

Awa Jurobe Yashiki Puppet Theater and Museum

This theater and museum complex offers visitors a chance to experience and learn about the unique puppet theater of Tokushima: Awa Ningyo Joruri. A combination of storytelling, music, and puppetry, the art form is a designated Important Cultural Property. Awa is the former name of Tokushima Prefecture, and Ningyo Joruri means puppet theater.

Local puppeteer troupes perform once or twice daily at the Awa Jurobe Yashiki Puppet Theater. Visitors can learn more about the puppets, the costumes, and the history of this performing art in the adjoining exhibition room, where they can even try their hand at operating the puppets. The complex stands on the former estate of a village headman named Bando Jurobe (1646–1698), and includes his traditional garden.

Roots in Farming Communities

Tokushima's puppetry shares roots with Japan's mainstream puppet theater, Bunraku. However, as Awa Ningyo Joruri was often performed on outdoor stages, its puppets tend to be larger so that they may be viewed more easily from a distance. Depending on the age and gender of the character, the puppets can be half to two-thirds life-size. Tokushima puppets usually have a glossy painted finish, unlike the matte surface of those used in Bunraku.

Awa Ningyo Joruri came to the region from Awaji Island, to the north of Tokushima Prefecture. Hachisuka Iemasa (1558–1638), the first lord of Tokushima, enjoyed puppet theater and promoted it widely. However, it was the farming families who truly embraced this art form and made it their own. Inspired by visiting troupes from the island, amateur Tokushima groups were performing on outdoor stages by the second half of the Edo period (1603–1868). These stages were usually located on the grounds of shrines, where puppet theater was performed as an offering to the gods. Today, around 80 outdoor stages are still maintained in Tokushima Prefecture.

Over time, puppet theater spread throughout the entire prefecture, benefitting from Tokushima's flourishing indigo industry and its wealthy merchants, who became the art's patrons. Tokushima also developed a reputation for its skilled puppet makers, who supplied both the professional troupes of Awaji Island as well as the local amateurs. Puppet theater remained very popular locally, even after other forms of entertainment, such as movies and modern theater, took over in big cities like Tokyo and Osaka. Eventually, though, the spread of those forms of entertainment from the 1930s, coupled with the escalation of World War II in the 1940s, led to a decline in audiences. Most of the troupes in Tokushima disbanded around this time.

Puppet theater made a comeback in the second half of the twentieth century when it was introduced into school curriculums and the younger generation started taking an interest in it. Today, in addition to the daily showings at the Awa Jurobe Yashiki Puppet Theater, outdoor performances are staged regularly. Around 40 puppet makers remain active in Tokushima, crafting puppet heads for troupes all over Japan.

Performances Are a Team Effort

A team of three people operates each lead character in Awa Ningyo Joruri. The chief puppeteer is responsible for the head and the right hand and arm, while the other two control the puppet's legs and left hand and arm. The mechanisms are designed to allow for natural expressions and realistic movements. Puppets can open and close their mouths, raise and lower their eyebrows, and move their hands to make a wide range of gestures. Currently, there are 70 different heads, representing both male and female characters with a diverse range of ages, personalities, and roles in society. In size, a head may measure as much as 18 centimeters in length. Wigs are typically fashioned of human or yak hair.

Puppeteers typically dress entirely in black for the performances, so that they are less noticeable on stage. The chief operator needs to stand higher than the other two, so he or she wears raised wooden clogs, the soles of which are made of straw to absorb sound.

Awa Ningyo Joruri performances also feature a narrator and a musician who plays the three-stringed shamisen. Facing the audience from the right side of the stage, the narrator conveys the emotions of each character, and may even dramatically laugh or cry as the story demands. A copy of the script sits on top of a heavy wooden stand in front of the narrator. The shamisen player commits the entire performance to memory and sets the appropriate mood as the play progresses.

An Enduring Family Drama

One of the most famous Awa Ningyo Joruri plays is *Keisei Awa no Naruto* (The Tragedy of Naruto), which the playwright Chikamatsu Hanji (1725–1783) adapted from *Yugiri Awa no Naruto* (Yugiri and the Awa Whirlpool) by the dramatist Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725). First performed in Osaka in 1768, the work originally consisted of ten acts, but it is mainly the eighth that is performed today. This is divided into two parts, “The Scene of the Pilgrim Song” and “The Scene at Jurobe’s House.” Both follow the subplot of a family of three—Jurobe, his wife Oyumi, and their young daughter, Otsuru.

It is the first scene, known for its touching interaction between mother and daughter, that audiences will usually see at the Awa Jurobe Yashiki Puppet Theater. English versions of the script are provided.