

## Yachiyozza Theater

Gray roof tiles, a wooden frame, and white paneling make a striking contrast to the colorful interior of the Yachiyozza Theater, which has red lanterns hung around the box seats and vintage advertisements painted on the bold blue ceiling. A mercantile association established Yachiyozza in 1911, opening it as a playhouse for Kabuki drama.

### *The playhouse and its rise and fall*

Yachiyozza became a fixture in Yamaga in the Taisho era (1912–1926), and its entertainment programming reflected the cultural tastes of the day. The theater hosted not only Kabuki but also silent film screenings, *naniwa-bushi* (Japanese narrative singing), and music recitals. Dance performances and athletic events such as martial arts tournaments were also held. The venue's popularity began to decline in the decades following World War II as television came to dominate popular culture and became the primary source of entertainment.

### *Restoration and preservation*

After the Yachiyozza Theater closed its doors in 1970, the building fell into disrepair and was nearly demolished. A grassroots movement to save and restore the theater emerged around 1980, led by a senior citizens' association in conjunction with local youth groups. This community effort was successful in preserving the theater as an important piece of Yamaga's history. In 1988, the Yachiyozza Theater was designated a National Important Cultural Property—the third playhouse in Japan to receive such a distinction.

### *Features of the playhouse*

The physical features of Yachiyozza include a *hanamichi*, a walkway that allows actors to move between the stage and the back of the theater, and a *suppon*, a raisable platform for dramatic entrances near the audience. There is also a *mawari-butai*, a circular portion of the stage that can be manually rotated from underneath to effect scene changes. The current capacity of the theater is 700, although it accommodated audiences of well over 1,000 in its heyday.

*The Yachiyoza Theater today*

A full-scale renovation began in 1996 and was completed in 2001. A significant amount of the wood in the building is from the theater's original construction. Nowadays, the theater serves as a venue for Kabuki drama and a wide range of other performing arts. Local guides offer Japanese-language tours of the space with advance notice. The faithful restoration of the playhouse to its former glory demonstrates the pride Yamaga residents take in their cultural heritage.