



The Tale of King Kuroshima (Kuroshima-o monogatari) at the 2022 *Uchinaa shibai* appreciation workshop. (Photo provided by National Theatre Okinawa)

Developments in Japan and Overseas

A Retrospective on the Fiftieth Anniversary of Okinawa's Reversion to Japan

The Rich World of Uchinaa Shibai, a Theatre Reflecting Okinawa's Turbulent History

Uchinaa shibai (in Japanese, *Okinawa shibai*) is a form of drama that arose among the Okinawan people after the Ryukyu Kingdom was dissolved and performing arts previously seen only at court spread into the public realm. Rooted in traditional culture but exploring familiar, resonant themes, *Uchinaa shibai* became hugely popular, and many masterpieces were written in the two genres of *hogen serifu geki* and *Ryukyu kageki*, or "dialect

theatre” and “Ryukyu lyric drama,” respectively. However, particularly around the time of the Second World War, Okinawa was placed in highly straitened circumstances, and *Uchinaa shibai* was not shielded from the effects of Japanese and US politics in turn.

Nevertheless, *Uchinaa shibai* overcame these great challenges to survive to the present day. Although it has often been overshadowed in public attention by the other traditional Ryukyuan performing arts, on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan, let us explore the history and nature of this theatre of the people.

〈History〉

The Birth and Evolution of *Uchinaa Shibai*, a Theatre for the People

Hosoi Naoko

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Uchinaa shibai is a form of popular theatre born of the dissolution of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the late 1870s. Based on traditional culture and using Okinawan language and music, it was created by the people of Okinawa as “our theatre.” Despite coming perilously close to disappearing during Okinawa’s modern history, it remains beloved today. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Okinawa’s reversion to Japan, this retrospective outlines the history of *Uchinaa shibai*.



North Hall of Shuri Castle (prewar), where the Ryukyu court received emissaries.
(Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)

Okinawa’s Traditional Culture

The traditional culture of Okinawa is the intangible culture of the age of the Ryukyu Kingdom, created mainly as a tool of Ryukyu court diplomacy and refined and developed over centuries.

The Ryukyu Kingdom maintained relations with both China and Japan.

Emissaries from China, known as *sakuhoshi*, were welcomed with performances called *ukanshin udui* (Ja. *okansen odori*). *Ukanshin udui* included *kumi udui* (Ja. *kumi odori*), a form of theatre combining song, dialogue, and dance; *buyo*, classical dance; and *uzagaku*, chamber music of the Chinese Ming and Qing dynasties. With respect to Japan—specifically, the daimyo of the Satsuma Domain—meals served as tribute were accompanied by *To udui* (Ja. *To odori*), faithful copies of Chinese plays performed in Chinese, as well as *buyo* and *uzagaku*.

The performers of this period were Ryukyu nobles who learned these arts as needed. There were no professionals dedicated solely to performance.

The Dawn of Public Performance and Theatrical Venues

In mainland Japan, the traditional domains were replaced by prefectures in 1871, but things proceeded differently in the Ryukyu Kingdom. First, in 1872, the kingdom was redesignated the “Ryukyu Domain,” although the Ryukyu court was preserved. Then in 1879, the Ryukyu Domain was abolished and Okinawa Prefecture established in its place. The policies pursued by Japan with respect to



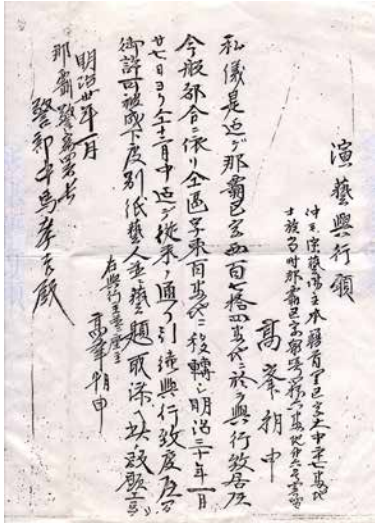
Detail from *Emissary Procession (Sakuhoshi gyoretsu no zu)* showing chief emissary and vice-emissary. (Collection of Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum)



Detail from *Ryukyuan Dance and Music Scroll (Ryukyujin bugaku omakimono)* showing *uchi kumi udui*. (Collection of Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum)



Detail from *Ryukyuan Dance and Music, With Folk Dances (Ryukyujin bugaku narabi ni odori no zu)* showing music being performed (Collection of Okinawa Prefectural Museum and Art Museum)



Request from the Nakamo Theatre to stage a play (1897). Due to claims that theatre corrupted public morals, permission was required to stage public entertainments. (Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)

the Ryukyus between 1872 and 1879 are collectively called the “Disposition of the Ryukyus” (*Ryukyu shobun*). Part of this process was the dissolution of the Ryukyu court, stripping the nobility who served there of their vocations. *To udui* was lost along with the court, but some of the former nobles trained in the performance of *ukanshin udui* eked out a living by continuing to perform in secret at restaurants and similar venues. They also taught these arts to other former nobles. In 1882, Okinawa was brought into step with the Japanese mainland by the promulgation of strict regulations on public performances of dramatic works. At the time, however,

public performance itself had yet to be established in Okinawa, which led to an unusual situation in which it was born and developed within a preexisting regulatory framework.

By 1883, “*kamajii* theatres” had made their appearance. *Kamajii* were straw bags used to hold rice and other dry goods, and enterprising producers used these as makeshift walls to enclose performance spaces. Located near Shian Bridge in Naha, these *kamajii* theatres were crude, roofless performance venues charging minimal entrance fees. They were also where the performing arts of the Ryukyu court were revealed to the common people for the first time and the inception of public performance in Okinawa. In the 1890s, more permanent theatres began to appear. The first solid, tile-roofed theatre was the Nakamo Theatre in Naha, which was built on land reclaimed from the Kumoji River in 1891.

Popularization and the Formation of *Uchinaa Shibai*

Although the performing arts of Okinawa had begun as tools of Ryukyu court

diplomacy predating the Ryukyu Disposition, finding a new audience in the common people led to a process of gradual popularization. In the field of dance, the first generation of performers—those who had learned directly from the original performers of *ukanshin udui*—revolutionized the art, creating dances that took up themes from everyday life, as well as group dances. These became known collectively as *zo udui* (Ja. *zo odori*).

The popularization of *kumi udui* was driven by the second generation of performers. Broadly speaking, two approaches were pursued. The first was to retain the existing character of *kumi udui*—its dialogue, lyrics, and choreographic gestures—while changing the key themes from “loyalty” or “obedience” to stories about parents and children or relationships between lovers. This approach would eventually produce *Ryukyu kageki*, “Ryukyu lyric theatre,” one of the major genres of *Uchinaa shibai*.

The other approach was to perform in a realistic style using colloquial language, which was not an element of traditional *kumi udui*. This approach resulted in *hogen serifu geki*, “dialect theatre,” another major genre of *Uchinaa shibai*, which directly incorporated new elements inspired by the political plays called *soshi shibai* then arriving in Okinawa from the Japanese mainland as well as the Shinpa (“New School”) plays and kabuki that Okinawan performers saw in mainland Japan and Taiwan.

Of these two approaches, Ryukyu lyric drama may seem easier for performers to experiment with, since it used the existing elements of *kumi udui*. In fact, however, dialect theatre was the first to emerge.

The Dialect Drama Boom

The first play to arrive in Okinawa from the Japanese mainland is said to have been a *soshi shibai* play staged in 1896. *Soshi shibai* were based on new political beliefs like the Liberty and People’s Rights movement, combining verbal elucidation of these philosophies with bodily action to create a form of theatre. The actors were amateurs and their technique crude, but their works had a certain realism and rough-hewn power. The realistic effects involving fake blood and the rapidly changing programs came as a shock to the audiences of the day, as can be

seen in contemporary newspaper accounts and memoirs by performers. With their colloquial dialogue and realistic performance style, *soshi shibai* demonstrated for the people of Okinawa a type of theatre that was utterly different from *kumu udui* and classical dance.

From around 1898, dialect theatre gradually rose in popularity while *kumi udui* and classical dance began to disappear from theatrical programs. In 1903, an organization called the Kogekikai (“Theatre Appreciation Society”) was founded by performers with the stated goal of improving the quality of theatrical programs and the social standing of the performing fraternity. Members of the Kogekikai took turns visiting the Japanese mainland and Taiwan, bringing back plays to perform in Okinawa. The Kogekikai played a critical role, with Uema Seihin, in particular, mirroring the efforts of mainland figures striving to create a new theatre by introducing mainland plays without any adaptations for Okinawan audiences.

Uema’s Okinawa-za theatre competed with the Kyuyo-za, which was run by the three Tokashiki brothers, Shugi, Shuryo, and Shurei. For a nine-year period starting in 1906, plays taking Ryukyuan history as their theme enjoyed massive popularity, inaugurating what might be called the “Age of Dialect Theatre.” The first of these historical plays is said to have been *Record of the Origins of Hokuzan* (*Hokuzan yuraiki*), produced by the Tokashiki brothers in 1902.

Tragic Female Protagonists: The Birth of Ryukyu Lyric Drama

In Okinawa, Ryukyu lyric drama is known simply as “lyric drama” (*kageki*). It is said to have been born of *uchi kumi udui* (Ja. *uchi kumi odori*), one of the choreographic elements making up *kumi udui*. These dances were performed by a contrasting pair of performers—for example, actors playing male and female characters. Traditionally, the songs accompanying these dances were performed by additional musicians, but from around 1900 dancers began singing the songs themselves, creating a form of comedy. Under the influence of the dialect theatre boom, however, these performances became longer and more tragic. Finally, in 1910, the genre’s first tragedy with a female protagonist was staged. This was the

beginning of Ryukyu lyric theatre, and tragic stories and female protagonists remained key to achieving popularity in the genre.

For a time, the world of Okinawan theatre became a three-way contest between the Tokashiki brothers' theatre, now renamed the Meiji-za; the Okinawa-za, and the newly completed Naka-za. The “three great lyric dramas,” which are performed even today, are said to be *Aka in Tumai* (*Tumai Aka*) (written by Ganeko Yaei and first performed in 1910), *Peony in the Deep Mountains* (*Okuyama no botan*) (written by Iraha Inkichi and first performed in 1914), and *Hando-gwa of Iejima* (*Iejima Hando-gwa*) (written by Majikina Yuko and first performed in 1924). *Yakushido Temple* (*Yakushido*) (also written by Iraha Inkichi and first performed in its present form in 1912), which added humor and lively spectacle to the motifs of *Aka in Tumai*, was also highly popular, and is sometimes added to the above list to create the “four great lyric dramas.”



Family photograph of Ganeko Yaei, author of *Aka in Tumai* (circa 1909). (Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)



Iraha Inkichi and Tokashiki Shuryo in stage costumes. (Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)

Pressure on *Uchinaa Shibai*

The first external pressure on *Uchinaa shibai* was the imposition of Japanese mainland regulations on theatre without any consideration for Okinawa's unique circumstances. As noted above, in Okinawa the development of public performances was preceded by the regulations that constrained it. The first set of regulations in 1882 was followed by more regulations in 1886, 1891, 1892, and 1929.

However, the impact of these rules and regulations paled beside that of the negative campaign waged against *Uchinaa shibai* in the newspapers. This

surprisingly tenacious campaign focused its attacks on lyric drama in particular, which had won many female fans. The level of the drama was criticized, and male actors were castigated over their relationships with women. Whether these accusations were true or not, the attacks strongly emphasized elements that a traditional perspective would view as social harms. In some regions, women were barred from theatres altogether. Nevertheless, the protracted nature of this negative campaign and the stream of new regulations and prohibitions is proof that public performances continued regardless. *Uchinaa shibai* enjoyed the unflinching support of the people.

In the second half of the 1930s, the campaign to increase use of the Japanese language entered a new stage, with measures once confined to schools expanded



Makishi Kochu during his time with the Matsu theatre troupe. Makishi was designated one of the four holders of this Intangible Cultural Property. (Photo from *Photo Album of the Great Ryukyus*, provided by the Naha City Museum of History)

throughout the community. At the regional level, groups of young women were assembled for the campaign, which took mothers raising children as its first target. From 1937, these efforts merged with the “Japanization” movement (targeting Korea, Taiwan, and Okinawa) and intensified so greatly that they become known as the “movement to annihilate dialects.” It was true that people who traveled from Okinawa to the mainland to study or work faced discrimination if they could not speak Japanese fluently, and so there had been movements actively promoting Japanese even among the people of Okinawa. But Japanization went beyond matters of language, demanding that important elements of everyday life conform to mainland patterns. In Okinawa, people were forced to change their surnames to Japanese ones and were barred from building new tombs in the turtle-back form traditional to the Ryukyus. The

theatrical world was not exempted from these policies, and from 1942 all plays were required to be performed in standard Japanese. This imperiled the very existence of *Uchinaa shibai*, which was performed in Okinawan. Being robbed of its language was a far greater blow than the prohibitions and negative campaigns that had come before.

Meanwhile, with increased movement of people, such as the waves of immigration that began in 1899 and evacuations to the mainland during the war, traveling *Uchinaa shibai* troupes appeared, and classical Ryukyuan dance took root where performers settled.

Uchinaa Shibai's Postwar Revival

In 1945, at the beginning of the period of *Amerika-yu* or US rule, the military government formed a fifteen-member Okinawa Advisory Council as a consultative body. At its first meeting in August 29, the council suggested that the list of eleven administrative



A green room right after the war. Collection of Keystone Studios. (Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)



An excited audience at an *Uchinaa shibai* performance in decades past. (Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)

departments proposed by the military government be augmented with a Department of Arts and Monuments as well a Department of General Affairs. The former, the council said, was needed to “stabilize the hearts of the people, update their lifestyles, and improve their tastes.” The proposal was accepted, and the military government ordered the formation of these thirteen departments.

The first head of the Department of Arts and Monuments was Toyama Seiken, a former elementary school principal who was also a member of the Okinawa Advisory Council. On September 6, at the council’s sixth meeting, Toyama requested support from all regions for “the commencement of tours by performing arts troupes, with particular emphasis on Okinawan song and dance,” with “promotional announcements” during intermissions seeking to “stabilize the hearts of the people, update their lifestyles, and improve their tastes.” Although it was a consultative body, the Okinawa Advisory Council also played an executive role. Under its direction, the Department of Arts and Monuments reached out to *Uchinaa shibai* performers and had them form the Okinawan Performing Arts Federation. It formed screening panels and held auditions, from which fifty actors and musicians were issued certifications as performers. These certified performers were divided into three traveling troupes named “Matsu,” “Take,” and “Ume,” meaning “Pine,” “Bamboo,” and “Plum,” respectively. At first, each troupe had around 16 members, but their numbers eventually rose to around 40 performers each. The *Uchinaa shibai* performers of this period were thus public servants, a fact that was not lost on the public, which sometimes criticized the troupes for charging entry fees on top of their government salaries.

The three troupes divided the prefecture up between them and traveled their routes giving performances. For the people of Okinawa, *Uchinaa shibai* was a part of everyday life. Many new open-air theatres were opened, with 44 said to be operating by 1948. With just three troupes to perform in those 44 theatres, demand was greatly underserved. Audiences wanted more performances, and actors and musicians without formal certification demanded recognition.

The Department of Arts and Monuments, which had authority over these matters, became part of the Okinawa Civil Government, the successor to the

Okinawa Advisory Council, and was then absorbed into the Department of Education in April 1948. Minutes from a meeting of department heads held in October that year record comments from the chief of police asking, after some comments about public morals, whether it would be acceptable to add two new official theatrical troupes named “Crane” and “Rebirth,” bringing the total to five. Governor Shikiya Koshin ordered the heads of the General Affairs Department, the Police Department, and the Public Health Department to explore the matter. What happened next cannot be followed from records alone, but before the end of the year, the forming of theatrical troupes was opened to all, and a stream of new troupes appeared on the scene.

The Decline of *Uchinaa Shibai*

Once the doors were opened and anyone could form an *Uchinaa shibai* troupe, the genre flourished for a time. There were contests sponsored by newspapers and even theatrical festivals. Before long, however, both performances and troupes



Okinawa TV's *Wednesday Theatre (Suiyo gekijo)* (1960s). From left: Iraha Akira, Ogimi Kotaro, Yagi Masao. (Photo from *Photo Album of the Great Ryukyus*, provided by the Naha City Museum of History)

Okiei movie theatre flying the US and Japanese flags (January 1, 1953).
 (Photo provided by the Naha City Museum of History)



began to plunge in number. One factor in this decline was the beginning of television broadcasts in Okinawa in 1959 and radio broadcasts of *Uchinaa shibai* in 1960. In the early days of Okinawan broadcasting, stations aired recordings of *Uchinaa shibai*, or filmed performances in theatres and broadcast them as live programs. Audience figures were said to be particularly dismal on days when these broadcasts were held.

Struggling to retain their audiences, *Uchinaa shibai* venues reinvented themselves as film theatres, only to see films, too, face pressure from the rise of television. The Okiei, a film theatre that opened in 1951, changed direction in 1965. It transferred its distribution rights to other theatres, renovated its theatre for live performances—complete with a revolving stage—and set about attracting audiences with all-star performances featuring luminaries of the *Uchinaa shibai* scene. This created a vicious circle for other troupes: bereft of their stars, they had even less ability to draw an audience, and without the necessary funds to build venues with staging facilities as advanced as those of the Okiei, they continued to lose customers to the larger theatre. For the Okiei, the all-star initiative had been

a last-ditch effort to escape certain doom, but one of its side effects was to weaken *Uchinaa shibai* as a genre. Finally, in 1977, the Okie's own productions of *Uchinaa shibai* came to an end as well.

Meanwhile, in 1967, the Government of the Ryukyu Islands—Okinawa's administrative body from 1952 to 1972—had declared the five surviving *kumi udui* by Tamagusuku Chokun Important Intangible Cultural Properties, naming seven actors and seven musicians as their holders. The performers named included celebrated *Uchinaa shibai* stars like Tamagusuku Seigi (1881–1971), Majikina Yuko (1889–1982), Oyadomari Kosho (1897–1986), and Miyagi Nozo I (1906–1989), who by the declared holder of *kumu udui* as an Important Intangible Cultural Property at the national level in 1972. This speaks to the physical affinities between performing *kumi udui* and *Uchinaa shibai*.



***Uchinaa Shibai* After Reversion**

In 1972, the year that administrative authority over Okinawa reverted to Japan, *kumi udui* was declared an Important Intangible Cultural Property at the national level. Okinawa Prefecture passed its Prefectural Ordinance for the Protection of Cultural Properties the same year.

According to the Okinawa Prefectural Cultural Promotion Division, in 1989, Ryukyu lyric theatre was recognized as a Prefectural Important Intangible Cultural Property on the grounds that it was “a theatrical form unique to Okinawa in which dialect texts were set to the melodies of existing folk songs and sung by the actors themselves,” making it “invaluable cultural heritage, both on artistic grounds and in terms of the history of the performing arts.” Designated as holders of this property at the same time were Miyagi Nozo I, Ogimi Kotaro (1919–1994), Makishi Kochu (1923–2011), and shamisen player and singer Noborikawa Seijin (1932–2013). A Ryukyu Lyric Theatre Preservation Society

was also established. All four of the holders of this cultural property performed not only Ryukyu lyric theatre but also dialect theatre, and should, in effect, be viewed as holders of the cultural property of *Uchinaa shibai*.

In 1990, the Okinawan Prefectural Theatre was established on the second floor of Naha Higashimachi Hall as a permanent venue for local performing arts (it was closed in 2009), and in 2004, the National Theatre Okinawa (managed by the National Theatre Okinawa Management Foundation) was opened as Japan's sixth national theatre. The theatre has had an artistic director since 2010, and Kinjo Shinji, who became the theatre's third artistic director in 2022, has had a close connection to classical Ryukyu dance since early childhood. He is also familiar with Ryukyu lyric theatre and was among the theatre's first class of *kumi udui* trainees.

Japan's Basic Act on Culture and the Arts, promulgated in 2001, and the Okinawa Prefectural Ordinance for the Promotion of Culture and the Arts resulted in government support that has been a boon for *Uchinaa shibai*. However, for actors, in particular, being designated as a holder of an Intangible Cultural Property can become a status symbol, and at present it seems that whatever tailwinds exist are being enjoyed by Ryukyu lyric theatre alone. *Uchinaa shibai* has long been loved by the people of Okinawa as "our theatre," but whether its full diversity can be preserved and nurtured remains to be seen.

Note: I thank the Okinawa Prefectural Cultural Promotion Division for the materials it provided during the writing of this essay.

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(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)

〈Interview〉

An Unscripted Oral Tradition: Uchinaa Shibai Today

Kinjo Shinji (Performer of Ryukyu performing arts; artistic director, National Theatre Okinawa)
Senaha Takako (*Uchinaa shibai* actor)

The Birth of *Uchinaa Shibai*

Is it fair to say that *Uchinaa shibai* has been for the people since it first emerged as a traditional performing art?

Kinjo: Before *Uchinaa shibai* was the age of *kumi odori*.⁽¹⁾ This was one of the court performing arts of the Ryukyu Kingdom. After the domain system was abolished and replaced by prefectures, the kingdom collapsed and *kumi odori* performers were dispersed far and wide. But there was no point trying to stage *kumi odori* in Naha playhouses, because the general audience wasn't interested, so *Uchinaa shibai* was born as a form of drama with more connection to everyday life.

Uchinaa shibai is always performed in *Uchinaaguchi* [the Okinawan language], and the costumes are Okinawan as well. It has its own unique conventions, but it has also changed along with the times. Long before we were born, in the period before the war and for a few years afterward, Senaha-sensei and her colleagues performed in theatres with no curtains and no lighting. *Uchinaa shibai* was closely related to everyday life, something you would casually go and watch with friends. Today, seeing a play at the National Theatre means buying expensive tickets and dressing up nicely, but back then you could even bring food to eat while you watched.

Senaha: That's true. Everyone brought plenty of food. The audience and the performers would get together after the show. "This part was good, but listen—that other part, you should do it more like this," they'd say, and we'd fix it for them next time.



The Taisho Theatre, where Senaha first took the stage (Photo provided by Naha City Museum of History)

Kinjo Shinji and Senaha Takako
(Photo: Ayada Shoichi)



Kinjo: Back then, there were performances every day, after all. Now the longest run is two or three shows at most. The stage equipment has changed, too. The way the performances are presented has changed in step with the audience.

Senaha: In those days, everyday life was conducted in the Okinawan language, so the lines in *Uchinaaguchi* came out naturally. There were no scripts, only oral instructions: “First do this, and then do that.”

Kinjo: You discussed it in advance, and the words [lines] came naturally.

Senaha: Yes. You would remember that. Then you would think up better, more polished lines for yourself. That’s the sort of theatre it was.

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Kinjo: Paper itself was precious then, so memorization was the only way to go.

Senaha: After the war, there were no clothes, nothing—just burned-out ruins. We would find parachutes thrown away by the Americans and decorate them with *bingata* designs using American paint. When we put those clothes on, they were dry and stiff, and the color would gradually flake off until they were half-bare. We had to make our own wigs, too.

It All Started with Classical Dance: “I Didn’t Know To Be Scared”

Senaha-san, you first took the stage at the age of ten, before the war ended. What was it like entering the theatrical world alongside adults?

Senaha: I never had time to play. I’ve given my whole life to the theatre. I was born in Kumoji, Naha. I had three brothers, and my father died just after I turned three. My youngest brother was still a baby, and my mother had to work with him strapped on her back. I was left with a few different members of my extended family. One of them was my uncle, who was a *koto* teacher. He had no

children, so he said, “I’ll take her and teach her *koto*.” Alongside *koto*, he also taught classical dance. I said, “I’m not playing *koto*, I’m going to dance!” Once I started learning, I was taken to perform at family celebrations and events like that. “You’re really talented, you can do anything,” people would say. I was in constant demand.

That was very early to start learning *koto* and classical dance.

Senaha: There was a theatre called the Taisho Theatre, run by a man called Takayasu Koshun. One of its actors, Oyadomari Gensei, who was in the same grade at school as my older brother, was looking for child actors. One day he came to meet me at school and took me to the Taisho Theatre. I’d never seen a play, so I had no idea why he was taking me to such a big place. He said, “You’re learning classical dance?” I said, “Yes.” “Alright, from now on you’ll dance on this stage.” “Okay.” I didn’t know to be scared. I went right out onstage. That was where it started. I looked forward so much to going out in front of people. Everyone adored me. Then the war started, and my *koto*-teaching uncle said he was going to the mainland. He was going to take me, too, but my mother said, “No, I’d miss her.” He went alone, and then died in the Konan Maru⁽²⁾ incident. If I’d gone with him...

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A Vision of Femininity That Differs From Today’s

Senaha-san, when live theatre restarted shortly after the war, you were chosen to play Chiraa, the heroine of *Peony in the Deep Mountains* (*Okuyama no botan*).

⁽³⁾ The idea of femininity in *Uchinaa shibai*, as also seen in characters from *The Musician’s Love* (*Ongakuka no koi*),⁽⁴⁾ like the *juri* (a courtesan of Tsuji⁽⁵⁾), is that they are vibrant even if their social position is low. Where does the appeal of characters like this lie?

Kinjo: That’s a difficult one. First, the position of women was different from how it is today. The male chauvinism of the times still lingers in these plays. As a result, when modern audiences watch *Uchinaa shibai*, they see a lot of men who seem like terrible people. But they weren’t seen as terrible back then. In *The*

Senaha (right) in *Peony of the Deep Mountains* (1966)
(Photo provided by Senaha Takako)



Senaha's 1954 Actors' Association membership card (Photo provided by Senaha Takako)



Kinjo Shinji in *Peony of the Deep Mountains* (2015) (Photo provided by National Theatre Okinawa)

Musician's Love, the male protagonist spends months with the *juri*, even though he has a wife. But his wife and the *juri* aren't on bad terms, the man doesn't apologize, and in the end everyone lives together.

Senaha: People with high social standing couldn't do that. One official who had with a *juri* lost his job at Shuri Castle and died. But for the common folk, this was seen as unremarkable, and there are many plays like this. Nowadays, of course, audiences are likely to say, "What?!"

Kinjo: Then and now, women have always made up a majority of the audience for *Uchinaa shibai*. I imagine that the works produced were ones that women could

empathize with. People in similar situations could cry along with the characters.

Senaha: After the war, there were many real-life dramas as people who had been torn apart by war found each other again. Lovers reuniting, saying "You're alive!" As I often say to Shinji, we should make new plays. Wouldn't it be good to have

plays about how the world has changed?

Kinjo: They would still be *Uchinaa shibai*, so they would have been performed in *Uchinaaguchi*, with Okinawan costumes, following the form's conventions. With those ground rules, what kind of stories would we see?

Senaha: In one postwar play I loved called *A Foreign Mother* (*Ikoku no haha*), there's one scene set in China where a parent and child part in tears. It has dialogue in Chinese. I didn't realize you could make a play like that. But it was only staged once. The script has been lost too.

Kinjo: I never heard of that before. Was it written by Ogimi Kotaro? If it was after the fifties or sixties, there might be some footage.

Scripts with More Than One Right Answer

Tell us about the scripts for *Uchinaa shibai*.

Kinjo: By the 1990s, my generation was already performing from scripts, but they were very rough. There would be stage directions like, "Say something like this," and the actors were free to come up with the rest. So every actor came up with their own words. The problem was, if the generation after us tried to perform from those scripts, they probably couldn't do it. So, now I make more detailed scripts, but I always make sure to remind the actors that there's more than one "right answer."



Scene from *The Musician's Love* (Photo provided by Ginoza Village Cultural Center Garaman Hall)

For example, I might change dialogue based on who is playing a certain role: *That actor could say these lines, but this one couldn't memorize the whole thing, so I'll pare it back to the bare minimum...* In the case of musical theatre, the songs are set, so you can't expand them, but as for the dialogue, I might think, *This actor can speak briskly and keep the pace up*, and add more lines. So the script is different for every production. Even for the same play, if the actors change, the approach changes too.

Senaha: That's what makes theatre interesting.

Kinjo: *If Senaha-sensei is performing this role, then she'll move like this*—that kind of thought does go into it.

Senaha: People today don't speak Okinawan as much, so it's like just reading a book, and the lines feel too fast. I'd like to see more emotion. When I see a young actor doing a good job, I think, *There, we did it, we did it*, as if it were my own accomplishment. I'm already ninety, and I've spent my life in theatre, so everyone keeping theatre alive is dear to me.

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Kinjo: The lines audiences laughed at fifty years ago don't get laughs any more. You have to change how things are said, use different words—you don't know where people will laugh until you try.

Senaha: Laughter and tears, one after another—that's theatre. When I was still playing child roles, I had a scene where my character goes to visit her long-lost mother with a baby on her back, but is driven away. It reminded me of my own situation, and it made me so sad that I started bawling—runny nose and everything. I couldn't even speak. Soon I had the audience crying as well. When I got backstage, my older colleagues scolded me. "How can you speak your lines if you're crying? Make the audience cry by *pretending* to weep—that's what being an actor is."

Playing the Upside-Down Ghost

Senaha-san, you're also known for your work in supernatural and horror plays.

I understand that you appeared in many ghost stories at the Okiei Theatre.⁽⁶⁾ Did you make the audience very scared?

Senaha: I wasn't scared, though
[laughs].

Kinjo: But I gather the audience was terrified. Back then, Senaha-sensei usually played the lead role. There are many horror plays in the *Uchinaa shibai* rep-



ertoire, like *The Upside-Down Ghost (Sakadachi yuri)*.⁽⁷⁾ This play features a headless mannequin turned upside down, and the actor pops their head up from below. The “upside-down ghost” is said to have appeared in Makan Road (Makanmichi), Naha.

Senaha: Everyone was too scared to do it, but I said, “I’m not scared—it looks like fun. I’ll do it.” I thought about ways to scare people.

Kinjo: The women that become ghosts either die or are killed in the first half of the play. I believe that you have strong feelings about how your characters are killed, how they die. You have fun with it, don’t you?

Senaha: Ahaha! I’ve played every kind of role, male and female. The troupes were small—ten people would be a lot—so I had to play several roles.

The Pleasure of Discovering How Okinawa Used to Be

Kinjo: *Uchinaa shibai* are closer to reality than *kumi odori*. With *kumi odori*, the gestures are exaggerated versions of the real thing. They’re formalized. For example, if a character draws their sword in the play, you might think they would simply pull it out, but it’s more complicated than that—first, they hold the sword like so, and then they pointedly adopt a stance like so. When performing *Uchinaa*

shibai, I was fascinated by the feeling of approaching people living in various earlier ages. To wash our hands today, we turn on the tap to make the water run, but in an *Uchinaa shibai*, there are no scenes like that. You mime getting water from a well and putting it into a tub. Today, if we peel a sweet potato, we bring tissues, but at the time they put them in a *baaki* [bamboo colander]. As an actor, you are uncovering an older Okinawa that still lingers on in the performing arts.

Rising Interest in *Uchinaaguchi*

Senaha: What I have high hopes for now is TV shows that teach *Uchinaaguchi*. If we teach *Uchinaaguchi* to children, I think more people might come to see plays.

Kinjo: Okinawa has seen a recent movement to use *Uchinaaguchi* more widely. At school, my children even express thanks for their lunch in *Uchinaaguchi*.

Senaha: My grandchildren say to me, “What’s that? What are you saying, Grandma?” I tell them what it means and recommend that they watch some plays.

Kinjo: Our recent performances have all been subtitled. I think we are gradually seeing more audience members from younger generations, or outside Okinawa prefecture. As part of my job, when the theatre stages a production, I stand in the lobby greeting patrons beforehand and saying goodbye as they leave, and they often say things like, “The subtitles said such-and-such, but what did that character say in *Uchinaaguchi*?” or “About that dialogue in that scene—can you tell me how to pronounce those words properly, what they mean?” It’s wonderful to see people take an interest in language.

What is the National Theatre Okinawa doing to raise awareness of *Uchinaa shibai*?

Kinjo: Alongside our regular productions, since 2015 we have held an “*Uchinaa shibai* appreciation workshop” once a year. It’s very inexpensive and meant for beginners. We try to include plays that even children can enjoy, so in September 2022 we did *The Tale of King Kuroshima* (*Kuroshima-o monogatari*). In the past,

we have done *Bakeneko* (*Kaibyoden: Bakeneko—Yamada Nundunchi*), and *Tale of the Irises* (*Shobu nu yurechi*). We also do one play per year aimed at audiences already familiar with the genre. In March 2023, we will stage a historical play called *Prince Tamagawa* (*Tamagawa Oji*⁽⁸⁾) (Playwright: Taira Ryosho, Director: Kinjo Shinji). The dialogue in a historical play is difficult and quite different from everyday conversation. When we stage a difficult play, we make sure the first half of the program is something light and easy. *Uchinaa shibai* are generally presented as double features. We combine historical plays with light farces or cheerful dances. For our March production, we'll be staging Iraha Inkichi's musical farce *Feelings* (*Umui*) (Director: Kinjo Shinji), with Senaha-sensei appearing in it.



Tale of the Irises at the *Uchinaa shibai* appreciation workshop (2017) (Photo provided by National Theatre Okinawa)

Young Performers Onstage

How well are the younger generation mastering difficult songs or dances for on-stage performance?

Senaha: Many *Uchinaa shibai* are musical plays, with songs as well as dialogue. The actors study how to project, how to tighten their voices, how to make their voice cry in tragedies. You have to know how to sing, speak, and move, which is challenging. People who do classical dance carry themselves completely differently, too. You can tell right away. They're more supple in how they stand and move. Even when they stand in one place, they're completely relaxed. People



Performance of *Yakushido*, one of the Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre (Photo provided by *Uchinaa Shibai* Research Society)

without that classical dance background are stiffer.

Kinjo: I tell younger actors over and over again, the first step is to memorize the Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre.⁽⁹⁾ Not just the male parts but also the female parts, even if you're a male actor. I think those four works are the foundation of this theatre. And once you master one play, you'll find the same songs used in others, so they are useful in many places. Sometimes young actors get together and say, for example, "Today let's do *Yakushido*," draw straws to divide up roles, and practice the plays with each other. They only look at the script when they get lost.

I think that younger actors should play the biggest roles they can while they're still young. While in your twenties, you shouldn't be satisfied with reaching your personal "100%"—you should play roles a little beyond your level. That will take you to the next step. Today's young actors will have to teach the generation that follows them, so we need to teach them how to teach others.

Senaha-san, you have been performing in *A Musician's Love* for decades, as the *juri* for a long time and in recent years as Paapaa (the old dame of Tsuji). What is it like working alongside young people?

Senaha: I often tell young actors about their part and how they should perform it. For example, a *juri* is a woman who works in a place where men come to enjoy themselves, so she understands how men feel. The thing about men is—I say this with a man right here, but anyway [laughs]—they’re looking for a person, a place that will care for them and make them feel safe. I’ve been around a long time, so I understand this role. The *juri* is an expert in giving men that feeling of being cared for, of validating their feelings, so you have to play her completely different from the protagonist’s wife. There needs to be a distinction between professionals and amateurs.

What about Paapaa?

Senaha: Paapaa is part of the oldest generation of *juri*, so she knows everything. She can size men up. She’ll say, “Don’t let this one go.” I watched my own mentors play her way back when.

Kinjo: Paapaa must be played with a sense of the clownish.

Senaha: Personally, I am a bit of an *uumaku* (rascal), so I have more fun playing characters that make other characters cry, rather than characters that do the crying. When I played a ghost, I would tell the person playing

Senaha in *Aka in Tumai* (*Tumai Aka*), one of the Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre. At right is Iraha Sayuki. (Photo provided by Senaha Takako)



Performance of *Hando-gwa of Iejima*, one of the Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre (Photo provided by Uchinaa Shibai Research Society)

the role of my killer, “Pretend to lift me up,” and then onstage I would leap up suddenly, which startled them as well as the audience. When I had a role where my *kamoji* (hairpiece) was cut, I would make that mechanism myself.

Kinjo: The sword strikes the *kamoji* and it looks like the hair flies away. And you made the mechanism yourself.

Senaha: It looked like it was really cut. That’s the most enjoyable thing, the most interesting part. Whatever role I play, I enjoy it. Even at home, I’ll be thinking my hardest about how to play a certain role next time, and my grandchildren will say, “What are you doing, Grandma?” I tell young actors, “You’re an actor, so take any role you can. You mustn’t turn roles down because you’re afraid.”

Kinjo: I remember that when I visited you at home, you were writing out dialogue and memorizing it.

Senaha: Yes. I’m crazy about theatre [*laughs*].

(Reporting/writing: Kakihana Rieko)

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1. *Kumi odori* is a form of music and dance theatre created by Tamagusuku Chokun, an official of the Ryukyu Kingdom with responsibility for dance performances, to entertain emissaries from the Chinese emperor. Today it is a National Intangible Cultural Property. In 2010, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage register.
 2. The Konan Maru was a passenger ship offering regular service between Osaka and Naha. In 1943, it was torpedoed by a US Navy submarine, killing 650 passengers, including civilians.
 3. *Peony in the Deep Mountains* (1914; Author: Iraha Inkichi) is one of the “Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre.” It is about the love between Sandee, the son of a noble family, and Chiraa, a commoner. They have a son together, and Chiraa goes into hiding so that her humble birth will not prevent his advancement. Twenty years later, her now-adult son comes to visit her.
 4. *The Musician’s Love* is a historical work of Ryukyu lyric theatre by Iraha Inkichi.
 5. Placename in Naha. In the licensed quarters established here in 1672, Chinese emissaries and Ryukyu nobles were entertained by *juri*, women skilled in the performing arts. There were around 180 such establishments in Tsuji in the 1930s, but on October 10, 1944, the neighborhood was burned out by aerial bombing.

6. In 1965, the Okiei film theatre was renovated with a revolving stage and reopened as the Okiei Theatre. Its all-star performances featuring popular *Uchinaa shibai* actors attracted many actors.
7. A horror play by Tokashiki Shuryo, first staged around 1914. In the play, a beautiful woman sees that her ailing husband is tortured by jealousy of her, and cuts her own nose off to prove her love. However, the husband falls out of love with her, kills her, and drives stakes through her legs. She returns as an “upside-down ghost” to seek revenge.
8. A historical play by Taira Ryosho (1893–1979). It depicts the turbulent life of Prince Tamagawa, sixth son of King Sho Ko, and the suffering of the Ryukyuan people under the resulting political turmoil.
9. The “Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre” are said to be *Peony in the Deep Mountains*, *Hando-gwa of Iejima* (*Iejima Hando-gwa*; 1924; Author: Majikina Yuko); *Aka in Tumai* (*Tumai Aka*; 1900; Author: Ganeko Yaei); and *Yakushido Temple* (*Yakushido*; 1912; Author: Iraha Inkichi).

Kinjo, Shinji

Born 1987 in Tomigusuku. In 1991, began studying under Tanida Yoshiko and Kinjo Mieko of the Tamagusuku Ryu Senju Kai dance academy. In 2007, graduated from the first incoming *kumi odori* class at the National Theatre Okinawa. In 2008, while studying at Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts (Major: Ryukyu Performing Arts), won the highest prize in the Ryukyu Classical Dance category at the Ryukyu Classical Performing Arts Competition. Teacher in the Tamagusuku Ryu Senju Kai. Holder of the Prefectural Intangible Cultural Heritage “Ryukyu Lyric Drama.” Member of the *Uchinaa Shibai* Research Association. In April 2022, accepted post as artistic director of the National Theatre Okinawa.

Senaha, Takako

Born 1933 in Naha. In 1943, debuted as a child actor with the Shinraku-za troupe at the Taisho Theatre. Shortly after the end of World War II, entered the Matsu theatre troupe, transferring to the Ume troupe after around a year. Worked with the Okinawa-za and Tokiwa-za troupes before founding the Mitsuwa-za troupe in 1954 with her husband Matsumora Koei. Acted in the Okiei Theatre, which started in 1965, from its third production, *Aka in Tumai* (*Tumai Aka*). Spent the next twelve years until the Okiei Theatre was disbanded as one of its leading actors. Holder of the Prefectural Intangible Cultural Heritage “Ryukyu Lyric Drama.” In 1984, received the Encouragement Prize in the Theatre category of the Okinawa Times Arts Awards. In 2005, won the Grand Prize in the same category. In 2013, honored by Okinawa Prefecture as a Person of Cultural Merit. Still performing on many stages.

(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)

〈Column〉

The Remarkable Postwar Success of the All-Female Otohime Theatre Troupe

Kakihana Rieko (Editor of the Theatre Yearbook)

December 25, 1945. *Uchinaa shibai* stars languishing in internment camps across the burned-out wastelands of Okinawa are assembled at Ishikawa (modern-day Uruma) to put on a Christmas show in conjunction with a US military camp. The show is one of the cultural initiatives undertaken by the occupying US forces. Staged on sloping ground amid the ruins of Iha Castle, the open-air performances overflow with the energy of an *Uchinaa shibai* revival, and the audience responds with great enthusiasm.

One of the groups performing in the show was an all-female dance troupe led by Uema Ikuko (1906–1991). The young dancers' vibrant performance of the *zo-odori* "Tanchame" won thunderous applause. That moment was the birth of what would become the most popular theatrical company in Okinawa, with Uema as its first leader: the Otohime Theatre Troupe.

The Otohime Theatre Troupe was formally founded in April 1949. With the approval of the Okinawa Civilian Administration under US military rule, the

troupe's 21 founding members staged a production of *Aka in Tumai* (*Tumai Aka*), one of the Four Great Works of Ryukyu Lyric Theatre. They entertained internees across Okinawa, performing in hastily constructed open-air theatres for audiences of villagers who had been swept up in the



Hazama Yoshiko, "Okinawa's Danjuro," performing in *Aka in Tumai*.
From Hazama Yoshiko, *The Eternal Tarugani* (*Eien no Tarugani*)

First Theatre Contest pamphlet.
(Photo provided by Senaha Takako)

maelstrom of war. By night, they bedded down in the same theatres. The troupe lived together all year round, working together from morning till night to create their plays. Some audience members are said to have paid the entry fee in vegetables.

Determined to satisfy the huge demand for theatre they had discovered, the Otohime Theatre Troupe developed a revolutionary system in which every member of the troupe both acted and wrote. Within a year of its founding, the troupe had a repertoire of 50 plays, from lyric theatre and period pieces to contemporary works. At the height of the troupe's popularity in the 1960s, its repertoire exceeded 160 plays performed by more than 50 actors as the troupe visited every one of the 120 theatres scattered across Okinawa.

In 1951, less than two years after its founding, the Otohime Theatre Troupe was chosen from among the 27 theatre companies officially recognized by the Okinawa Civilian Administration to perform in Hawai'i. In 1955, the troupe won first place at the Ryukyu Shimpō's first Theatre Contest¹ with *Palace of the Princess (Uminaibi Udun)*, a work based on Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*. In the contest's third year, the troupe won first place again with the fantasy play *The Tale of*



1956 production of *The Tale of Tsukishiro*. At right is Hazama Yoshiko, playing the Spider Spirit. From Hazama Yoshiko, *The Eternal Tarugani*



Writer Kawabata Yasunari visited the Otohime Theatre Troupe at the Ishikawa Theatre in June 1958. At far right in the front row is Uema Ikuko, first leader of the troupe. (Photo provided by Okinawa Prefectural Archives)



Theatre Company Unai, *The Tale of Tsukishiro* (2009). Company leader Nakasone Ritsuko is at far left in the photo on the right. (Photo provided by Theatre Company Unai)

Tsukishiro (*Tsukishiro Monogatari*),² written by Kaneshiro Michiko based on Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. The star of this production was Hazama Yoshiko (1928–2001), who succeeded Uema as the troupe's second leader and was praised as "Okinawa's Danjuro."

The Otohime Theatre Troupe's reputation as one of the finest performing companies in Okinawa soon reached the Japanese mainland, and many cultural figures visited to see the troupe perform. Among those who praised Otohime's performances were writers Kawabata Yasunari and Inoue Yasushi and playwright Uchimura Naoya (third chair of the Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute).

In the 1960s, with the spread of TV broadcasts, demand for *Uchinaa shibai* fell, and troupes began to disband. Apart from a small hiatus, the Otohime Theatre Troupe alone survived alongside its fans. Today, Theatre Company Unai (*unai* means "sisters"), founded in 2004, continues to uphold Otohime's tradition of all-female dramatic performances.

The current leader of Unai is Nakasone Ritsuko,³ who left her job at a Naha department store to join Otohime nearly sixty years ago. Past eighty years of age, she continues to perform regularly. Regarding the accepting, female-only atmosphere that Otohime cultivated, Nakasone says, "You can speak your mind freely,

without feeling out of place. Male actors would probably hold back when dealing with married women, but speaking woman-to-woman lets us get right to the heart of the matter. Even performing the same play, our productions are completely different than those of companies with male actors. Years ago, a man watching our rehearsals commented that he envied women, because we can perform with all our heart.”

Today, Nakasone also teaches theatrical skills as a part-time lecturer at Okinawa Prefectural University of Arts. The precious lives and passion for theatre preserved by women against all odds through the horrific of Battle of Okinawa flowered anew in the lineage from Otohime to Unai and are now being inherited by a new generation of young performers.

1. The pamphlet for the first Theatre Contest included a welcome message from the Ryukyu Shimpō’s chief editor at the time, Oyadamari Masahiro, explaining that the contest was being held “with the same intention of raising the level of the international theatrical arts as that promoted by the Ministry of Culture’s Arts Festival and the International Theatre Institute.”
2. After winning a prize at the contest, *The Tale of Tsukishiro* was made into a color film directed by former Shochiku movie star Obinata Den and screened at the Naha Theatre from New Year’s Day, 1959. *Yanbaru Highway* (*Yanbaru Kaido*) is another cinematic adaptation of the Otohime Theatre Troupe’s work.
3. Nakasone Ritsuko was born in 1941 in Motobucho. Attending a performance of the Otohime Theatre Company’s *Palace of the Princess* as a junior high school student, she was enthralled by the elegance of the singing voices, the costumes, and the princess’s *kanpu* (hairstyle). In 1964, she joined the



Green room in the early 1960s.
(Photo provided by Theatre Company Unai)

troupe herself. In 2001, when the Otohime Theatre Troupe disbanded after the death of second leader Hazama Yoshiko, Nakasone moved quickly to bring the former members together again, staging new productions the following year, and then in 2004 founding Theatre Company Unai. She has been the head of of Theatre Company Unai since 2009. She is also head of the Tamagusuku-ryu Otohime Ritsuju no Kai. In 2011, she received an award in the Theatre category of the Okinawa Times Art Awards for her contributions to the theatrical arts. She is a holder of the Prefectural Intangible Cultural Property “Ryukyu Lyric Theatre.”

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(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)