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# TEACHING TUESDAY

## BENSHI

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At the advent of silent films, there was a narrator to accompany the film and introduce it to the audience, until people got used to cinema. In Japan, this narrator was called a *benshi* (弁士), but unlike in the West, the benshi did not die out. Instead, they remained an important part of the Japanese film industry throughout the silent film era.

The tradition of a benshi evolved from the tradition of Japanese theatre, including Noh, Kabuki, and Bunraku. These theatre traditions often involved either dramatic or lightly disinterested narration from actors sitting to the side of the stage. As movies became more and more popular, this transformed into the tradition of a benshi. The benshi would stand to the side of the screen and introduce the story to the audience. As benshi became a staple of the silent movie tradition, the role evolved. Benshi eventually spoke for characters on-screen and played multiple characters, as well as providing translation for foreign-made films.

Benshi were often more popular than the movie actors themselves, and during their “Golden Age” (1915-1925), they often had to perform in fresh, entertaining, and engaging ways roughly thirty times a week. The popularity of benshi and their performances helped the silent film era in Japan last much longer than in the West, and even today there are a few remaining active benshi.