Sakaro is the more usually performed third act of the longer drama Hirakana Seisuiki. It concerns the fate of a Genji clan retainer named Higuchi no Jiro. Jiro takes on the identity of the boatman Matsuemon following the defeat of his master in battle. As a wanted man, Matsuemon deceives even his wife and father in law, the old boatman Gonshiro. His wife, Oyoshi, has had her child from her first marriage taken away and swapped in error with the son of a feudal lord. Soldiers arrive and threaten the family; Matsuemon reveals his identity and also that he is the loyal protector of the boy, Komawakamaru. Overcoming the soldiers and leaving the family he makes for the river, aware that there is an army of soldiers arriving in order to arrest him.

Then ensues the famous act: The Watchtower Pine Tree. For fans of ukiyo-e, this is the typical pose of Matsuemon: he scans the horizon in front of a nocturne of river and trees and lanterns; a scene drawn by artists Kunisada, Kunichika and others many times. Matsuemon wears the distinctive colourful costume of the boatman and is frequently depicted grasping a huge oar. In the drama, his father in law betrays him to the soldiers in order to protect the child’s life. Matsuemon surrenders, honouring the sacrifice of Gonshiro and saving the life of the child. Matsuemon is roped and led away.

Illustrated, Nakamura Utaemon IV as Matsuemon by Kunisada. 1852