

A Set of *Kyōgen* Adaptations: Henry Livings's *Pongo Plays*

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This report discusses the transpositions, adaptations, and original departures from kyōgen and music hall that Henry Livings used in creating his delightful popular sketches, Pongo Plays, performed in England in the 1960s and 1970s.

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I should like to draw attention to a set of adaptations of *kyōgen* that has not been referred to by scholars of Japanese theatre. Their interest is that the adapter, Henry Livings (1929–1998), ingeniously and amusingly draws on the conventions of British music hall to provide a theatrical stylization equivalent to that of the originals. It is not surprising that Livings's work with *kyōgen* has gone unnoticed. He is a writer of farcical comedies with titles such as *Stop It Whoever You Are* (1961), *Honour and Offer* (1969), and, his best-known play, *Eh?* (1969). The *kyōgen* adaptations appear in a series of play scripts for young people, *Pongo Plays 1–6* (1971) and *Six More Pongo Plays* (1974). Nothing indicates a connection with *kyōgen* in the titles of the two slim books, though the 1971 publisher's blurb does state, rather vaguely, "Henry Livings re-tells a number of traditional tales from Japan and elsewhere."

The eponymous Pongo is Sam Pongo, often a servant like his prototypes Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja. As in the *kyōgen*, there is a recurring trio: the Master, Sam Pongo, and, in place of a male fellow servant, the lovely Lorris. Some of the Pongo plays are close adaptations of *kyōgen*, others variations on the originals, and others wholly invented yet in the *kyōgen* spirit. Of the twelve plays in the two collections, six are clearly adaptations of *kyōgen*, although not specified as such in the texts.

Pongo Plays 1–6 includes:

Rattel (*Busu* [also called *The Delicious Poison*]), first performed in Manchester, 1969

Beewine (*Bōshibari* [also called *Tied to a Stick*]), first performed in Birmingham, 1970

The Boggart (*Kubi hiki* [also called *Tug of War*]), first performed in Birmingham, 1970

Conciliation (*Kamabara* [also called *The “Sickley” Stomach*]), first performed in Lincoln, 1970

Six More Pongo Plays includes:

The Ink-Smeared Lady (*Suminuri*)

Mushrooms and Toadstools (*Kusabira* [also called *Mushrooms*]), first performed in London, 1970

If Livings had envisioned a whole evening of Pongo plays, that did not happen. They appear to have premiered in mixed bills of short plays by various authors.

These six plays are easily identifiable with the Japanese originals. Other Pongo plays could possibly be adaptations of *kyōgen*, but none seem to match with summaries in Don Kenny’s *A Kyogen Companion* (1999). There were a limited number of English translations of *kyōgen* that would have been available to Livings in 1970.¹ All but one of the adapted plays are in *Selected Plays of Kyōgen* (McKinnon 1968); the exception is *The Ink Smeared Lady*, which Livings probably found in *Japanese Folk-Plays: The Ink Smeared Lady and Other Kyōgen* (Sakanishi 1960; a reissue of *Kyōgen, Comic Interludes of Japan*, 1938). These two collections most likely served as Livings’s sources.

The plots of the Pongo plays diverge to varying degrees from those of the original *kyōgen*. Some are adapted to a Western setting with little change; others start with the *kyōgen* plot but develop it differently (as in his version of *The Ink-Smeared Lady* to be discussed later); while still others invent an original play in the *kyōgen* spirit. An example with no changes in the development of the plot and minimal

Anglicization is *Rattel*. The high-quality sugar in *The Delicious Poison* that the lord tells Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja is poison, to prevent them eating it in his absence, in *Rattel* becomes a sherry trifle (a very British dessert based on stale sponge cake and custard), which he instructs his servant, Lorris, to be sure to tell her boyfriend, Sam Pongo, is rat poison. The sugar and the trifle are both devoured. To cover their crime, the pair of servants destroys a scroll and a bowl in the *kyōgen*, and a vase and a drape in the Pongo play.

An example of a *kyōgen*-like invention, with no definite Japanese source, is *The Gamecock (Pongo Plays 1–6)*.² Sam Pongo, a “wily traveler” in this play, enters an empty pub and boasts to the barmaid that he can turn common ale into best bitter. He persuades her to go with him to the cellar, despite (or perhaps because of) her suspicions that he is seeking a place to have his way with her. Once there he rapidly bores a hole in two adjacent barrels, which she desperately tries to plug with a hand on each hole. Now he has her bent over and helpless. She awaits an assault on her rear with nervous anticipation, but all he wants is to pour himself a free beer and go on his way. In its sexual content, this is unlike a *kyōgen*, but in the use of one simple outrageous trick, it has the same quality of inspired ingenuity to slake a thirst as *Chidori* (The Plovers), *Tied to a Stick*, and many other traditional *kyōgen*.

Why *Kyōgen*?

There are probably two reasons for Henry Livings’ interest in *kyōgen*. First, Livings has said that when writing his full-length plays he breaks them into ten-minute units, “About as long . . . as you can hold a new situation, clearly and totally in mind” (Livings 1963: 25). That is about as long as translations of *kyōgen* scripts are, if read aloud naturalistically. Second, Livings’s central character is typically the little guy, and he has said that he is interested “to see how [power] works and on whom” (Berney 1993: 392). *Kyōgen* frequently show power and its reversal, as in the triumph of the servants Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja over their master. Indeed, many *kyōgen* are vivid examples of a universal comic motif, the world turned upside down. Thus, Livings may have had both a technical and a thematic interest in *kyōgen*.

As a writer of light comedies, Livings has attracted little critical attention. He wrote the Pongo plays at a time when many plays with a sociopolitical emphasis were being written. John Russell Taylor suggests, “Not only does he come from the working class, but he writes for the working class. He uses one of the lightest and most popular forms, farce, to convey serious truths to his audience” (Taylor 1963: 258). Taylor does not state what those truths are, and the regional repertory companies where Livings’s plays have been performed have hardly

been havens for the working class. What Livings himself said was, “When I first wrote plays, I felt there weren’t enough plays which were fun, and that plot and naturalism were overwhelming the other aspects (fun, magic, social observation, the sculptural kinetics, the social connection that can be set up in a theatre)” (Berney: 392). Livings’s encounter with *kyōgen*, which embodies all of these missing aspects, appears to have been a fortuitous one.

***Kyōgen* and Music Hall**

The adaptations are particularly interesting because Livings adapts not only the plays but also the theatrical conventions. He finds an equivalent presentational mode to that of *kyōgen* in the music hall. There he could find direct address to the audience, an onstage musician in full evening dress, an emphasis on the physicality of performance, and stock characters recurring from play to play.

Music hall, like American vaudeville, presented variety acts and was at its height in the first two decades of the century. The success of this essentially popular form of entertainment culminated in a Royal Command Performance for George V in 1912. But just as vaudeville lost its best performers to film and television—Buster Keaton, W. C. Fields, the doubles act of George Burns and Gracie Allen—so the music hall lost its best comic performers to British television’s variety shows. Music hall acts survived the longest in the north of England, touring a circuit of workingmen’s clubs.

In his memoir on his early days in the theatre, *The Rough Side of the Boards*, whose subtitle, *A Rueful and Mendacious Theatrical Memoir*, suggests its facetious tone, Livings describes seeing a performance of music hall on a small semicircular stage in a corner of a Sheffield pub in the 1950s. He calls it “the real thing,” but the phrase introduces a paragraph describing the traditionally decorated pub and its “pugilistic woman with frizzy black dyed hair and a cigarette” at the piano (Livings 1993: 119). He seems to have enjoyed the interior decoration and the atmosphere more than the performance. He describes a solo can-can by an inexperienced young woman, frowning in concentration, and a tenor singing Scottish ballads who was joined part way through his act by a bagpiper. Livings’s attention and description then drifts away from the performance, about which we are told nothing more. He saw a tradition on its last legs.

It is ironic that Livings, who almost certainly never saw a performance of *kyōgen* and probably never saw a true music hall performance, nevertheless brought the two together. Although he used the character types and plot structures of *kyōgen*, the performance con-

ventions seemed to interest him most. Seeking British equivalents, he asked for all of the characters except the musician to wear wooden Lancashire clogs, so that “every move is punctuated by the clogs’ click-clack;” with clogs, “mimed movement like the ‘marcher sur place’ shall be emphatic and the actors’ work simple and clear”—and if possible the movements should be reflected in a polished hardwood floor (Livings 1971: 6).³ Elements of the setting such as doors and steps are to be mimed, a decorative curtain or perhaps a screen are to hang behind the actors, and the lights are to remain at a constant bright level.

The Adaptations

The dialogue of the Pongo plays is colloquially British, sometimes employing a Victorian formality. Livings’s intention seems to have been less to evoke a specific period than to suggest an old-fashioned England where the squirearchy would have had live-in servants and duties to the empire, and where, as Livings writes, there were “class and trade uniforms” that are still familiar to us (Livings 1971: 6). The songs, which the actor-musician accompanies on whatever instrument he or she can play, from piano to mandolin, usually have simple verses of four rhyming lines. For example, in Livings’s version of *The Ink-Smeared Lady*, originally a dialogue-only *kyōgen* in which a Lord (*daimyō*) parts from the mistress he has enjoyed during a long stay in the capital, he opens with the cast singing

Oh what pain it is to leave
To lose each magic hour
Our time together turned to grief
A fragrant broken flower. (Livings 1974: 25)

This theme is sustained through another four verses.

The recurring characters in the twelve Pongo plays are the Master and, in place of Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja, Sam Pongo and Lorris. The former is a street-smart servant or working-class man, and the latter is usually a sexy young woman, who is often the Master’s maidservant as well as Sam Pongo’s girlfriend. In *The Ink-Smeared Lady*, she is the Master’s mistress. Replacing two men with a man and a woman opens up a world of sexual innuendo and byplay that alters the dynamics of the original *kyōgen*. An example of such innuendo is in *Beevine* (*Bōshibari* [also called Tied to a Stick]). When Lorris tells Sam Pongo that her Master has tied her hands behind her back, he asks “didn’t you feel him at it?” and she replies “Yes, but I didn’t think that was what he was up to” (Livings 1971: 39).

Of course, an insubordinate servant and a flirtatious young woman are to be found in comedy throughout theatre history and across the world. So are self-introductions by characters, jokes about the speed with which servants appear (so convenient to a play's advancement), recurring situations between stock characters, and speeches that recur along with them. These are as common in *kyōgen* as in *commedia dell' arte*, and are somewhat less so in the *Pongo Plays*.

Not only do characters recur but, as in *kyōgen*, so do some of their lines. Often a play begins with a variant of a *nanori* (name-announcing speech) by the Master, seen at its fullest in the *Pongo Plays* in *Beevine*:

MASTER: I am a man of some little substance and well thought-of hereabouts: I have a maidservant, and I can have Eccles cakes for breakfast any time I please, I have the leisure for gentlemanly pursuits, and anybody would say I ought to be without cares; but it's a remarkable thing to me that whomsoever tries to fly that little bit higher, there's always someone to pull him down: the maidservant has a gentleman friend, one Sam Pongo, a consistent worm in my bud. (Livings 1971: 33)

The orotund language of the Master establishes that the play is in the past, yet has a colloquial familiarity.

The plays' endings presented a particular problem. Because British theatres do not have a long entryway to the stage, Livings could not end with a chase up the bridgeway (*hashigakari*) accompanied by the cry of "I'll catch you yet, I'll catch you yet," as in a number of *kyōgen*. In the two examples that follow, it is the *kyōgen* endings that are most changed.

In Livings's adaptation of *Mushrooms*, called *Mushrooms and Toadstools*, he replaces a wonder-working Mountain Ascetic (*yamabushi*) with a neighbor woman—Lorris at a more mature age than usual—who has a reputation for charms that cure warts and other ills. Of course, neither the Mountain Ascetic nor Lorris can get rid of the mushrooms. The problem of the ending seems to have led Livings to invent a new central conceit. Drawing upon the audience participation conventions of music hall and British pantomime, Livings combines the proliferation of mushrooms with the children's game of red light/green light, in which everyone tries to creep up on whoever is It, whose back is turned, freezing before It turns around and sees them moving. Whenever the Musician sings the menacing-sounding

Chanterelle and Honey Agaric
Stinkhorn Smut and Bunt

Oh Warty Puffball and Fly Agaric
Bitter Boletus and up we shunt (Livings 1974: 49)

audience members, as the mushrooms and toadstools, are encouraged to advance onto the stage. While *Mushrooms* ends with a chase up the bridgeway, in *Mushrooms and Toadstools*, the Master and Lorriss act as if they are being squeezed off the stage. They escape into the auditorium, where they applaud the spectators who are now onstage. Since applause ends a play, the spectators stop milling about and the Master thanks them for their performance.

In his adaptation of *The Ink-Smeared Lady*, Livings remains close to the original until the ending. The Master writes to his mistress:

Dearest Lorriss, I am compelled to the far Indies, and in that harsh exile there can be no place for the tender passion I bear you, and no place for a weak woman. It would be an unworthy and an unmanly Briton who would expose an English rose to the relentless heat, the diseases, and the damp of jungle and trading-post. (Livings 1974: 27)

He contemplates “the ivory maidens of the Orient” with “their slender rounded limbs, their bright oval eyes, their thick-coiled ebony hair . . . their submissive cunning in the ways of men” (Livings 1974: 26), but assures himself that they will be but small consolation for the loss of Lorriss. She enters and he breaks the news to her. She reacts with sorrow:

LORRIS: I hoped we’d stay together.
MASTER: We were together.
LORRIS: Forever I meant.
MASTER: Nothing is forever, we grow old, we die . . .
LORRIS: My love is forever; I still need you, and you’re going.
MASTER: I’ll leave you provided.
LORRIS: Thank you. (Livings 1974: 28)

How false her tender feelings are is revealed, just as in the *kyōgen*, when Sam Pongo puts ink into a glass of water from which she is dabbing tears onto her cheeks. But whereas in the *kyōgen* the Mistress chases her lover up the bridgeway, trying to smear ink on his face too, in Livings’s version the gullible Master takes the inky tears as a remarkable demonstration of her sorrow—“They’ll never believe this in Kuala Lumpur: her eyes are love-letters” (Livings 1974: 31). Left alone, Sam Pongo and Lorriss sing “Oh what pain it is to leave” one more time. He puts his arm around her, a woman both sexy and financially provided for, and they leave together.



FIGURE 1. The Mistress's tears of parting are exposed as a sham when the Lord places ink in her water-bowl, in *Suminuri* (*The Ink-Smeared Lady*). (Print by Yamaguchi Ryōshū. Reprinted from *Kyōgen hyakuban* [One Hundred *Kyōgen*, 1922]. Courtesy of Unsōdō)

Conclusion

From the first translation-adaptation of an East Asian play, original texts have been assimilated to the prevailing conventions of Western theatre. Ji Junxiang's *Zhao Shi Gu'er* (*The Orphan of Zhao*), the first Asian play to appear in translation, was dressed in the conventions of baroque tragedy in Voltaire's *L'Orphelin de la Chine* (1755), in those of European opera in the central act of Judith Weir's *A Night at the Chinese Opera* (London 1987), and in the conventions of the American musical in a recent country music-influenced production (New York, 2003 [See McCarter 2003 and Jefferson 2003 reviews]). What is unusual about Henry Livings's *Pongo Plays* is that he turned to a non-mainstream theatrical form, music hall, because of the equivalence of the conventions it shares with *kyōgen*. His Pongo plays maintain the fun, the social critique, and a suggestion of the performance style of the *kyōgen* that inspired them.

NOTES

1. For example, none of the other Pongo plays can be matched with any of the summaries in Don Kenny's *A Kyogen Companion* (Tokyo: National Nō Theatre, 1994).

2. It is possible that *The Liquor Pipe* (*Hi No Sake*; in Sadler 1934), in which Tarō Kaja also bores a hole in a sake barrel, was a source of inspiration.

3. The Lancashire clogs suggest the north of England, where Livings grew up and to which he returned to work with a theatre company in Stoke-on-Trent for a number of years.

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