

The New York Times

MAYA PHILLIPS | THEATRE REVIEW



RUSS ROWLAND

Basking in the Warmth Of a Master Storyteller

A comic performance demonstrates a traditional form of Japanese humor

Seinfeld, Chappelle, Haddish, Wong: We have plenty of choices when it comes to stand-up comics in the United States. But sit-down comedy, as in rakugo, a centuries-old form of Japanese comic storytelling — not so much. Katsura Sunshine, the star and director of “Katsura Sunshine’s Rakugo,” at New World Stages, brings the form, with buoyant humor and playfulness, Off Broadway.

The stage is adorned simply, with red and white lanterns overhead and a rectangular platform on which Mr. Sunshine kneels for the performance, in the traditional style. A typical rakugo performance consists of stories delivered with three parts: an introduction, the story proper and the punch line. But when Mr. Sunshine steps onto the stage, something about the sight doesn’t quite compute.

Starting with the Guy Fieri-style bottle-blond hair.

Mr. Sunshine, dressed in a kimono and bearing the two traditional props of the form — a fan (*sensu*) and a hand towel (*tenugui*) — was born in Toronto and is of Slovenian descent. One may enter fearing the twin terrors of cultural insensitivity and appropriation, just to find them unfounded.

Because Mr. Sunshine, whose given name is Gregory Robic, is no drive-by enthusiast. Early in the show, as if anticipating the question of authenticity, he speaks of spending two decades in Japan and of his three-year apprenticeship under the rakugo master Katsura Bunshi VI. Now, Mr. Sunshine is only the second Westerner to become a rakugo master in Japan’s history.

In fact, he makes a virtue out of his fish-out-of-water status. His tales and prologues are full of self-deprecating humor, placing him in scenarios where he plays the outsider comically humbled and embarrassed by his ignorance. They skew cute — blithe, good-humored stories like ones you’d hear from a gregarious party host, about navigating mundane social situations:

learning the proper way to say “thank you” in a language that has over 40 variations, for example, and the correct sake-pouring etiquette.

The stories are full of repetition and build continuity, though Mr. Sunshine sometimes moves too briskly in his delivery, rushing us along. An affable entertainer, he’s best when he applies the brakes and motions to the audience, modulating his tone and showcasing his lively impressions and hammy expressions.

There are also thematic outliers, like “Reincarnation,” an original by his master, Bunshi, and “Rotten Tofu Chiritotechin” — both of which branch away from personal anecdotes, and Mr. Sunshine performs them with more narrative distance. The transitions are occasionally rough, though ultimately he makes his way back to the laughs.

Mr. Sunshine’s rakugo will cycle through different stories each month through the end of its run, in early January. Beginning to end, the production’s mirth is catching, warm, friendly and unburdened, as though each yarn is laced with a bit of sunshine.