

横仙歌舞伎保存会

Yokozen Kabuki Preservation Society

English Version

Nagi, Okayama



Matsugami Shrine Kabuki Stage

Built in 1846 at the end of the Edo period, Matsugami Shrine Kabuki Stage is used exclusively for kabuki performances. In the past, there were over a dozen kabuki stages in Nagi Town, but Matsugami Shrine is the only one that still remains. The stage features an elaborate rotating stage with a 5-meter diameter, a 2-story *tauza* room for the *gidayu* music players on the left stage, a sectional *hanamichi* walkway and more. All of these have been preserved just as they were at the time of construction yet are still used for performances today. Such a stage is hard to find, even throughout the country; this stage was designated as an Okayama Prefectural Important Tangible Cultural Property in 1963.

Why has the Matsugami Shrine Stage survived while all other stages have disappeared? First, the stage was moved to its current location in 1921, at which point large-scale repairs and reconstruction were performed to greatly extend the life of the stage. Additionally, the stage is only about 9 meters across - small compared to other stages at the time - making it easier to repair and take care of. Most importantly, the stage has been loved by locals in the Nakashima-higashi Area who continue to perform and prevent this *jige-shibai* - underground theater - from disappearing.

Even now, "Nakashima-higashi Kabukiza," formed by members of the Nakashima-higashi Area, holds regular performances every April in addition to special performances once every few years. These *jige-shibai* performances on a stage from the Edo Period make the many visitors - who have come from throughout Okayama and Japan - feel like they've traveled back in time.



East Mimasaka Local Kabuki Preservation Committee

In the past, there were countless *jige-shibai* performances in the Mimasaka Area of northern Okayama Prefecture, but only 4 groups in Nagi Town and Mimasaka City remain active today. As such, Okayama Prefecture took charge to coordinate various people and things, holding various training courses and starting the "East Mimasaka Local Kabuki Preservation Committee" with the goal of mutual improvement among the remaining groups.

The committee has the unique "Learn Kabuki from the Pros" training course, to which they invite professional kabuki actors and stagehands who handle makeup and costumes. Many people have gained an interest in local kabuki - and even participated in performances - through this course, making it a good opportunity to deepen understanding and share the appeals of kabuki.

Additionally, since there are few areas with a tradition of *jige-shibai* in Western Japan, the committee performs together with other preservation groups from Hyogo and Kagawa Prefectures in each of their local areas. They also compete in contests and share equipment to encourage interaction between their groups.



"Higashi Sakushu" (in the Japanese name of the committee) refers to the eastern half of the former Mimasaka Province. This committee consists of Yokozen Kabuki Preservation Society in Nagi Town, Nakashima-higashi Kabukiza, Awai Kasuga Kabuki Preservation Society in Mimasaka City and Katsuta Kabuki Preservation Society. The four groups share information about kabuki and hold trainings.

Yokozen Kabuki History

April 27, 1966	Genichi Takamori designated as Okayama Prefectural Important Intangible Cultural Property Yokozen Kabuki Preservation Society founded
August 30, 1969	Received Miki Memorial Award
December 6, 1974	Death of Genichi Takamori
March 31, 1976	Yokozen Kabuki designated as Okayama Prefectural Important Intangible Cultural Property
November 5, 1989	1st <i>Higashi Sakushu Nouson Kabuki</i> Performance
1996	Kabuki Specialist Employee hired Children's Kabuki Class started
April 11, 1999	Start of regular " <i>Shiki no Kouen</i> " seasonal performances Kabuki Specialist Employee hired
2000	Received 1st Okayama Prefecture Cultural Award
September 30, 2000	Acknowledged by Minister of Culture for Cultural Property Protection Act 50th Anniversary
October 30, 2000	<i>Mainichi Chihou Jichi Prize</i> Encouragement Award
March 9, 2001	<i>Nihon Zenkoku Award</i> (Children's Kabuki Class)
May 20, 2001	
January 9, 2004	Received Sanyo Shimbun Award
March 8, 2009	Received Sanyo Shimbun Momotaro Award (Children's Kabuki Class)
May 10, 2012	Okayama Cultural Property Protection Award
May 29, 2012	<i>Okayama Yumezukuri Suishin</i> Grand Prize (East Mimasaka Kabuki Preservation Committee)
April 26, 2013	Okayama Art and Culture Award Runner-up (East Mimasaka Kabuki Preservation Committee)
May 28, 2014	Nakamura Award (Children's Kabuki Class)
August 7, 2014	Marusen Cultural Award
November 5, 2015	Fukutake Cultural Encouragement Award

Yearly Performances

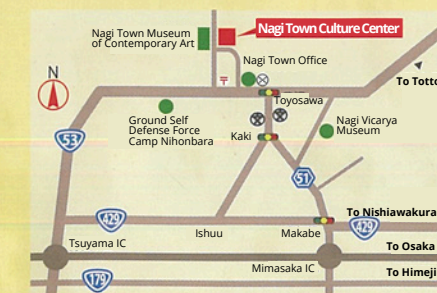
Late January	Yokozen Kabuki Winter Performance
April 29th	Yokozen Kabuki Spring Performance at Matsugami Shrine
Early October	Awai Kasuga Kabuki Performance
Late November	Yokozen Kabuki Grand Performance

*Summer Performance held at other locations by request.



Contact Information and Directions

Office: Nagi Town Board of Education
Nagi Town Culture Center, Toyosawa 327-1,
Nagi-cho, Katsuta-gun, Okayama-ken
☎ 0868-36-3034 ✉ shakai@town.nagi.okayama.jp



ACCESS

By Car

From Tsuyama Interchange
Head toward Tottori on National Route 53, turn left at traffic light before Nagi Post Office, then proceed for 200 m.
From Mimasaka Interchange
Take Pref. Road 51 Mimasaka-Nagi and turn left in Makabe Area (near Kannon-do bus stop). Go north for 5 km, then turn left at Toyosawa intersection and proceed for 400 m.

Jige-shibai (Underground Theater)

In Nagi Town on the border of northern Okayama and Tottori prefectures, the Edo Period performance art of *jige-shibai* - also called *jishibai* or *jikabuki* - lives on. The *jige-shibai* in this area is said to have started in the late Edo Period. It is said to have originated from locals trying to mimic semi-professional *Banshu* kabuki performances from present-day Kasai City and Nishiwaki City in Hyogo Prefecture.

Professional performances were referred to as *kaishibai*, while those performed by local amateurs were called *jige-shibai*. “*Jige*” means “local” in the regional dialect. *Nouson kabuki* (farming village kabuki) was not limited to Okayama Prefecture; rather, it spread as a trend through the entire country and served an important role as one of the few forms of recreation for farmers from the end of the Edo Period to the early Showa Period. These shows were repeatedly performed by villagers during local festival at kabuki stages built on shrine grounds.



Koyagake Stage

Temporary stages - or *koyagake* - like this were set up at places without an actual stage. The stage in the picture is from around 1975, but the location is unknown.



Jige-shibai Shows

Jige-shibai performances started in the evening and were held late into the night. During festival season, kabuki was performed somewhere everyday. *Jige-shibai* shows areas also served as social gathering places: every area had its star actors; people would bring their own snacks and alcohol; and young people looking for love would travel from town to town.



Takimoto Community Center

The Takimoto Area Public Hall in Nagi Town previously featured a stage.



Late Mr. Genichi Takamori

Although it saw great prosperity from the late Edo Period to the early Showa Period, *jige-shibai* practice suddenly declined during the period of economic growth post-WWII. This was due to the creation and spread of new form of entertainment such as film and television, as well as the flow of young people from farming villages to cities.

Having lost their purpose, the aging kabuki stages at shrines were torn down without a second thought.

Despite this, Genichi Takamori and other kabuki-loving people in the Mimasaka Area worked as a community to keep this tradition alive.

Born on July 12, 1896, Genichi Takamori first stepped onto the stage and fell in love with kabuki at age 11. He worked as a police officer in Tokyo, but his personality can be understood by the following:

“Everyday he came and went from the playhouse, took off his uniform, put away his saber and often stepped onto the stage. Anyway, he was an oddball; he didn't get any money, but he got love from the people.”

Ninomiya, Sakuzan. *Mimasaka no Kabuki Shibai*. Okayama Bunko, 1976.

He worked as a prison guard and other roles after that but left his job in 1929 to return to his hometown of Nagi. From the following year, Takamori began performing amateur kabuki in earnest under the tutelage of Umenosuke Yamashita of Osaka. He had taken on the stage name of “Baichou Yamashita” at this time and taught from his hometown to as far as Hiroshima Prefecture and Shodoshima.

Takamori bought costumes and wigs with his own money, then kindly lent these out. He also occasionally performed as an actor, *gidayu* performer and shamisen player, also forming a troupe and traveling around Okayama and the country to perform *urishibai* - performances to grow the industry.

Then, on April 27, 1966, Takamori's efforts to preserve and nurture traditional culture were recognized when he was designated as an “Okayama Prefectural Important Intangible Cultural Asset” as a Yokozen Kabuki Skilled Expert. On this occasion, 107 volunteers founded the “Yokozen Kabuki Preservation Society.”



Pillars of the Preservation Society

Even after Takamori's passing, the torch of Yokozen Kabuki has been passed down thanks to the tireless efforts of Preservation Society members. Among them, the following people held outstanding skill and worked hard to train successor, earning them designation as Important Intangible Cultural Property (Skilled Expert) by Nagi Town (termination upon passing).

Mr. Torao Kaneda	Yokozen Kabuki Gidayu Expert	Designated July 27, 1999; Terminated August 14, 1999
Ms. Kimiko Takamori	Yokozen Kabuki Tokoyama Expert	Designated July 27, 1999; Terminated April 2, 2009
Mr. Sukeyasu Ashida	Yokozen Kabuki Choreography Expert	Designated October 27, 2009; Terminated November 18, 2014

“*Yokozen*” means “beside the mountain” and was used widely to refer to this area. In this area, the mountain was referred to as “*仙 (sen)*” at the time, combining the characters for “person” and “mountain,” likely arising from the familiarity and reverence felt by personifying the mountain.

According to records, celebrations and commemorative performances in honor of the Preservation Society's founding were held on May 15, 1966 at Takimoto Community Center. The celebrations were held in the morning, followed by a total of six performances including “*Meiboku Sendaihagi*” in the afternoon.

One story from Takamori's life involves the novelist Sawako Ariyoshi (1931-1984). As part of her information collecting for her novel *Izumo no Okuni* (published over four years in the magazine *Funin Kouron* from 1966), Ariyoshi visited Nagi Town in autumn of 1966.

When Ariyoshi visited Takamori's house to ask about the local *jige-shibai*, she found that many people who heard that “a famous novelist from Tokyo had come” gathered there. These people put on makeup and costumes then suddenly started performing in the small room. Ariyoshi was surprised and delighted by this and wrote many scenes taking place in Nagi Town in the finish *Izumo no Okuni*.

Through Yokozen Kabuki, Ms. Ariyoshi likely felt the same enjoyment and familiarity that people in the Edo Period felt towards theater.



Mr. Takamori and Ms. Sawako Ariyoshi

Takamori left behind *nehon* - kabuki scripts - which continue to serve as the most important foundation for carrying on Yokozen Kabuki today. While the outline of the skilled Takamori's many scripts are the same as professional kabuki and other *jige-shibai*, they are filled with completely unique performances.

These scripts are recreations of *jige-shibai* that Takamori saw as a child and may, perhaps, remain the same as they were in the Edo Period. They form the very identity of Yokozen Kabuki and continue to be treated with importance into the present day through Yokozen Kabuki performances.

Takamori is quoted to have often said, “Yokozen Kabuki is not about the individual, but the community.” By this, he means that *jige-shibai* is not only to be enjoyed by a few fans; rather, its true importance comes from being protected and carried on as a local treasure.

Loved by many and highly regarded as the “Father of the Yokozen Kabuki Revival,” Genichi Takamori passed away on December 6, 1974, at the age of 78 after a long battle with rectal cancer.

After Takamori's death, Yokozen Kabuki Preservation Society was designated as an “Okayama Prefectural Important Intangible Cultural Property” on March 31, 1976.



Continuing for the Next 50 Years

Beginning in 1999, four regular performances are held each year under the title of “*Shiki no Kouden*” (Performances of the Four Seasons). The main performance is the “Yokozen Kabuki Grand Performance,” held every November over two days.

Spring is held at Matsugami Shrine Kabuki Stage; Summer is performed as a traveling troupe; Winter is held at Nagi Town Culture Center in collaboration with other groups as a mini cultural festival. As an official means of promoting the continuation of this culture, Nagi Town hired “Kabuki Specialist Employees” in 1996 and 2000. The specialists undertook specialized training for two years under various professional performers then joined as a member of the Preservation Society.

The “Children's Kabuki Class” also began in 1996, with enrollment open for elementary and middle school students ever year. One of the highlights of Yokozen Kabuki, the Children's Kabuki Class consists of the Yokozen Kabuki Preservation Society instructing in all areas, with students then performing in the Yokozen Kabuki Grand Performance and visiting performances at senior care facilities.

Additionally, third grade students at Nagi Elementary School learn about “kabuki” as part of their “integrated studies.” After learning about the history of kabuki and getting to see and touch instruments, costumes, wigs and other instruments themselves, all the students then get to try out acting in the play “*Shiranami Gonin Otoko*” themselves. On class observation day, the students spin around umbrellas and perform in from of their parents or guardians. Every year, many children become interested in kabuki through this class and go on to participate in the Children's Kabuki Class.

The greatest appeal of *jige-shibai* is its familiarity: someone that you know is up there acting, making you want to go onto the stage too.

For the many people waiting in anticipation, and for the next 50 years, we will take the next step forward, protecting the tradition the must be protected and changing aspects the must be changed.



Yokozen Kabuki Grand Performance



Children's Kabuki Class