

Performing Japanese “Silents”: *Benshi* Narration of the Sword-Fighting Film *Serpent*

Raiko Sakamoto

Benshi (Silent Film Narrator)

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CEO, Digital Meme

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DATE: Thursday, January 21st

LOCATION: Fine Arts 015

7:00 p.m. Introduction

7:15 p.m. Film Performance

8:30 p.m. Discussion

Shown with English subtitles, a music soundtrack, and *benshi* film narration

Hailed as a “cornerstone” production in Japanese film history, *Orochi* (Serpent, 1925) features the premier star of *chambara* (sword fighting) films, Tsumasaburo Bando (1901-1953). The boom in Japanese *chambara* film started around 1910, and the sword fights of its earliest examples were performed with a slow grace reminiscent of a *kabuki* performance. The young actor Tsumasaburo Bando, who made his debut in 1923, completely changed this style of sword fighting with his speedy action. *Orochi*, produced by Bando’s own production company, applied these new sword-fighting techniques to a new kind of story—the action scenes highlight the tragic beauty of a samurai who falls on hard times due to misunderstandings.

This screening of *Orochi* (Serpent) will feature Mr. Raiko Sakamoto performing as *benshi*. In Japan, screenings of silent films were accompanied by narration by a *katsudo benshi*, or motion picture narrator. So, they were rarely “silent.” This was particularly true for *chambara* (sword-fighting) films, which were also accompanied by music and were hugely popular. At the climax sword-fighting scene of a *chambara* film, the audience would yell to the screen, the *benshi* would raise his voice, and musicians would perform with heightened inspiration. Come join Mr. Sakamoto as he recreates this experience!

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