Saitama Traditional Performing Arts Festival:
The World of Washinomiya Saibara Kagura and Kumagaya Kabuki

Date and Time  January 17, 2016 (Sunday); 13:00~16:00 (venue opens at 12:30)
Venue             Saitama Arts Theater Main Theater
Performers        Kawakado Shishimai Association (shishimai dance troupe, Moroyama Town)
                   Kumagaya Kabuki Association (kabuki troupe, Kumagaya City)
                   Washinomiya Saibara Kagura Association (kagura troupe, Kuki City)

Program

Opening Performance: Shishimai (Lion Dance) (Performers: Kawakado Shishimai Association, Moroyama)

The shishimai, or lion dance, is a traditional dance performed to pray for tranquility and drive away evil spirits. Performers wear masks depicting lions and other animals.

The Kawakado Shishimai

The Kawakado Shishimai is a type of lion dance performed at Hachiman Shrine in the Kawakado area of Moroyama Town. Elementary school students dance the parts of the red female lion, the purple androgynous lion, and the light blue-green male lion.

Second Performance: Kabuki (Performers: Kumagaya Kabuki Association, Kumagaya)

The Kumagaya Kabuki Association

The Kumagaya Kabuki Association was established in 1996 with the support of the Ogano Kabuki Association by residents who wanted to perform kabuki with Kumagaya connections.

The Kumagai Jin'ya Kabuki Scene

(Background Summary) The setting is Kumagai Jirō Naozane's encampment near Suma-no-Ura just after the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani during the Genpei War. The stonecutter Midaroku has been discussing the gravestone he built for Taira no Atsumori with Kajiwara no Kagetaka, who serves the Minamoto clan, rivals of the Taira.

Naozane's wife Sagami (mother of Kojirō) and Fuji-no-Kata (mother of Atsumori), worried for their children, arrive at Naozane's encampment. Naozane, who has trudged back to camp with a heavy heart, tells his wife Sagami that he has killed Atsumori in battle. Fuji-no-Kata, hearing that her son has been killed, flies into the room and cries, "I will avenge my son!" She attempts to stab Naozane, but he successfully stops her.

(Summary of Today's Performance Begins Here)

Naozane's lord, Minamoto no Yoshitsune, appears to inspect Atsumori's severed head. The head, however, does not belong to Atsumori, but to Kojirō, Naozane's own son.

Before the recent battle of Ichi-no-Tani, Yoshitsune's servant Benkei had posted a sign by the road on his lord's behalf. The sign read: "The one who cuts off a branch must also cut off a finger." Naozane understood the double meaning of this message: Yoshitsune wanted to save Atsumori, who, though a member of the enemy Taira clan, possesses royal blood. Naozane also remembered that Fuji-no-Kata, Atsumori's mother, was the one who enabled his wife Sagami to escape her former employer (the Taira clan) to marry

Scene from Kumagai Jin'ya
Yamaguchi Kiyofumi/Ogano Kabuki Association
Naozane (employed by the rival Minamoto) years ago. Naozane decided that he would sacrifice his own son Kojirō, who was about the same age as Atsumori, to save Atsumori’s life.

Though Sagami, wracked with grief, and the shocked Fuji-no-Kata attempt to examine the severed head more closely, Naozane holds them back.

Suddenly, Kajiwara no Kagetaka appears. He has heard that Kojirō took Atsumori’s place and intends to inform the leaders of the Minamoto clan, but he is killed by Midaroku, who has thrown a stone chisel at him from the shadows.

Yoshitsune realizes that Midaroku is actually Taira no Munekiyo, the man who saved him and his mother Tokiwa when he was three years old. To repay his debt, he gives Midaroku an armor chest with Atsumori, alive and hiding, inside.

Naozane resigns from Yoshitsune’s service and, understanding the transience of this world, becomes a Buddhist monk. He looks back on the brief sixteen years of Kojirō’s life, then disappears, leaving only the words, “Those sixteen years, so long ago...they passed like a dream.... Ah, a dream!” behind.

(Additional Explanation) Naozane was a warrior who was active in the area now known as Kumagaya City in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. In the Tales of the Heike, Naozane actually kills Atsumori during the Battle of Ichi-no-Tani, but he mourns Atsumori, who was only sixteen years old (the same age as his own son), and, understanding the transience of life, becomes a Buddhist monk. In kabuki, however, the story changes: Atsumori is secretly the illegitimate son of the former Emperor Go-Shirakawa and Fuji-no-Kata, and Yoshitsune, knowing this, subtly orders Naozane to save Atsumori via a roadside sign.

Final Performance: Kagura (Performers: Washinomiya Saibara Kagura Association, Kuki)

Kagura is a traditional rite performed to welcome Shinto gods during festivals. Most kagura performances feature dancing and singing but no dialogue.

Washinomiya Saibara Kagura

Washinomiya Saibara Kagura is considered to be the origin of Kantō Kagura. Washinomiya Saibara Kagura has been passed down at Washinomiya Shrine, believed to be the oldest shrine in the Kantō region of Japan, and was the first kagura to be designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Heritage by the Japanese national government in 1976.

◆ Batsujo Shōjo-shaku Ōnusa no Mai (Common Name: Misogi)

This kagura is performed by two female dancers, each holding a ladle and a folding fan. This performance symbolizes the legend of Izanagi-no-mikoto, who cleansed himself in the river after he returned from the underworld pursuing Izanami-no-mikoto. The dancers complete a purification ceremony, their movements representing throwing water on the body with the ladles. The kagura is intended to cleanse the mind and body and to repent mistakes.

◆ Chin-aku-jin Hakkyū Utsubo no Mai (Common Name: Chin-ku-jin)

This kagura features two dancers in masks, representing the Minister of the Left and the Minister of the Right, each holding a bow, arrows, and bells. This performance symbolizes the legend of Amaterasu-no-Omikami, the sun goddess, who sensed the bad intentions of Susanoo-no-mikoto, a god who came to visit her; she dressed in armor and set out to meet him armed with many arrows. This kagura is a majestic dance that is intended to defeat evil spirits and suppress all manner of curses. This kagura was also performed during epidemics.