

## **Noh**

There are 36 Noh stages on Sado Island—about one-third of all Noh stages in Japan—a remarkable number for such a small island. Nonetheless, this is far fewer than in the golden age of Noh on Sado during the Edo period (1603–1868), when the island had about 200 stages. Noh was introduced to Sado when Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), the renowned actor and playwright who was considered the greatest master of the art, was exiled to the island in 1434.

Noh increased in popularity when Okubo Nagayasu (1545–1613) was appointed magistrate of Sado in the early 1600s. Okubo was tasked with overseeing the island's flourishing gold and silver mines, and brought his love of Noh theater with him to Sado and to the rapidly increasing population of Aikawa, one of the main mining districts. The performing arts became a pastime for mine workers and farmers alike. After a long day of work, they would retreat into the worlds of Noh or kabuki by constructing stages or sewing costumes. Toward the end of the Edo period, Noh began to decline on Sado along with the mining industry, yet it remained relatively strong compared to the sharp decline the art form took elsewhere in Japan. On Sado, Noh lacked the exclusivity and association with the samurai class it had in mainland Japan, and that allowed it to survive after the end of the Tokugawa period of warrior rule in 1867. Noh remained the domain of the merchants and farmers of Sado, who incorporated local customs and religious practices and performed regularly at local shrines.

These days Noh is performed from April to October on open-air stages at shrines, with June the busiest month. This schedule used to be a matter of necessity, since Noh on Sado was performed mainly by the common people in the Edo period, and the shows would coincide with the farming season. Performances of Sado-style Noh are relatively low key and intimate: onlookers sit on the ground and watch the performance outside a shrine, in the light of a bonfire. First-timers may want to start in the Kuninaka area, where regular Noh shows are held on four main stages.