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The Critical Point of Kamigata Comedy: How It Became a New Comedy in the TV Era

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Abstract

The year 2020 marks the 116th year of Kamigata comedy. The 1950s brought about great change for this form of entertainment so popular in the Kansai area of Japan. Since 1953 when television broadcasting began, its influence has gradually infiltrated Kamigata comedy. This new media brought many changes to Kamigata comedy, as it needed to evolve to find its place in the TV era. Looking back on its history, 1959 was a very important year for Kamigata comedy. This study will examine the state of TV broadcasting, how Kamigata comedy came to television, and what made the year 1959 such a critical point in Kamigata comedy's history. Several important events in the history of Kamigata comedy and TV broadcasting, such as the appearance of new comedy to match the new media opportunities and the increasing popularity of the television set, intersected during the 1959. If the year 1959 is supposed to be a critical point in the Kamigata comedy history, it would be said that this year, when the Kamigata comedy became closely associated with television, was also the starting point for advancing into a new style of comedy in the television era.

Biography

Hiroshi Takijiri graduated from Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan, in 1987 (B.A. Theatre Study) and Ohio University, Ohio, USA, in 1991 (M.A. International Studies). After he worked for commercial companies for 32 years and served as a member of Rotary International, he completed the master program at Osaka University, Osaka, Japan, in 2020 (M.A. Theatre Study). He is currently enrolled in the Ph.D. program of the Graduate School of Letters, Osaka University, and continues to study theatre.

1. Introduction

The first Japanese theatre company to perform "comedy" was the Soganoya Brothers Troupe, which was founded in 1904. Under the assumption that

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Kamigata comedy¹ began with the Soganoya Brothers Troupe, this year (2020) would mark the 116th year of the Kamigata comedy. Although many comedy troupes have come and gone throughout the history of Japanese theater, the premise of the Kamigata comedy has stayed the same, “human empathy played with laughter and tears.” However, the 1950s brought about a big change for this form of entertainment so popular in Osaka and Kyoto.

A new form of media, television broadcasting, began in 1953, and its influence gradually infiltrated Kamigata comedy, which had previously only been performed on the stage. The rapid expansion of television meant that many new programs were needed to satisfy viewers, creating the opportunity for Kamigata comedy to entertain viewers in a new way. Kamigata comedy's home at the theater meant actors could only play to a limited audience in a closed space, but television could bring Kamigata comedy to a much greater audience.

Thus, Kamigata comedy began its relationship with TV broadcasting. This new platform brought many other changes to Kamigata comedy, as it needed to evolve to find its place in the TV era. In this paper, I would like to examine the state of TV broadcasting, how Kamigata comedy came to television, and what made the year 1959 such a critical point in Kamigata comedy's history.

2. The Advent of the TV Era

2-1. Opening of Commercial Broadcasting Stations

Around the time of “the advent of the television era” in 1959, commercial broadcasting stations opened one after another. The Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK), which is a special station responsible for public broadcasting in Japan, began its first television broadcast in February of 1953. In August of the same year, the Nippon Television Network Corporation, which is the first commercial television broadcasting station, opened. After that, commercial TV broadcasting stations opened with rapidity, and TV broadcasting areas expanded nationwide. The increase in commercial TV stations during the decade from 1953 to 1962² is as follows:

<u>Year of opening</u>	<u>Number of new openings</u>	<u>Main broadcasting stations</u>
1953	1	Nippon TV
1954	0	-----
1955	1	TBS TV
1956	2	ABC TV, CBC TV
1957	1	Hokkaido TV
1958	12	Yomiuri TV, Kansai TV, RKB Mainichi, etc.
1959	21	MBS TV, Fuji TV, TV Asahi, etc.
1960	5	Yamagata TV, Akita TV, Fukui TV, etc.
1961	0	-----
1962	3	Nagoya TV, Hiroshima TV, Sendai TV

After 1953, new TV stations opened and spread from the urban areas of Tokyo and Osaka to more rural areas. With this development, the number of commercial broadcasting stations continued to increase at the end of each fiscal year.

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(Fig. 1) Transition of Number of Operated TV Stations.³

As seen in Fig. 1, 1959 is the year in which the number is the highest, with 21 newly opened stations. Although not listed above, looking at the numbers after 1963, there is no year with more than 21 new stations after 1959.

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2-2. Popularization of the TV Device and the Increase of Viewers

TV stations had been opened one after another, spreading from urban areas to rural areas. This of course, meant that this new television device had to penetrate viewers' homes. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication's "White Paper on Communication, 1987 edition," the following fact can be recognized regarding the spread of the television receiver.

Black-and-white televisions were rapidly spreading to households in the Showa 30s (1955-1964), and the devices' household penetration rate reached 90% in 1959. [...] Looking at the relationship between the price and the spread of television set, the decrease in price had a great impact on the spread of the television set. Black-and-white televisions began rapidly spreading after the amount shipped per unit fell below the monthly disposable income per household.

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(Fig. 2) Transition Graph of:

- ① Penetration of black and white television set
- ② Monthly disposable income per household
- ③ Amount shipped per unit

(Some legends are translated in English from the original figures.)⁴

Another point to be noted here is that there was a turning point in the year 1959, in which the price per unit became less than the monthly disposable income per household, and the price of the television receiver continued to drop, making

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it easier to buy. As a result, the penetration rate of television devices increased sharply. The penetration rate was 30% in 1959, but it reached 80% just three years later. Thus, the year 1959 is supposed to be one of the most significant years in the history of television. Against this backdrop, TV stations requested Kamigata comedy to provide their works to new TV programs, and a new comedy-drama reflecting the TV era was born.

3. A Comedy Born from the Conflict between Stage and Television

In 1959, a new comedy form that was not a stage drama appeared. The serial TV drama "Oya-baka Ko-baka" ("a doting parent and a stupid child" in literal translation) began broadcasting on Yomiuri Telecasting Corporation, which had just debuted the previous year. Shigeru Otsuki describes the situation at that time:

As the Shochiku-Shinkigeki⁵ was about to reach its heyday under Tengai Shibuya,⁶ who was the leader of a theatrical company, coincidentally, television began to spread in each household. In 1958, Yomiuri Telecasting Corporation and Kansai Television began broadcasting, and Osaka entered a full-scale television era. As a matter of course, the most popular comedy company the Shochiku-Shinkigeki was called upon to appear in a TV drama. Tengai strongly resisted many offers from TV stations for various reasons, but eventually, he gave in. In December of 1959, "Oya-baka Ko-baka," in which main members of Shochiku-Shinkigeki starred, became a tremendous hit on Yomiuri Telecasting Corporation.⁷

Tengai Shibuya, the representative of the Shochiku-Shinkigeki, was interested in new broadcasting media, but he actually hated to be involved in television. Publicly, he cited theatrical reasons for refusing television as "acting becomes rough" and "unlike theatre, there is no sense of presence without the audience." Privately, by always saying, "If you show it for free, no one will come to see it at theatre," Tengai demonstrated his true fear; he was worried that the number of spectators in the theater would be reduced by television.⁸

However, one day when the theater manager asked Tengai if he really hated television that much, an unexpected answer was returned. He said, "No, it's rather what we should take advantage of." Having despised television, Tengai recognized the power of the media that was spreading nationwide rapidly. As a leader of the comedy troupe and producer of the theatre, he chose a way to make an active use of the new media.

During this time, commercial TV stations in Osaka were growing. In

addition to NHK, the Asahi Broadcasting began in 1956, and in 1958, the Yomiuri Telecasting Corporation and Kansai Television opened, followed by the Mainichi Broadcasting System in 1959. The number of stations quadrupled in four years. As the number of stations increased, so did the number of programs for broadcasting. At that time, there were many entertainers in Osaka, and of course, the number of TV programs planned and produced in anticipation of them was increasing. In line with such a trend, the television companies urged the Shochiku-Shinkigeki to participate in TV programs.

Tengai Shibuya was reluctant at first to accept the request of television companies, concerned that the performance and flow of the Soganoya Brothers' comedy would be changed by television or that the theatre audience would be taken by television. On the other hand, he understood that the arrival of the television era, which involved the whole of Japan, could not be ignored any more, and that the advance into television could alleviate the economic problems of his theatrical company. The Shochiku-Shinkigeki, led by Tengai Shibuya, continued to struggle between the traditional stage and new media, television. As the result of struggling, in 1959, a new work, "Oya-baka Ko-baka" was born, in which the Shochiku-Shinkigeki showed a positive attitude to television.

4. New Original Comedy for Television "Oya-baka Ko-baka" (1959)

Tengai Shibuya wrote the script for "Oya-baka Ko-baka," and the title role, "Oya (a parent, father)," was played by Tengai himself, while "Ko (a child, named Kanichi)" was played by Kanbi Fujiyama.¹⁰ The story focuses on Kanichi's behavior, which deviates from common sense due to his naivety, turning his shame into laughter for the audience, and it brings viewers glorious fun while showing that the child (Kanichi), who is supposed to be stupid, also points out the falsity and faithlessness of adults by his purity. There are two points in this work that show a strong relationship with television.

The first point is that "Oya-baka Ko-baka" is an original comedy for television. This was not the first work on TV for the Shochiku-Shinkigeki. Before that, the Shochiku-Shinkigeki's comedies were broadcast on other television stations. Most of them, however, were either live broadcasts of the stage, or recreated existing drama for television. For the latter, a stage drama with a performance time of about one to one-and-a-half hours was remade for television, divided into two parts, with each part broadcasted once a week in a 30-minute program for two consecutive weeks. A typical example is "The Shochiku-Shinkigeki Comedy Hour," which aired every Tuesday from 20:30 to 21:00 from March to December 1959. A total of 20 works comprised this program, one shown every two weeks.

On the other hand, "Oya-baka Ko-baka" was a studio-produced original work

for television. This was also the first VTR recording broadcast on a television station. While there were still many live broadcasts in the studio at the time, the drama recorded in the studio was convenient to the Shochiku-Shinkigeki comedy troupe because it allowed the troupe to be free from time constraints while also performing on the stage. This also helped to produce the original studio drama, which was not broadcast on stage.

Another feature of this TV work is that it was not produced by Tengai Shibuya of the Shochiku-Shinkigeki; instead it was produced by the employee director of a TV station, Yomiuri Telecasting Corporation (Nobuyuki Kosaka). Most of the stage performances of the Shochiku-Shinkigeki were directed by Tengai Shibuya, as the leader of the comedy troupe, whereas a staff of the TV station that had just opened the previous year directed this drama. What point did the drama production at that time focus on? Takaharu Sawada, who was a director of the similar comedy program at the same time at a different broadcasting station (Asahi Television Broadcasting), said this was a pivotal moment that changed old stage production methods to be more effective for a television program.

Comedies are comedies because they can make people laugh in any case. You should do anything to make viewers laugh. As a result, if the voltage of laughter itself drifted upward and exceeds the power of laughter of the leading role, it may be inappropriate that the actor or talent plays that role. Even if it isn't a comedy, I get angry, for example, when I see an idea of the exhibition at an exposition, focusing on the most interesting idea only in the beginning, and after that some fluffy ideas are put together properly to make the story take shape. Why bring in the most interesting idea first and show me great ideas one after another? I learned this aggressive rendering method from Achako Hanabishi.¹¹ I suppose that the way of rendering I took is allowed and recognized because I was a television director, not a stage producer. The television medium is always greedy. The ones who hold the TV channel are cruel viewers. They wouldn't understand any details of the production side. In a comedy program, it cannot be said that the actor is funny because he/she is the protagonist, but it can be said that the actor is the protagonist because he/she is the funniest. The "not-funny" guy must leave the television. The protagonist is not who is protected but who is actively considered the funniest guy.¹²

In the traditional Soganoya comedy, the plot that makes audience laugh and cry at the end is emphasized. Most of the stories are entertaining and touch the

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heart of audiences. The ones who bring a story forward along such a plot are comedic characters on the stage. Furthermore, although the protagonist of a play is usually performed by the leader of a troupe, the protagonist is not always the funniest character. Depending on the story, the leader can play a role that is not a comedic character. For example, in the "Katsura Harudanji," which is hailed as a masterpiece, the main character, a famous comic storyteller Harudanji, was played by the leader of the troupe Tengai Shibuya. The story depicts the sadness of the life of a rakugo-ka (comedic storyteller). Regardless of the main plot, the character who gets the greatest laugh on the stage is an apprentice boy of a liquor shop, a small supporting role played by Kanbi Fujiyama. He was still a young anonymous actor at the time of the first performance of the work in 1951.

On the contrary, TV comedy-drama emphasized the comical performance of comedians rather than the fun of the plot. As a means to counter the "cruel viewers" who hold the right to the channel, the television took the "aggressive production method" that emphasized the continuity of fun, with the primary purpose of making viewers laugh. The protagonist of a comedy drama must always be a funny person on television.

This idea can be recognized in the protagonist of "Oya-baka Ko-baka," the son Kanichi. The protagonist of this program was not the troupe leader, Tengai Shibuya, but instead Kanbi Fujiyama, who played a humorous character attracting "greedy and cruel television viewers." They tuned in every week to watch this funny actor, Kanbi Fujiyama, who made them laugh, rather than to enjoy the drama.

The second point can be seen in the character played by Kanbi Fujiyama. In this work, Kanbi created a character with a strong personality, the stupid and funny boy called "Aho-bon."¹³ With this role, he was even called "The Prince of the Comedy." Also, even today, whenever people speak of the name of Kanbi Fujiyama, they remember him always in the role of "Aho-bon."

Even in the stage before that work, there was a stereotypical, or stock, character called "Aho" in Kamigata comedy. One example of this character is an apprentice boy of a mercantile house. Talking to adults, the boy's foolish responses due to his ignorance and innocence caused great laughter. This type of character frequently appears not only in Kamigata comedy but also in Kamigata Rakugo.¹⁴ It is an essential role in Osaka's laughing performing arts. His stage costume also imitated what a real-life apprentice boy would wear, such as a short kimono with a happi coat.

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An apprentice boy, played by Kanbi Fujiyama
in the play "Katsura Harudanji" (1951)¹⁵

Kanbi Fujiyama, who specialized in portraying such a foolish kid, made the "Aho" role in this work to be even more visually effective for television. "Aho-bon" Kanichi had his hair hardened with pomade, wore his suit loosely, and spoke like a little child. His unnatural appearance caused laughter just when he appeared on the television screen.

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"Aho-bon" Kanichi, played by Kanbi Fujiyama at the
"Oya-baka Ko-baka" stage version.¹⁶

Kanbi made use of these visual features so that the strangeness of the character would be instantly transmitted to viewers' eyes when he appeared on the TV screen. This new type of "Aho" role, which was different from the traditional foolish character in theatrical plays, was born from this work, and he kept viewers glued to the TV.

5. Expanding Comedy on Television

According to TV viewer ratings (Dentsu Survey, Part 3) on January 26, 1960, shortly after “Oya-baka Ko-baka” began airing, it achieved a staggering figure 49.4%.¹⁷ At the time, there were 13 network stations¹⁸ in the Yomiuri Telecasting Corporation (including Yomiuri TV itself), which produced and broadcast “Oya-baka Ko-baka.” These 13 stations accounted for 30% of the total number of TV stations in Japan (43 stations in 1960) and covered each major area from Hokkaido to Kyushu. Considering the viewer ratings and the broadcast coverage, this means that “Oya-baka Ko-baka” was broadcast almost nationwide, and almost half of the viewers watching television at that time were watching this drama. Until then, Kamigata comedy had been a play performed only at theaters in urban areas such as Osaka or Tokyo. Television brought it to homes throughout the country via the broadcast, and the viewers accepted it positively and favorably. Its ratings show that this comedy-drama brought Kamigata comedy into the new television era.

Kaoru Fujii, a playwright of the Shochiku-Shinkigeki, stated about the influence of the drama on Kanbi Fujiyama like this.

Gaining popularity in homes, the name of Kanbi Fujiyama quickly became known nationwide. Without this program, the “comedy genius” might have ended with only a Doutonbori’s¹⁹ star for his lifetime without being called “genius.”²⁰

“This program” that Kaoru Fujii mentioned refers to “Oya-baka Ko-baka.” This drama, produced at the request of the station, could not have been created without television. Therefore, Fujii’s words could be rephrased as: “If there were no television, Kanbi Fujiyama would not have gained national popularity as a comedy actor.” It could be said that television gave birth to a super-hit comedy, and it transformed a local comedian in Osaka to a comedic genius in Japan.

The Shochiku-Shinkigeki, which is rooted in the traditional Soganoya comedy and has remained at the center of Kamigata comedy’s history, began its relationship with television in 1953 and expanded nationwide through the milestone work “Oya-baka Ko-baka” in 1959. Then, in the following year 1960, the sequel “Shin (New) Oya-baka Ko-baka” was launched on the same Yomiuri broadcasting station, as other new comedy programs began airing on Asahi Broadcasting, Kansai Television, and Mainichi Broadcasting. Thus, the Kamigata comedy expanded nationwide through the broadcasting networks.

6. Conclusion

Along with the start of television broadcasting, Kamigata comedy faced a major turning point. Television worked as a kind of catalyst for the birth of the masterpiece comedy “Oya-baka Ko-baka,” which was different from the traditional comedy and was a very unique work for television. The power of this media spread the work throughout the country.

Furthermore, the popularity of Kamigata comedy was fed back to the stage from the television. Contrary to Tengai's worry that the audience would not come to the theatre due to broadcasting comedy on television, an even larger audience came to the theatre. Television needed Kamigata comedy, and the Kamigata comedy took advantage of television for its future. Looking back on the history of the Kamigata comedy, its forage into television was a perfect marriage. Several important events in the history of Kamigata comedy and TV broadcasting, such as the appearance of new comedy to match the new media opportunities and the increasing popularity of the television set, intersected during the 1959.

If the year 1959 is supposed to be a critical point in the Kamigata comedy history, it would be said that this year, when the Kamigata comedy became closely associated with television, was also the starting point for advancing into a new style of comedy in the television era.

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1 Kamigata comedy: "Kamigata" is an old name for the Kansai area, including Osaka and Kyoto. Kamigata comedy is the collective name for comedies performed in the area and originated from the Soganoya Goro and Juro's comedy theatre. The Shochiku Shinkigeki is the most famous comedy troupe in Kamigata comedy.

2 Japan Commercial Broadcasters Association (JBA). "List of Commercial Television Station Opening." available from
<https://j-ba.or.jp/category/data/jba101207>; accessed 22 August 2020.

3 Fig. 1: Transition of Number of Operated-TV Stations.
Kimizuka, Yosuke. Council of Performers Rights & Performing Arts Organizations. "The Birth of Commercial Stations and TV Broadcasting: And Expansion of Performers Rights." available from
https://www.cpra.jp/cpra_article/article/000306_2.html; accessed 22 August 2020.

4 Fig. 2: Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications. "White Paper on Communication, 1987 edition." available from
<https://www.soumu.go.jp/johotsusintokei/whitepaper/ja/s62/html/s62a02020100.html>; accessed 20 August 2020.

5 Shochiku-Shinkigeki: Founded in 1948. A comedy troupe at the center of the postwar history of the Kamigata comedy.

6 Tengai Shibuya: 1906-1983. The leader of the troupe of the Shochiku-Shinkigeki. Also actor, playwright and producer. The name of playwright of the work "Oya-baka Kobaka." Naoshi Tate is Tengai's pen name.

7 Shigeru Otsuki, *Shibuya Tengai Den*, Shufunotomosha, 1992, p.161.

8 Yomiuri Shimbun Osaka Honsha Bunkabu, ed., *Kamigata Houso Owarai Shi*, Yomiuri

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- Shimbunsha, 1999, p.220.
- 9 Ibid., p.220.
 - 10 Kanbi Fujiyama: 1929-1990. Comedic actor, excelling in playing the role of a foolish person. After Shibuya Tengai died, he led the Shochiku-Shikigeki.
 - 11 Achako Hanabishi: 1897-1974. Stand-up comedian and comedic actor.
 - 12 Takaharu Sawada, *Kamigata Geinoh Retsuden*, Bungeishunju, 1997, p.37.
 - 13 Aho-bon: A coined word that combines the two words, “aho” meaning stupid and “bon” meaning a rich merchant's son. A stupid young master of a mercantile house. One point to note here is the use of the word “aho.” “Aho” in the Osaka dialect is accompanied by the nuance of dearness, not simply meaning a fool.
 - 14 Rakugo: Japanese comedic storytelling
 - 15 Picture reprinted from Kanbi Fujiyama, *Aho Kaina*, Nihon Tosho Center, 2002
 - 16 “Oya-baka Ko-baka” DVD disk jacket, reprinted from Amazon. Available from <https://www.amazon.co.jp/%E8%A6%AA%E3%83%90%E3%82%AB%E5%AD%90%E3%83%90%E3%82%AB-%E5%89%8D%E7%B7%A8-DVD-%E8%97%A4%E5%B1%B1%E5%AF%9B%E7%BE%8E/dp/B000BU6PTE>; accessed 19 August 2020.
 - 17 Kaoru Fujii, *Saraba Shouchiku-Shinkigeki*, Joho Center Publishing, 1993, p.58.
 - 18 Yomiuri Telecasting, Nippon TV, Nishinippon Broadcasting, Nankai Broadcasting, Sapporo Television Broadcasting, Kitanihon Broadcasting, Shikoku Broadcasting, Kochi Broadcasting, Yamaguchi Broadcasting, Yamanashi Broadcasting System, Yamagata Broadcasting, Akita Broadcasting System, Fukui Broadcasting: Total 13 stations.
 - 19 Dotonbori: A downtown and entertainment district in the southwestern part of Chuo-ku, Osaka, where there had been theaters along the Dotonbori river since the Edo period.
 - 20 Fujii, op.cit., p.58.