



Agnes Shabat



Kamishibai ■ By Agnes Shabat

– Japan's Paper Theater



Susan Mercer

Kamishibai (kah-mee-she-bye) is Japanese for paper drama or paper theater. This storytelling form was created in Japan in the 12th century and was a popular type of entertainment from the 1920s through the 1950s.

Allen Say, author of *The Kamishibai Man*, spoke at the Morikami Museum in Delray Beach a little over a year ago. He said that the Japanese used benshi or actors to narrate silent movies. These actors would stand near the screen and act out the scenes very dramatically. When the “talkies” came out, these men were out of jobs. They were trained actors with outstanding voices, and they developed the kamishibai storytelling stage.

As related in *The Kamishibai Man*, these men would travel from town to town on a bicycle with the kamishibai stage attached on the back. The men would call the children to come and listen to the stories by using hysoshigi or wooden clappers. They would also sell sweets to the children. The children who bought treats got the best seats, while the children who did not buy sweets had to sit in the back of the audience. It is estimated that there were once 25,000 kamishibai storytellers in Japan.

Kamishibai storycards consist of 16-20 large cards with illustrations on the front and text and dialogue on the back. The story-

cards are inserted into the kamishibai stage with the illustration facing the audience. The text on the back of the last card would be read while the children looked at the illustration on the first card in front. Then, the first card would slide out and be inserted in the back of the pack revealing a new illustration to the audience and new text to read on the back of that card and so on. The kamishibai cards are stored in a simple but sturdy envelope, decorated with its own illustration and the title and author of the tale.

The kamishibai man would tell his story and leave off at a very dramatic part so that the children would want to come back the next week to continue the tale or hear the ending. In the 1950s, when television was invented, kamishibai disappeared. Fortunately, kamishibai is experiencing a renewed popularity in Japan today, especially in libraries and elementary schools.

Allen Say had the idea for his book several years before it was published, but he wondered if an American audience would know about kamishibai. He originally thought of calling the book *The Paper Theater Man*, but when he spoke at a library in New York, he mentioned his idea to the librarian there. She directed him to a woman in the area who had been giving kamishibai performances. She told Mr. Say that kamishibai has become

very popular in some parts of the United States. And so it has.

On October 11, 2007, Agnes Shabat and Susan Mercer, media specialists with Orange County Public Schools, presented a session on Kamishibai – An Introduction to Japanese Storytelling at the Florida Association for Media in Education (F.A.M.E.) annual conference held at Disney's Coronado Springs Resort.

Approximately seventy media specialists from around the state of Florida were in attendance at their session. Attendees were introduced to sources of kamishibai materials, (stages, storycards and hysoshigi), books about Japanese folktales and origami, and websites about Japanese culture. The participants also learned how to incorporate kamishibai into their library media programs. Mrs. Shabat and Mrs. Mercer demonstrated ways to make your own kamishibai storycards and stage. Mrs. Mercer also included a hands-on activity involving storigami which incorporates storytelling with the art of origami or paperfolding.

If you would like more information on kamishibai storytelling, please contact Agnes Shabat (shabata@ocps.net) or Susan Mercer (mercercs@ocps.net).