Most who have lived in Hawai‘i know that Japanese immigrants brought the word *shibai* to our Island culture and language. Pronounced like “she buy,” with emphasis on the second syllable, it describes people, actions or words that are hypocritical, disingenuous, shady or untrustworthy. In Japanese characters, the word literally translates as “a play” or “a dramatic performance.” To me, that is the word that best describes what has been going on in Washington, D.C., during these past few weeks. *Shibai*!

This play acting – this *shibai* – has much in common with Japan’s ancient tradition of formalized, drawn-out kabuki theater. The characters have been posing, grunting and shouting as they have their moment on stage. In another culture, an observer from Shakespeare’s era might have described it as “a tale … full of sound and fury signifying nothing.”

In the meantime, with a good portion of the federal government shut down, our nation’s economy is being significantly damaged, particularly including the Travel & Tourism industry, on which Hawai‘i relies for the health of its economy.

The real issue is the size of government, which until recent years has typically spent about 18 - 20 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) except in times of war. Over the past decade, that has grown to about 25 percent of GDP or more. Worse yet, spending by government has far exceeded its income, forcing it to borrow larger and larger amounts of money to cover its expenses. The interest alone on this debt is one of the federal government’s largest expenses.

The national debt – not including Social Security and Medicare – has mushroomed an astounding 89.3 percent since President Obama took office, according to FactCheck.org, a nonprofit project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. “At that rate, the debt owed to the public will more than double during the Obama presidency,” FactCheck reported recently. Of the debt owed to the public – that is, to everyone except federal government accounts such as the Social Security and Medicare trust funds – nearly half is owed to foreign investors.

As our latest kabuki drama recently began, our eyes were fixed on a tall actor who shouts through his mask, “Let me be clear! I will not negotiate any spending cuts or entitlement reform until the debt limit is raised without conditions. Until then, we’ll close the national parks and even the monuments and memorials in Washington, D.C.”

*Shibai* ... >> 2
Other actors huddle and then speak up. One with teary eyes joins several in a group sipping tea to shout back, “So let it be!”

While the audience is focused on the antics of the vocal players up front and others noisily dragging barricades to Washington’s World War II Memorial, few notice the back of the stage where actors in black kimonos are swiftly transferring wealth from the fading kimonos of players representing the employed into the pockets of those representing the unemployed. Nearby, other black-kimono-clad players are reaching into the knapsacks of the young and unborn to pluck out seeds intended for future crops and handing them over to millers and bakers to instead make bread for today’s elderly.

The curtain falls for a minute and when it comes up again, there are three actors up front – the tall, vocal one; the tearful one; and a new player dressed in a dark kimono decorated with paintings of dice, slot machines and flashing neon signs. They gather around an old, empty can of beans they find lying on the stage floor. They talk a few moments, laugh and side by side begin to kick the can across the stage and into the next scene of the show.

In the meantime, the black kimonos continue their fleecing and plucking in the background.

“We, the people,” are the ones who sent these actors to the stage in Washington where they write laws and regulations that apply to everybody except themselves and their friends. Will we ever wake up, or will we keep watching, not fully understanding, and tolerate still more shibai? ☹