

Nagahama Hikiyama Festival

Child Kabuki actors perform on extravagantly decorated mobile stages in this lively spring festival, which has been held every year since the eighteenth century. During the festival, ornately decorated floats are pulled in a procession through the city's central shopping district to Nagahama Hachimangū Shrine, stopping along the way for public Kabuki performances.

The wheeled stages, called *hikiyama*, are decorated with gold leaf and intricate wood carvings, and their curved roofs resemble those of Shinto shrines. The actors are amateurs between the ages of 6 and 12, but the costumes, music, and production levels are professional grade. The youthful intensity and raw emotion of the young actors is considered a highlight of their performances. Four stages appear in the festival each year, out of a rotating stable of 12, along with a three-wheeled lead stage festooned with banners and ornamental swords.

Pulling the *hikiyama* through the narrow streets of the city center is a feat in itself: each of the floats is between 6 and 9 meters tall and weighs between 5 and 6 metric tons. Groups of young men (and more recently, women) in festive traditional clothing take on the demanding physical task. The festival runs from April 9 to 17, with Kabuki performances on the evening of the thirteenth, the morning of the fourteenth, and throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth.