



Sharing Japanese Humor with Americans

Motoko Dworkin ©2011

(A version of this article appeared in Storytelling Magazine Nov/Dec 2011)

“Don’t ever be rude to your husband and in-laws!” Chiyo’s mother commanded the night before her wedding. The shy young woman was married off to a farmer in a distant village the next day. She worked hard to serve her husband and please her mother-in-law. A few months into her marriage Chiyo began to look pale and sickly. Her mother-in-law asked her what was wrong. After much hesitation Chiyo confessed that she had a terrible secret.

“I have been suppressing this urge...to pass...wind,” Chiyo said tearfully, “because I don’t wish to be rude.”

“What? You mean gas? Oh, silly Chiyo! We are family now. Come on, let it go!”

“Are you sure?” Chiyo was incredulous, “Thank you for your kind permission, my dearest mother-in-law.”

She lifted her kimono and let it go, and BLEW THE HOUSE AWAY!!

From the Japanese folktale *Hekoki Nyobo* (The Fart Wife)

We Japanese are a serious people. We take everything seriously, including humor. You can witness this in wacky Japanese game shows on YouTube, in which contestants are willing to do almost anything to get a laugh. It’s like watching a train wreck!

If you look deeper into the culture, however, you find a different kind of humor: story-based, gentler yet hilarious, a sublime celebration of human follies and foibles. As a bilingual storyteller from Osaka, I consider it my mission and privilege to introduce this type of Japanese humor to the American audience.



Historically, while Tokyo (formerly known as Edo) belonged to samurai, and Kyoto to the emperor and the nobles, my hometown Osaka has always belonged to merchants, who value harmonious laughter as an effective means of business communication. I grew up speaking its dialect of rapid-fire banter, self-effacing humor, and truth-telling with a comic touch.

I draw extensively from folktales, traditional comic storytelling called *rakugo*, and the classical farce of *kyogen*. In my stories, the shy young wife discovers her hidden power of gas. A swindler is bested by his intended victim. A master miser risks his own life to save a few pennies. A wealthy man, rejected both by his wife and his mistress, ends up homeless one stormy night.

Translating humor offers unique challenges. Puns and word play are nearly impossible. I try to work in several layers. First I look for comedy based on plot and situation that excites our minds. The gap between the timid young wife and her gas power, for example, surprises and entertains. Second, the emotional dilemma of the character arouses sympathy and promotes cultural understanding. Finally, I seek to capture elements that stay and resonate with the audience and empower them. Humor allows the audience to identify with the characters and truly connect to the story.

Comedy is based on tension and conflict. In humorous stories from Old Japan, however, we realize at the end that we all are on the same side. In the story of the Fart Wife, her family eventually accepts her for who she is, and she learns to use her power creatively to help others.

As I always say, inside every American there is a Japanese woman. You are lucky that we are so small!