

Awaji Puppeteers Return to Seattle after 17 Years

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Classical Japanese puppetry returns to Seattle. After a gap of more than 17 years, Awaji Puppet Troupe performs two well-known pieces Aug. 17th.

Sponsored by the Hyogo Business and Cultural Center (HBCC), Awaji Puppet Troupe will bring six puppeteers, three puppets and four musicians — including Shamisen and Tayu chanters — to present this mainstay of Japanese culture.

“The last time the troupe was in Seattle was right after the Hanshin Earthquake in 1995,” remembers Brian Chu, HBCC’s cultural and educational program manager. “Our organization, started in 1990, hosted the troupe for a special dedication of thanks to Washington state for their generous donations toward the relief efforts going on in Japan at the time.”

The Awaji puppeteers performed in February of 1996 at the Broadway Performance Hall at Seattle Central Community College, and this month, they bring their work to a larger audience at A Contemporary Theatre (ACT Theatre) in downtown Seattle.

The first piece to be performed this month will be “Ebisu-mai (Ebisu Dance),” or “Dance of the Fisherman God.” Using only one puppet, this piece centers on the dance performed to wish for good fishing and safety on the seas. Next will be “Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees,” performed with two puppets animating the titular lead character Yoshitsune and his Mistress Shizuka. This

piece is derived from a longer kabuki play of the same name, which itself was developed from the “Heike Monogatari,” a classical, epic poem detailing the rise and fall of the Taira clan of samurai.

“We thought that these two plays, with their older music and style unique to Awaji Island puppet theater, would beautifully represent the 50th anniversary celebration between Hyogo and Washington state,” say the Awaji troupe members.

The troupe members are looking forward to presenting the unique and traditional aspects of Awaji puppetry.

“The long and celebrated history of Awaji puppet theater traces its roots back more than 500 years,” says Chu. “It was the first immensely popular puppet theater and paved the way for later styles, such as the now more commonly recognized Osaka Bunraku style.” This popularity has been due in part to the size of the dolls, which are much bigger than traditional American puppets.

“They require three people to operate,” says Chu, “one for the left arm, one for the legs, and the main performer taking the head and right arm.” To make the performance even brighter for Seattle audiences, a special puppetry demonstration will also be presented Katsura Sunshine, an officially recognized performer of rakugo, a traditional form of Japanese stand-up comedy. The evening promises to be — according to Chu — a fun night of “singing, music, gorgeous puppets and grandiose storytelling.”

Awaji Ningyo Za (Awaji Puppet Troupe) performs with special guest Katsura Sunshine starting 7 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 17th at ACT Theatre on 700 Union St. in downtown Seattle. Ticket information can be found at: www.acttheatre.org/Tickets/OnStage/JapanesePuppetTheatre