performances), *rōkyoku* (melodic and narrative recitations), *manzai* (funny dialogues), *shamisen-mandan* (funny monologues accompanied by *shamisen*-music) and also *kōdan* (recitations of military or historic tales). Furthermore, the Asakusa Opera and Revues (musical theater including opera, operetta and dance; cf Yamanashi 2019) and later on the cinemas (Sheruman/Schermann 2019) were located in the same (*shitamachi*) areas of Tokyo and the same people attended as audiences, i.e., were both geographically and demographically close to the *yose*. All these factors possibly increased acceptance of women on stage.

As *rakugoka* perform on their own, strains on relationships among the artists as Allmendinger and Hackman (1999) have seen with orchestra musicians with women entering previously male-exclusive institutions, seem unlikely within the *rakugo* world. Rather than the *rakugo* world accommodating female perspectives in conjunction with female participation and visibility increasing, it seems that female *rakugoka* themselves will adapt and change further. *Rakugo* is an art created in cooperation with the audience: *rakugoka* achieve recognition mostly from audiences that provide performers with an external motivation to improve and excel. It also means that acceptance of a performer and their style depends on the audience. In addition, societal changes have influenced the acceptance of female *rakugoka*. When Shōkyō and Hanayo trained in the 1950s and 1960s, the ideal of *ryōsai kenbo* (good wife and wise mother)—the idea that while men were advancing the nation in public, women had to "create a pleasant home environment to help nurture the family and protect the nation" (Stalker 2018, p. 105)—was still strongly present, but attitudes have changed since then. The last entry on Hanayo is found in 1969—a year when less than half of women aged 25–29 were in employment (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism 2012). More than fifty years later, in 2021, 83.2% of women aged 25–34 were in employment (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2022). When society expects women to take care of their husbands and children, working as a freelance artist is still difficult. In 1981, when Karuta started training with Enka II, he made her promise to never get married as he

[17] In the *iemoto*-system, disciples pay to be taught by their master and are limited to practice only what they have been taught within their own school, their own master or senior disciples.

had already seen many female *geinin* quit upon marriage (Iwagami and Iwakami 2004, p. 14; Asahi Shinbun 2011). Osaka's Ayame got married, but could not meet the expectations of her husband, who wanted her to return home before him in the evenings and cook; he eventually started to beat her (Shimazaki 1995, p. 55).

As society changes, so do audiences' approaches and attitudes as well as performers' opportunities and lifestyles. Komichi, who started her training 22 years after Karuta, admitted that her *shishō* was sad when she moved further away due to her marriage. She also stated that her getting married was never an issue: "My *shishō* and his *shishō* are both married, there is no way I would not be allowed to get married myself" (Ryūtei Komichi 2021). More recently, in 2008, a single mother (Harusameya Fūko n.d.) and in 2017 a married woman with two children (San'yūtei Arama n.d.) joined the ranks of the Rakugo Geijutsu Kyōkai.

Although Shōkyō and Hanayo were not allowed to train as *zenza* at the *yose*, today all *rakugoka*, no matter their gender, are trained there. The fact that all go through the same training process, for the same amount of time, has strengthened female *rakugoka*'s acceptance. They may still hold back in criticizing or admonishing male junior performers or still have the feeling of requiring male performers' "approval to be here" (*irete moratte iru*) (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019), but this might change in the future.

The number of female performers is currently still small and there is usually only one female *rakugoka* in a *yose* line-up of twelve to twenty *rakugoka*. As female *rakugoka* are still a minority, neither their associations, the *yose* directors nor male peers feel the need to take action to accommodate female perspectives or preferences. Even in 2022, *yose* events staged to exclusively feature female *rakugoka* do not end with a *hanashi* but an *ōgiri*-improv-quiz or a dance (Daigo rakkyō redīzu tadaima sanjō! 2022). That said, organizational progress with a possibility to advance female perspectives has also occurred: in 2010, Karuta became a director (*riji*) of the Rakugo Kyōkai board (Asahi Shinbun 2011). Today, she proactively looks after female juniors and raises her own female *deshi*, both now are *shin'uchi* themselves. During the last decade, Tokyo's *rakugo* world has become a space that welcomes female participants. Women no longer require considerable resolve (*kakugo*) when deciding to pursue a *rakugo* career (Hanashi—Rakugo-kei Jōhō Saito 2019). Male *shishō* seek out the advice of female performers and ask them to help their female *deshi*. Female *zenza* now have a wider variety of role

models, some doing *koten*, some *shinsaku*, some changing *koten*, some not, some stressing femininity, some sporting a masculine look.

This chapter has only briefly analyzed different strategies female *rakugoka* currently follow. They all warrant thorough examination and analysis: language use of female *rakugoka* in comparison to male peers; strategies regarding performance (*hanashi*) and appearance on stage—both during and after completing *zenza* training; changes in perception and acceptance among audiences and male peers and so forth. At present, while Komichi is very successfully carving out her position at the *yose*, there is not yet a position of a "woman who can fit any line-up" (Ryūtei Komichi 2021). As the number of female *rakugoka* increases, each will have to find her own brand and stage persona in order to be cast for the *yose* line-up. In 2021, 61% of the female *rakugoka* noted in Tōkyō Kawaraban (2021) were not yet *shin'uchi*, i.e., they are still in a period of training (*zenza*) or are *futatsume*, a period in which they (no matter their gender) are still trying to find their own style, and where both audiences and producers still allow them to experiment and "mess up" (Hirose 2016, p. 192).

Although 2020 and 2021 likely experienced a dent in *deshi*-intake due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Di Francesco 2023), *rakugo* is as popular as ever. With female *rakugoka* of the second generation, such as Komichi and Izumi, popular on Tokyo's stages, female participation is likely to increase further. Male *shin'uchi* seem to be less reluctant to take in female *deshi* and eventually audiences will no longer see performers such as Komichi and Izumi as performing "from the female perspective" (*josei no mesen*) but as from the "Komichi-perspective" and the "Izumi-perspective."

Rakugo critic Hirose lauds *shin'uchi* Komichi as a "model case" of women who do "straight *koten*" (Hirose 2020, p. 337) as she does "not let [audiences] feel any unnaturalness of women performing *rakugo*" (p. 338), stressing how her approaches may be suggestions, pointers and inspiration for future female *rakugoka* (p. 339). Indeed, Komichi seems to have become the first female *rakugoka* to succeed if measured in terms of the number of *yose* engagements (Gokurakurakugo 2021). As Beichō predicted in the 1970s: once the number of spectators who have seen skilled female performers increases and the existence of female *rakugoka* is no longer considered an oddity, the audience's sense of discomfort should disappear (Katsura Beichō 1986 [1975], pp. 53–54).

Komichi stated that she creates her own precedents (*zenrei ha jibun de tsukuru* (Ryūtei Komichi 2021). If it hasn't been done yet, she will be the first to do so. Let us dare hope that many others will follow, creating their own precedents.

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