
Marty Gross

Striking a Magic Combination

by Boyd Neil

In an ambitious attempt to convey one art form through another, filmmaker Marty Gross went to Japan, where he coaxed the great dolls of the ancient Bunraku Theatre to tell their story on film.

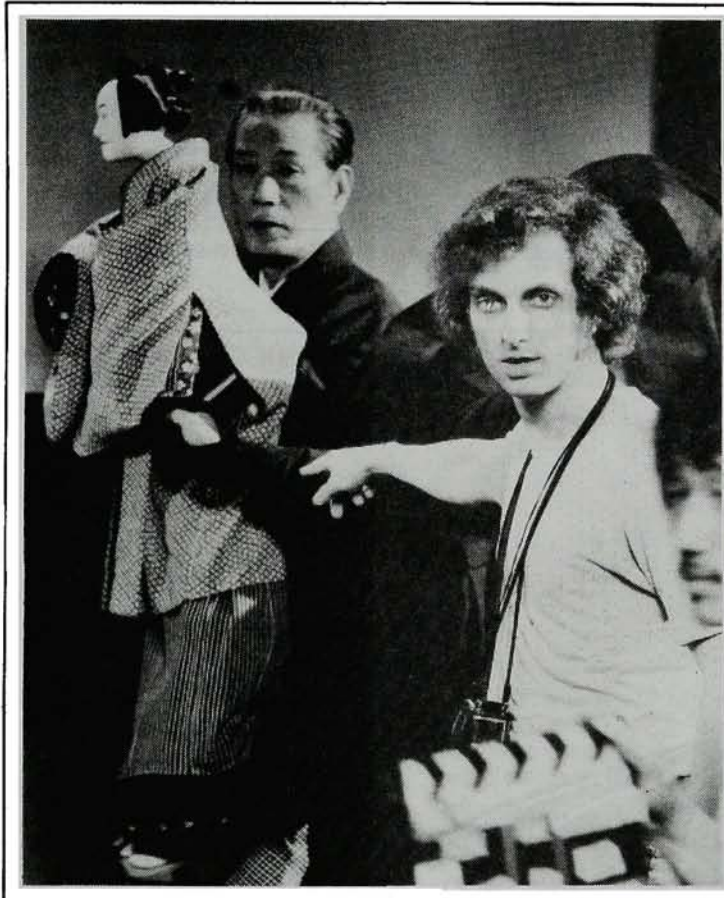


photo: Ian Buruma

On location in Japan, Tomao Yoshida manipulates the doll "Chubei," while director Marty Gross lines up the action for shooting

Marty Gross is more than a filmmaker. He is also an artisan and a poet. And never have the three been so merrily partnered as in his latest film **The Lovers' Exile**, soon to be released in art cinemas across the country by Linda Beath's New Cinema.

Gross's first two films, **As We Are** and **Potters At Work** have both won film awards, both in Europe and Canada, and 200 prints of the latter are now in circulation around

the world. It was while filming **Potters at Work** in Japan that Gross was approached to consider the country's 300-year-old Bunraku theatre as the subject for his next film — an unlikely subject for a filmmaker, or a potter (Gross's previous vocation).

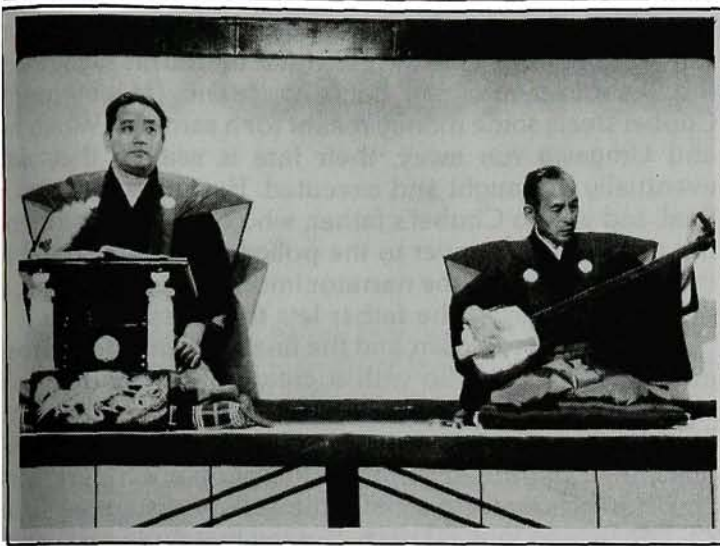
Boyd Neil is a free-lance writer specializing in theatre, dance and film in Toronto.



Japan's Bunraku Theatre is famous for its unique puppetry. Here, master puppeteer Yoshida, and hooded doll handlers bring "Chubei" to life.



This artist's impression depicts the lovers Chubei and Umegawa from the story "Lover's Exile"



Integral to the performance are, narrator Oritayu Takemoto, and samisen player Enza Tsurusawa

Little known in the West, the Bunraku theatre consists of lifesize dolls, each of which is manipulated by three sere doll handlers who are visible to the audience. The dolls "act out" tales which are spoken, chanted and sung by a narrator, or joruri. Testimonials to the incomparable power and beauty of the art have come from the likes of Roland Barthes, Sergei Eisenstein, Northrop Frye, Bertolt Brecht, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Louis Barrault.

Despite its many attractions, this particular theatre art seems to be the least suited of them all for adaption to film. The stories are spare and straightforward — the most recent one in the Bunraku repertoire was written in 1875. The art form is, in fact, consciously and gloriously artificial. We see not just the whole, but the parts as well — the dolls, the handlers, the narrator; a structural concept that is the very antithesis of screen realism.

The challenge for Gross in making *The Lovers' Exile* was to transfer Bunraku's artificial form of storytelling to the screen, for a screen audience nurtured on the cinema's *illusion of reality*. "It is recollecting the artifice of storytelling that fascinates me in thinking of this project," Gross explains. "This artifice is symbolized in Bunraku theatre, which is neither puppetry nor live action. Here are men structuring for us a story. On the one side, there is the most extravagant form of emotion (the narrator) and on the other, complete restraint and, ostensibly, non-involvement (the doll handlers). These elements of Bunraku both bring us forward and keep us away. This puts us in an interesting position in relation to the story. It is made more interesting when we are a further step removed by film. We are reminded that a story is a story."

This dizzying concept of the film is matched only by Gross's chutzpah in pulling it off. There was the problem of money, of course, to pay the Bunraku troupe (\$50,000) to rent the "biggest studio in the East" — used previously for the filming of *Rashomon* — and for equipment that included the use of "the same camera as Mizoguchi used in some early films." Total budget, \$350,000. All Gross's films have been independently financed and produced, so he has done much of the "hustling" himself.

Then there were the complexities of both Japanese society and the world of Bunraku masters. Gross travelled to Japan four times in twelve months to become acquainted with the art of Bunraku and the doll handlers themselves. "They probably didn't trust me at first," he says. "It is a hierarchical society and the men my age in Bunraku are only handling the dolls' feet. They thought of me as a kid, and they are resistant to youth. But I spent a full month in the theatre watching them work for nine hours a day. Then I would go back to talk with them about my plans and report on my progress in raising money and getting good people to work for me. It all came together, so it worked in my favour."

But which of the 118 Bunraku plays to choose? Gross knew he wanted one from the Japanese author Chikamatsu, whose works are now considered classics. And he wanted a play that "dealt with the emotions and situations of everyday life", never questioning seriously whether other people might want to see a more opulent tale of feudal loyalties or samurai warriors. "I wanted the spectacle to be in the construction of the ordinary, not in the tale itself," he says. "I wanted something mundane as the base of the film story, as a contrast to the way in which it is told in Bunraku theatre." So Chikamatsu's *Meido no Hikyaku* (*The Courier to Hell*) became the slightly truncated film tale which Gross called *The Lovers' Exile*.

The story he chose is filled with clichés, transformed by the doll handlers' magic into subtle moral and spiritual

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caveats. Chubei, a young manager of couriers, falls in love with the prostitute Umgawa. In order to free his lover from the teahouse, and pay back his friend (Machiemon), Chubei steals some money meant for a samurai. When he and Umgawa run away, their fate is sealed; they will eventually be caught and executed. But the lovers pay a final, sad visit to Chubei's father, who debates whether or not to turn his son over to the police and conform to his duty as a citizen. As the narrator intones "Shared blood, a source of anguish," the father lets them escape.

With the story chosen and the financing in place, Gross moved into the studio with a crew of 60, including his cameraman from *Potters at Work*, Hideak Koboyashi, and the Bunraku entourage composed of the doll handlers, their hairdressers, properties people, set designers and those who were to care for the dolls backstage — 30 in all. The filming took 20 days. But the first three days were spent recording the narrator, shooting his scenes, then doing a video of the whole three-hour play. (The film is about half that length.) This complete run-through was necessary because the narrator had to perform the whole play in one shot; he couldn't be expected to turn his extravagant emotional energies on and off at the crew's whim. Although Gross could give specific direction to the doll handlers, he had to decide in advance what scenes with the narrator he wanted on camera so that they could be done in sync. The dolls were actually filmed to a sound recording of the narration.

Gross decided to film the play from a straightforward, frontal viewpoint, because he could regulate the movements of the doll handlers, sometimes adjusting the traditional patterns of Bunraku to suit the needs of the camera. Consequently, he had little difficulty with the film's visuals. When it came to the complex task of cutting the film, he had the services of the Japanese composer, Toru Takemitsu. Still, the narration was a problem. "Because the narrator never stops," Gross explains, "it is extremely difficult to cut — especially when you don't speak Japanese. Takemitsu had to be brought to Canada to work out natural transitions in the narrator's voice."

Major cuts were necessary because the final film version of *Meido no Hikyaku* is only half the length of the original play. The translation was the work of Donald Ritchie, a major critic of Japanese films. He and Gross worked together on the subtitles, but Gross was responsible for their placement — in a black border at the bottom of the film frame. This added a final, unique dimension to the film, which itself attempts to frame the "universal picture" of theatre.

The TV version of *The Lovers' Exile* has already been sold to a number of European stations following the film's successful screenings at the Venice and Edinburgh film festivals. In the introduction that will accompany it, written and presented by the brilliant French actor Jean-Louis Barrault, Barrault states that "The art of theatre has always drawn its vitality from popular imagination. Sometimes imagination uses puppets, sometimes storytellers." Sometimes, Barrault might now wish to add, in view of *The Lovers' Exile*, this imagination uses artisans and poets disguised as filmmakers. □