

Iida Puppet Festa



Hobos Puppet Theater performs the *Giant Turnip* (2021)



Nanja Monja performs *Bekkanko Oni* (2019)



Puppet Theater Kurikinton performs *Moreley's, Looking for Something* (2019)



Neville Tranter of Stuffed Puppet Theatre performs (2019)

Japan's largest puppetry event, Iida Puppet Festa, features a variety of puppet shows and the participation of many puppet troupes from Japan and abroad. It is held each year in Iida City, Nagano Prefecture, a treasury of traditional performing arts.

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THE Iida Puppet Festa, held in early August every year in Iida City, Nagano Prefecture (population of about 98,000, as of January 2022), is Japan's largest puppetry event and also one of the world's best known puppetry events. During the four-day event, about 300 troupes from Japan and abroad gather, holding more than 400 performances at about 140 venues, including neighboring

All photos: Courtesy of Iida Puppet Festa Executive Committee

municipalities. In 2019, before the COVID-19 outbreak, as many as 40,000 people attended the shows.

Iida City, located more or less in the center of Japan, has long flourished as a key point in the cultural corridor connecting east and west, in particular with puppet theater performances a favorite. Among these, *ningyo joruri*, which was introduced about 300 years ago, is a tradition actively continued and practiced by four groups still today.

In Iida, where puppet-related performing arts have thus been transmitted, the City-sponsored “Puppet Carnival Iida” started in 1979, with 60 troupes from all over the country participating, and was held 20 times. Subsequently, it was relaunched in 1999 under the name Iida Puppet Festa, organized by several citizens’ groups.

The Festa is jointly created by the audience, the performers and the organizers. Some 2,000 residents volunteer to help run the event. A Festa where “anyone can participate,” whether amateur or professional, every year sees four to five groups from abroad that volunteer to participate. However, due to the COVID-19 situation, the Festa was canceled in 2020, and held in a smaller format with about 100 performances by troupes from Nagano Prefecture only in 2021.

Harada Masahiro, executive chairman of the Iida Puppet Festa Executive Committee, comments, “At the Festa before COVID-19, we had as many as 300 troupes gathering, with performances ranging from traditional marionettes to avant-garde puppetry and *ningyo joruri* by local high school students, so you could see almost every form of puppetry in the world. Recently, there has been an increase in high-tech puppetry that makes use of computers and video technology.”

The 2019 Festa featured troupes from countries such as South Korea, Greece, Poland and the Netherlands. The Korean troupe Bookteller’s Quilt performed a unique work where the narrator manipulated everyday practical items such as spoons, electric kettles, and brooms as if they were puppets to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The world-famous puppeteer Neville Tranter’s one-man Stuffed Puppet Theatre also performed a work rich in social satire in Japan for the first time.

Harada says, “Puppetry differs between east and west, so it’s very exciting to have participants from countries and regions that you don’t usually have the opportunity to see. Inspired by the Festa, people who are interested in the different cultures of other countries are creating new styles of puppet shows.”

The Iida Puppet Festa is a place where everyone can enjoy puppetry rooted in the history and culture of Japan and various other countries around the world. People who became familiar with puppet theater while growing up are now starting to actively help run the Festa. This worldwide exchange through puppetry is being passed on to the next generation. That’s the kind of drama that is unfolding quietly and steadily here. 📖



Kanae JHS Puppetry Club performs *Nyan-Nyan school! Athletic meet!* (2021)



Puppet theater Musubiza performs *Great Adventure of Kakureyama* (2019)



Puppet Theater Kyougei performs *Mekke of Todorogahuti* (2019)



Greek troupe Antamapantahou performs the *Strings of Music* (2019)