

Koina no Ginpei Yuki no Wataridori
(Koina no Ginpei, Migratory Snowbird) and
Kosuzume Toge (Kosuzume Pass)



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Silent films in Japan were always shown with narration from a benshi, or motion picture narrator, and it is my belief that this has something to do with the strong influence that the popularity of *bunraku* (puppet theater) had on film. *Bunraku* was a popular form of entertainment in which dolls were silently manipulated on stage while a *Taiyu* (performer) sat off to the side providing plot narration and character lines. It was common for that narration to take on a seven-five syllabic pattern, often becoming what one might call a narrative poem. Benshi usually narrated films using everyday speech, but there are also works in which it is appropriate to use poetry and take on a five-seven syllable pattern in order to clearly express the mood of a scene. These are the most moving scenes that a benshi performs.

Koina no Ginpei Yuki no Wataridori (Koina no Ginpei, Migratory Snowbird), released in 1931, is one such work in which a five-seven rhythm is used. The script is by Shin Hasegawa, a writer who garnered a large popular following at the time by producing a series of hit plays starring a yakuza member as the main character. The play's scripts were strongly influenced by *kabuki*, and while they mostly contained lines performed in normal speech, a considerable amount of the important parts took on five-seven syllable patterns, adding force and excitement to the cries of the yakuza during the fight scenes and other important moments. Works like Hasegawa's came to be called *matatabi* (wandering gambler) stories, and were popular for a very long time. I believe that a large portion of their popularity was due to the rhythm of the lines. For benshi, these works must have been good opportunities to show the refinement of their narrative abilities.

Koina no Ginpei Yuki no Wataridori (Koina no Ginpei, Migratory Snowbird) was produced by Bantsuma Yatsu Studios, which was a film company established in Yatsu, Chiba prefecture, by the greatest star of the time, Tsumasaburo Bando, to produce the *jidaigeki* (period drama) he starred in.

Mr. Bando, whose real name was Denkichiro Tamura, was born in Tokyo in 1901. After graduating from elementary school he took up an apprenticeship with a *kabuki* actor, and became active in the theater world for some time, eventually even founding and performing with his own troupe. In 1923 he joined Makino Film Productions and became a film actor. *Kozusume Toge* (Kozusume Pass) is one of the many films he appeared in that year, and while only a portion of the film remains, it is very valuable as the oldest extant film of the great star. Of course, the biggest Japanese film star of the time was certainly the former *kabuki* actor Matsunosuke Onoe, but due to his fidelity in transmitting the traditions of *kabuki* onto film, he tended to play fight scenes slowly and with grand stylized motions. Tsumasaburo Bando, on the other hand, earned enormous popularity for his fight scene performances in which he acted with the same violent speed of Douglas Fairbanks, who was already a star in America at the time. In 1925, Bando established his own production agency and began releasing work after work starring himself. *Koina no Ginpei Yuki no Wataridori* (Koina no Ginpei, Migratory Snowbird) is one such work from that era.