

Kanamaruza (formerly Konpira Oshibai)

Built in 1835, Kanamaruza is Japan's oldest surviving complete kabuki theater. Konpira Daigongen (now known as Konpira san and Konpira Shrine) became a site of national pilgrimage in the middle of the Edo period (eighteenth century), drawing visitors to Kotohira from all over Japan. Kabuki and other forms of entertainment had been provided for these pilgrims several times a year in a temporary playhouse. As the town developed and expanded at the base of the shrine, Konpira Oshibai was constructed as a permanent kabuki theater to entertain the pilgrims. Renamed Kanamaruza around 1900, it has been known affectionately by that name ever since.

Kanamaruza was registered as an Important Cultural Property in 1970. Over a four-year period beginning in 1972, it was dismantled and reconstructed in its present location. In 2003, restoration work was begun and the theater was restored to its original Edo-period state.

In 1984, the theater attracted the attention of the professional kabuki world. Three famous actors, Nakamura Kichiemon II, Sawamura Tojuro II, and Nakamura Kankuro V, visited Kanamaruza to produce a TV program about it, which made it well known throughout Japan. They were fascinated by the theater's unique atmosphere and traditional design, and thus the idea to hold regular performances there was born. In late June 1985, a kabuki troupe led by Kichiemon staged the play *Saikai Zakura Misome no Kiyomizu* (Reunion Among the Cherry Blossoms After the First Meeting at Kiyomizu) and the dance drama *Niwaka Jishi* (Spirited Lion) at the Kanamaruza.

Since 1985, annual kabuki performances called the *Shikoku Konpira Kabuki Oshibai* have been held in the month of April or May, an event that marks the arrival of spring to Shikoku island. First-rank kabuki actors come to perform, and the audience can relish kabuki in the compact size of theater for which it was originally designed, allowing close proximity to the stage and *hanamachi*, and a marvelous sense of intimacy with the players.