



Great Hall of Traditional Okinawan Theatre: Performance and Promotion of Kumiodori and Ryukyuan Dance

Mekarushi, a *kumiodori* play created by Tamagusuku Chokun (1684-1734), the founder of *kumiodori*, based on Ryukyuan folklore concerning a robe of feathers.

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 aims to build momentum for the upcoming Expo 2025 (World Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai), to support renewed interest in inbound travel to Japan, and to encourage further demand for domestic tourism. It also features a focus on “The Beauty and The Spirit of Japan,” promoting Japanese cultural arts and spreading awareness of their diverse and universal charms within Japan and around the world. This is a large-scale project with Japanese cultural facilities, arts organizations, and many others hosting and participating in a diverse range of projects and events. In this article, from among these participants, we will focus on efforts being made by the National Theatre Okinawa.

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Maintaining and Promoting Kumiodori, a Theatrical Form with a 300-Year History

The National Theatre Okinawa opened in Urasoe, a city located at the boundary between the southern and central areas of Okinawa’s main island, in January 2004. For over twenty years since then, the theatre has held performances of traditional Okinawan performing arts. These include *kumiodori*,¹ a form with a 300-year history featuring elements of song and dance, Ryukyuan dance,² *Okinawa shibai*³ (Okinawan plays), and *sanshin*⁴ music. (See photos)

At the same time, the theatre focuses on providing training programs using a systematic curriculum to help foster the next generation involved with the performing arts, striving to preserve and promote *kumiodori* in particular. Furthermore, the theatre works to collect valuable *kumiodori*-related materials such as scripts, costumes, and stage props both old and new, as well as to collect and publicly exhibit a wide range of materials related to the folk performing arts of Okinawa. The theatre has also hosted performances of theatrical programs from mainland Japan, which has deep connections with Okinawan performing arts, and performing arts groups from the Asia-Pacific region, including Indonesia.

For the Japan Cultural Expo, in which The National Theatre Okinawa participated in fiscal 2020, the theatre produced bilingual pamphlets in Japanese and English and promotional videos in multiple languages to help viewers – mainly tourists, including visitors from outside Japan – deepen their understanding of traditional Okinawan performing arts. Also, for the performances, the theatre introduced the use of audio guides and tablets with subtitles offering support for multiple languages to provide



Example of an Okinawan play appreciation class. The National Theatre Okinawa holds a range of promotional performances such as theatre appreciation classes for parents and children to help viewers deepen their understanding of such traditional performing arts.

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

explanations of highlights and the background of *kumiodori*, Ryukyuan dances, and more. Workshops offered before performances, providing English-language interpreting, received favorable receptions as well.

Special Performances Commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the Theatre's Opening

For the Japan Cultural Expo 2.0, the theatre has worked to further expand and develop such efforts. This has included having commercials for traditional Okinawan performing arts shown onboard Okinawa-bound passenger planes, offering backstage tours accompanied by English-language interpreters, and providing workshops

at sightseeing destinations. One specific example is holding *kumiodori* workshops on guided tours of Shuri-jo Castle⁵ in Naha, one of the most popular sightseeing spots in Okinawa, in cooperation with the Okinawa Churashima Foundation. Around 250 people, including visitors from outside Japan, took part in these workshops.

The National Theatre Okinawa, which marked the 20th anniversary of its opening in January 2024, has a range of commemorative performances and theatre appreciation classes planned for the year. Geographically and historically, Okinawa served as a hub for interaction in the



Ryukyuan Dance Appreciation Class, a promotional performance

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa



Kumiodori workshop on a guided tour of Shuri-jo Castle

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

Asia-Pacific region. To consider cultural exchange in the vast Asia-Pacific region through viewing and appreciating traditional performing arts rooted here in Okinawa is a greatly significant matter.

The National Theatre Okinawa website
<https://www.nt-okinawa.or.jp/english>



The National Theatre Okinawa, which has marked the 20th anniversary of its opening

Photo: The National Theatre Okinawa

1. *Kumiodori* is a theatrical form combining narrative lines, music, gestures, and dance. It is said to have been created based on ancient Ryukyuan performing arts and traditions.
2. While the foundations of classical dance were established during the same period as *kumiodori*, new dance forms incorporating folk songs and popular songs, including *zo-odori* (mixed dances) and *sosaku buyo* (creative dances), subsequently developed. These came to be known as *Ryukyu buyo* (Ryukyuan dance) and took root as performing arts of the common people.
3. When a playhouse first opened in Naha around the 1880s, musical dramas and plays featuring narration in the local Ryukyuan dialect came to be performed, dealing with the customs and manners of the common people. These came to be known as *Okinawa shibai* (Okinawan plays).
4. Classical music and folk songs performed on the *sanshin*, a three-stringed instrument originally brought from China around the end of the 14th century.
5. Royal castle of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1429–1879). After the end of World War II in 1945, reconstructions were carried out in 1992. It has also been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Although a fire destroyed the main courtyard structures of the castle in 2019, there is now ongoing work being performed to reconstruct and restore them.