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The Delicious Poison (Busu)

A Tarō Kaja play

Translated by Don Kenny

Tarō Kaja ("first servant") is a kyōgen character par excellence. He and his master are all the characters necessary for a play, but he often appears in tandem with his fellow servant Jirō Kaja ("second servant"). Sometimes Tarō Kaja is clever enough to outwit his master verbally or physically, but at other times his ignorance leads him astray. In Tarō Kaja, or "servant," plays (also called *shōmyō*, "small landholder" pieces), the shite plays Tarō Kaja. In other pieces, such as the Yamabushi piece *The Snail*, Tarō Kaja is played by the ado. Unlike the waki role in most noh plays, however, secondary roles in kyōgen are often secondary in name only, with the interactions among the characters usually the basis of the humor.

The plot of *The Delicious Poison* is similar to that of *Tied to a Stick* (Bōshibari), in which a master attempts to safeguard his saké in his absence. In *Tied to a Stick*, physical rather than psychological restraints are used. These two popular plays best represent kyōgen's version of master-servant conflict. The plots in several other plays featuring Tarō Kaja involve a task that the servant is ordered to perform: in *The Inherited Cramp* (Shibiri) he attempts to get out of a shopping expedition by claiming to have cramps, and in *Three Poles* (Sambon no hashira), Tarō Kaja and his fellow servants figure out how two men can carry three poles.

The stage business used in *The Delicious Poison* is particularly effective. The servants repeatedly fan the air to prevent the "poison" from affecting them: as they advance toward and then retreat from the barrel, one of them waves his fan horizontally, the other, vertically. Tarō Kaja's "death," the eating of the sugar, the destruction of the master's treasures, and the sobs of "regret" all are enacted with the lavish use of onomatopoeia. The climax of the play is a song describing the servants' "attempted suicide." These characters clearly deserve to be chased off the stage, but one is inclined to hope that they escape severe punishment.

Unlike most kyōgen plays, *The Delicious Poison* has an identifiable literary

source: a story in *Shasekishū*, a thirteenth-century collection of tales (*setsuwa*) compiled by the monk Mujū. Don Kenny's translation is from a performance script of Nomura Mansaku (b. 1931) of the Izumi school. The translation was originally published in Kenny's 1989 anthology *The Kyōgen Book*. An annotated Japanese text from the Ōkura school is available in Koyama 1960.

Don Kenny translates kyōgen plays as performance scripts for English productions, specifically those of the Kenny and Ogawa Kyōgen Players. He attempts to reflect and replicate the archaic style and stylization of the original texts by avoiding overtly colloquial English (especially phrases with regional or historical connotations) and by translating literally many of the idioms (most of which do not exist in modern Japanese) rather than replacing them with more common English phrases of similar meaning. He transliterates purely onomatopoeic sounds directly into the Roman alphabet.

CHARACTERS

SHITE: Tarō Kaja

ADO: master

KOADO: Jirō Kaja

MUSICIANS

None

A Play in One Act

The master, Tarō Kaja, and Jirō Kaja enter down the bridgeway. The servants sit at the rear of the stage, and the master goes to the shite spot.

MASTER: I am a resident of this neighborhood. Today I have a matter to attend to, for which I must travel beyond the mountain. I will call my two servants and order them to watch the house while I am gone. Tarō Kaja, are you there?

(He goes to the waki spot.)

TARŌ KAJA *(Standing)*: Here!

MASTER: There you are.

TARŌ KAJA: At your service, sir.

MASTER: You came quickly. First call Jirō Kaja.

TARŌ KAJA: As you say, sir. *(To Jirō Kaja)* Here, here, Jirō Kaja! You are summoned.

JIRŌ KAJA *(Standing)*: You say I'm summoned?

TARŌ KAJA: And you must come quickly.

JIRŌ KAJA: With all my heart. *(To the master)* Jirō Kaja is at your service, sir.

MASTER: You came quite quickly. The matter I have called you here about is of no great import. Today I have a matter to attend to, for which I must travel beyond the mountain. Both of you must stay and watch the house.

TARŌ KAJA: As you say, sir. But one of the two of us. . . *(To Jirō Kaja)* Right, Jirō Kaja?

JIRŌ KAJA: Oh, oh!

BOTH: . . . will be most happy to attend you.

MASTER: No, no. Today I have a particular reason for not requiring an attendant.

Both of you must stay here and watch the house with care.

TARŌ KAJA: If that is the case

BOTH: We will do as you say, sir.

MASTER: Wait right there for a moment.

BOTH: With all our hearts.

The master takes a large cylindrical lacquerware container, which a stage attendant has put at the rear of the stage, and places it on the floor at center front.

MASTER: Listen well! Over there is a poison called Busu. Prepare your hearts for that!

TARŌ KAJA: Since there is another person here, we both will be happy to attend you.¹

MASTER: What did you think I said?

TARŌ KAJA: Did you not say that over there is a person called Busu?

MASTER: No, no, that's not right at all. It is a poison called Busu. It is so very fatal that if you are even struck by a breeze that happens to blow across it, you will fall dead upon the spot. So keep your wits about you, and watch it with great care.

JIRŌ KAJA: I have an urgent question, sir. If it is so very fatal, how can it be handled?

MASTER: There is a special incantation that is used.

TARŌ KAJA: Something of that sort

BOTH: would certainly be needed.

MASTER: I will presently return.

TARŌ KAJA: Indeed, we urge you to return

BOTH: as quickly as you can.

MASTER: With all my heart.

He goes to the bridgeway and exits.

TARŌ KAJA: He is gone.

JIRŌ KAJA: He is gone, indeed.

TARŌ KAJA: First let us sit down.

JIRŌ KAJA: With all my heart. (*They sit, one on each side of the container.*)

TARŌ KAJA: Now just what do you think? Whenever I attend him, you are always left to watch the house. And whenever you attend him, I am always left to watch the house. For us to be left together to watch the house today is a most unusual thing.

JIRŌ KAJA: As you say, it is a most unusual thing, indeed.

TARŌ KAJA: Today let us pass the time in pleasant conversation.

JIRŌ KAJA: That is a fine idea. (*Suddenly striking the floor with his hands and running to the first pine*) Watch out!

TARŌ KAJA (*Following Jirō Kaja*): What happened?

JIRŌ KAJA: A breeze blew this way from across the Busu.

TARŌ KAJA: It's a good thing you noticed. I didn't notice a thing.

JIRŌ KAJA: Well, I must say you are not very observant.

TARŌ KAJA: We should not have been so close to it. Let's sit farther away to talk.

JIRŌ KAJA: That is a fine idea. (*They sit farther back from the container.*)

TARŌ KAJA: Tell me now, have you ever seen this thing called a Busu?

JIRŌ KAJA: I have never seen one.

TARŌ KAJA: I have never seen one, either. Since we're watching the house today, this is a very fine chance. I would like to take a quick peek. What do you think?

JIRŌ KAJA: What are you talking about? What good would it do us to look at such an awful fatal poison?

1. In Japanese he mishears *rusu* (a person who remains behind) for *busu*.

TARŌ KAJA: The way things stand with us, we may find ourselves in a most awkward position. If someone or other should come up and say to me, "Tarō Kaja, I hear that there is a thing called Busu at your place. What sort of thing is it?" How can I possibly answer that there is indeed such a thing at our place but that I have no idea what it may be. Our master's absence is a fine chance. Let's open it and take a quick peek.

JIRŌ KAJA: All you say may well be true, but how can you even think of taking a peek at such a fatal poison that if you are even struck by a breeze that happens to blow across it, you will fall dead on the spot?

TARŌ KAJA: I have thought of a fine way to get around that.

JIRŌ KAJA: What is it?

TARŌ KAJA: Since all we must do is avoid being struck by a breeze that happens to blow across it, all we need do is fan with all our might and take a peek while we are fanning.

JIRŌ KAJA: I cannot agree to this.

TARŌ KAJA: You must not talk that way. Just come help me fan.

JIRŌ KAJA: I will fan if you insist I fan, ah, but it makes my skin creep.

They take out their fans, open them, and fan vigorously as they approach the Busu container.

TARŌ KAJA: Come, come! Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA (*Untying the string of the Busu container, he runs back to the bridge-way*): Watch out!

JIRŌ KAJA (*Following him*): What happened?

TARŌ KAJA: Now I got the string untied. You go take off the lid.

JIRŌ KAJA: No, no, never. I do not wish to go near such an awful fatal poison.

TARŌ KAJA: If that is the case, I will go again. So come help me fan.

JIRŌ KAJA: With all my heart.

They fan again as they approach the Busu container.

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA (*Taking off the lid, he runs back to the bridge-way*): Watch out!

JIRŌ KAJA (*Following him*): What happened?

TARŌ KAJA: Now I took off the lid [figure 2.45]. If it were alive, it would surely jump right out. It must not be alive, as it has not jumped out yet.

JIRŌ KAJA: No, they always say that the most deceptive ones always sit quiet. So you must keep your wits about you.



FIGURE 2.45. Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja continue fanning to keep the delicious poison's fumes away as Tarō Kaja removes the lid from the lacquer container (*shōgi*). (Courtesy of Don Kenny.)

TARŌ KAJA: Let's go take a look.

JIRŌ KAJA: Are you going again?

They fan once more as they approach the Busu container.

TARŌ KAJA: Come, come! Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA (*Stopping and facing Jirō Kaja*): Are you going to fan or not?!

JIRŌ KAJA: I am fanning!

TARŌ KAJA (*Beginning to fan again*):

Come, come! Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA: Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA (*Looking into the Busu container*): Fan, fan!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'm fanning, I'm fanning!

TARŌ KAJA (*Running to the bridgeway*): Watch out! I saw it, I saw it!

JIRŌ KAJA (*Following him*): What is it?

TARŌ KAJA: I don't know just what it is, but it looks like a big black sticky lump, and it looks very good to eat. (*He closes his fan and sticks it in his waistband.*)

JIRŌ KAJA: What are you talking about? How can such an awful fatal poison be any good to eat? (*He closes his fan and sticks it in his waistband.*)

TARŌ KAJA: I would like to take a bite. What do you think?

JIRŌ KAJA: Have you lost your wits completely?

TARŌ KAJA: No, my wits I have not lost, but it seems as though that Busu has possessed me, as I want to eat it more and more. I'll just go take a quick bite (*starts toward the Busu container*).

JIRŌ KAJA (*Running after him and catching hold of his sleeve*): Oh wait! Please wait!

TARŌ KAJA: Wait for what?

JIRŌ KAJA: As long as I am here, I will not let you go.

TARŌ KAJA: You must not talk like that, and my sleeve, you must let go.

JIRŌ KAJA: No, no, never! Let go your sleeve I'll not!

TARŌ KAJA: Let go, let go!

JIRŌ KAJA: I'll not, I'll not!

TARŌ KAJA (*Singing, he pulls his sleeve loose from Jirō Kaja's grasp and moves toward the Busu container, taking out his folded fan*):

From sleeves all wet with fresh dew,

I brush tears of parting.

Busu pulls me to its side,

and I must follow.

Tarō Kaja kneels by the Busu container. He begins scooping out the Busu with his fan and eating it.

JIRŌ KAJA (*Watching Tarō from the bridge-way*): Oh, oh, he has started eating it. If only he is not struck dead!

TARŌ KAJA (*Suddenly dropping to the floor with his hand to his head as though he is in a dead faint*): Aaagh!

TARŌ KAJA: It looks like he has been struck dead. (*Rushing to Tarō Kaja and pounding him on the back*) Here, here, Tarō Kaja! What's happened, what's happened?!

TARŌ KAJA: Who is it?

JIRŌ KAJA: It's Jirō Kaja! What's happened?

TARŌ KAJA (*Getting to his feet*): It's sugar!

JIRŌ KAJA: You say it's sugar?

TARŌ KAJA: Just taste it and see.

JIRŌ KAJA: Let me see, let me see! (*He scoops up some Busu and eats it.*) Truly, it is sugar.

TARŌ KAJA: He told us it was Busu and a fatal poison just to keep us from eating it!

JIRŌ KAJA: It is just as you say.

TARŌ KAJA (*Taking the container to one side, he begins eating*): Oh, how delicious it is! I have never tasted anything so good before [figure 2.46].

JIRŌ KAJA (*Sneaking the container away while Tarō Kaja is busy eating, he takes it to the other side of the stage and begins eating*): Oh, how delicious it is! I have never tasted anything so good before!

TARŌ KAJA (*Stealing it back and eating*): I cannot stop eating it!

JIRŌ KAJA (*Stealing it back and eating*): The more I eat, the more I like it!

TARŌ KAJA (*Stealing it back and eating*): I have never tasted anything so good before!

Jirō Kaja picks up the lid of the container, moves to Tarō Kaja's side, and begins scooping the lid full. Tarō Kaja simultaneously scoops back into the container.

JIRŌ KAJA: Don't eat it all yourself. Let me have some, too!

TARŌ KAJA: Divide it fairly, divide it fairly!

JIRŌ KAJA: With all my heart!

They equalize their shares. Jirō Kaja goes back to his side of the stage with the lid. Both eat until the Busu is all gone, exclaiming joyfully with each spoonful.

TARŌ KAJA: I've never tasted anything so good!

JIRŌ KAJA: Oh, how delicious it is!

TARŌ KAJA: The more I eat, the more I like it!

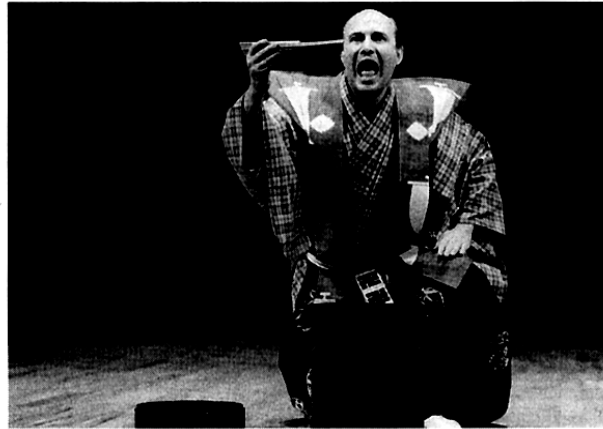


FIGURE 2.46. Tarō Kaja uses his fan to eat the poison. (Courtesy of Don Kenny.)

JIRŌ KAJA: I can't stop eating it!

TARŌ KAJA: Oh, how delicious it is!

JIRŌ KAJA: I've never tasted anything so good!

TARŌ KAJA: I can't stop eating it!

JIRŌ KAJA: The more I eat, the more I like it!

TARŌ KAJA (*Hitting the bottom of the container with his fan*): Ho! It is all gone!

JIRŌ KAJA (*Also hitting the bottom*): Mine is all gone, too.

They put their fans back in their waistbands and stand; Tarō Kaja goes to the waki spot, and Jirō Kaja goes to the shite spot.

TARŌ KAJA: Oh, you've done it now!

JIRŌ KAJA: Done what?

TARŌ KAJA: He told us it was Busu and a fatal poison just to keep us from eating it. And now you have eaten it all up. As soon as he comes back, I'll tell him everything right off.

JIRŌ KAJA: Well, you certainly have no sense of justice! Was it not I who warned you against eating it for that very same reason, and you who untied the string and began to eat it first? I no longer care what happens to you! As soon as he comes back, I'll tell him everything right off.

TARŌ KAJA: Here, here! I was only joking.

JIRŌ KAJA: So what will be our excuse?

TARŌ KAJA: Tear that hanging scroll to pieces.

JIRŌ KAJA: If I tear it to pieces, will we have an excuse?

TARŌ KAJA: Oh, oh, we will have an excuse! Tear it quickly!

JIRŌ KAJA: If that is the case, I will tear it.

TARŌ KAJA: Tear it, tear it!

JIRŌ KAJA: With all my heart. (*He mimes grabbing hold of the hanging scroll and tearing it to pieces*) Zarari! Zarari! Now I've torn it.

TARŌ KAJA: Oh, you've done it now!

JIRŌ KAJA: Done what?

TARŌ KAJA: This Busu was only sugar. You could order as much as you liked right now, and you would have no trouble getting as much of the same as you might want, but that hanging scroll was a painting of Kannon Buddha by the great Priest Mokkei, most highly treasured by our master. And now you have torn it to pieces. As soon as he comes back, I'll tell him everything right off.

JIRŌ KAJA: Your sense of justice gets worse and worse! I tore it only because you said that tearing it would give us an excuse. I no longer care what happens to you. As soon as he comes back, I'll tell him everything right off.

TARŌ KAJA: Oh, here, here! I was only joking again.

JIRŌ KAJA: Well, I must say, your joking knows no end. So what will be our excuse?

TARŌ KAJA: Break that Mount Temmoku tea bowl and the stand it's sitting on.

JIRŌ KAJA: You just want me to break it so you can torment me once more.

TARŌ KAJA: Oh, no! This time I will help.

JIRŌ KAJA: You say you'll help?

TARŌ KAJA: Most certainly.

JIRŌ KAJA: Then I will break it. Here, here!
Take hold, take hold!

TARŌ KAJA: With all my heart.

They go to the corner of the stage, face each other, and mime grasping opposite sides of the tea bowl stand and lifting it [figure 2.47].

JIRŌ KAJA: Ready?

TARŌ KAJA: Ready!

They throw the stand and tea bowl to the ground.

JIRŌ KAJA: Garari!

TARŌ KAJA: Chin!

JIRŌ KAJA: There are more now!

TARŌ KAJA: It's smashed to pieces! (Both laugh loudly.)

Tarō Kaja goes to the shite spot, and Jirō Kaja goes to the waki spot.

JIRŌ KAJA: So what will be our excuse?

TARŌ KAJA: As soon as he comes back, we must cry.

JIRŌ KAJA: If we cry, will we have an excuse?

TARŌ KAJA: Just leave the rest to me. Now let us sit down here.

JIRŌ KAJA: With all my heart. (They sit at center stage, facing front.)

MASTER (He enters and moves to the first pine): I have just now come back home.

No doubt my servants are eagerly awaiting my return. Here, here! I'm back home now, I'm back home now!

TARŌ KAJA (To Jirō Kaja): There! He's come back now. Cry, cry!

Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja cover their eyes with both hands and cry.

MASTER: What is the matter here? Suddenly you're all in tears. Tell me what happened!

TARŌ KAJA: Jirō Kaja, you tell.

JIRŌ KAJA: Tarō Kaja, you tell.

MASTER: You've got me worried. Tell me what happened!

TARŌ KAJA: If that is the case, this is how it was. In order not to fall asleep while watching the house, I began a round of sumo wrestling with Jirō Kaja. As Jirō Kaja is better at sumo, he quickly grabbed my thigh and tried to throw me over. To keep my balance, I grabbed ahold of your hanging scroll. Before we knew what happened,

TARŌ KAJA: It was torn in two. (They cry again.)

MASTER: What is this? My treasured hanging scroll you have torn in two?!

JIRŌ KAJA: The rebound threw me back, and I fell right on top of your Mount Tenmoku tea bowl. Before we knew what happened,

BOTH: it was smashed to pieces (they cry).

MASTER: Even my Mount Tenmoku tea bowl you have smashed to pieces? I'll have your necks for this!



FIGURE 2.47. The two servants lift the imaginary tea bowl stand and drop it to the ground, destroying the valuable bowl. (Courtesy of Don Kenny.)

TARŌ KAJA: After we destroyed all your treasures, we were sure that you would have our necks for it. So we decided to die by eating the Busu. We ate until it was all gone, but. . . Right, Jirō Kaja?

JIRŌ KAJA: Oh, oh!

BOTH: . . . we are still alive (*they cry*).

MASTER: By the three treasures! Even my Busu you have eaten up. Before long, you will drop dead on this very spot!

TARŌ KAJA (*Singing*):

First we took one great big bite,
but we were still alive.

JIRŌ KAJA (*Singing*):

Next we both took one more big bite,

TARŌ KAJA:

three bites and then four bites,

JIRŌ KAJA:

five bites and then six bites
we took more bites than ten

BOTH:

we ate and ate until there was
not a single bite left.
Life that never dies
is the greatest treasure we own.
Oh, how strong is the life we have
within our bodies.

MASTER (*Speaking during the last part of the preceding song*): Oh, I must say, how angry I am! (*Striking Tarō Kaja and Jirō Kaja on the shoulder with his fan*) You hateful rascal! You hateful rascal!

BOTH (*Getting to their feet and running up the bridgeway*): Ah, please forgive us!

MASTER (*Chasing them*): What do you mean, "Forgive us"? You lazy rascals, you will not get away.

BOTH: Oh, forgive us, please forgive us!

MASTER: I'll catch you yet! I'll catch you yet!

BOTH: Oh, forgive us, please forgive us! (*They exit.*)

MASTER: I'll catch you yet, I'll catch you yet! (*He chases them off.*)