



The Japan Foundation proudly invites a Shishi-Odori (Deer Dance) dance troupe to perform for the first time in the UK on the occasion of the forthcoming Mayor's Thames Festival, one of the biggest outdoor arts festivals in London. This year's Thames Festival is to be held as the final celebration of the London 2012 Olympic Games on the 8 and 9 September.

This year's festival features performances by the Oshu Kanatsu-Ryu Shishi-Odori Dance Troupe, one of the major Shishi-Odori dance styles. Shishi-Odori is a popular performing art handed down from generation to generation in the Tohoku region of Japan and is performed as a ritual on different occasions. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 2011, Shishi-Odori has been performed on numerous occasions at disaster-hit areas to offer prayers for the victims, playing a key role in bringing the people of the region together.

Through their performances at Thameside venues, the Shishi-Odori dancers will show their dynamic and sophisticated performances while expressing wishes for the repose of those who lost their lives in last year's disaster and for the recovery of the affected areas. They will also be taking part in the Night Carnival on the last day of the festival.

Features and background information

◆ Shishi-Odori (Deer Dance) is a folk performing art tradition handed down through generations in Iwate and Miyagi Prefecture, areas in Tohoku devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake. The performance is popular all over Japan for its dynamic dance and characteristic appearance, with dancers wearing headgears called *Shishigashira* (deer mask), two long *Sasara* sticks on their backs and a cloth draped around their bodies. The total weight of the outfits, including drums and *Sasara*, is said to be 15 to 20 kilograms. The performance is popular for its impressive dance full of intensity and the dancers' beating of the *Sasara* against the ground is also a popular feature.

◆ Participating in this UK visit include the leader and two dancers from the Kanatsu-Ryu (Kanatsu style) Urahama Shishi-Odori troupe, based in Ofunato City, an area where many local communities were washed away in the tsunami. Although the Shishi-Odori gear and costumes were safe, as they were luckily stored in the leader's house located on higher ground, the masks and gear for a sword dance, another performing arts tradition the group carries on with the Shishi-Odori, were lost in the tsunami. With support from various sources, efforts are currently being made to restore the gear and costumes.

The leader says, "The Shishi-Odori, as well as other folk performing arts, gives us the strong power to get over all of the sorrow and move forward. That's why we continue to dance at this difficult time."

◆ Shishi-Odori is originally a performing art dedicated to shrine and Buddhist rituals in the Tohoku region, and people who lived in those areas, mostly farmers, handed the tradition down locally. Most of the current members are local company employees or local government employees, and their practicing hours are limited to evenings after work and holidays. The dancers are mainly in their 30s and 40s and some have been dancing since they were young, while others were drawn to the art after they turned 30. The dance was originally performed only by men, but today there are also groups that consist of female dancers.

◆ The highlight of Kanatsu-Ryu is in its heroic dances, which show both sophistication and the roughness of lions. The Kanatsu-Ryu is known for its accuracy of acts that have been handed down through generations, and also for its respect for rituals, including introductory or succession rituals.

Performance Schedule

Thames Festival

Dates: Saturday, 8 September & Sunday, 9 September 2012

Venue: Various around London South Bank

<http://thamesfestival.org/events/info/shishi-odori-dancers>

Presented by The Japan Foundation, supported by The Great Britain Sasakawa Foundation with thanks to the Embassy of Japan in the UK.

Prior to the Thames Festival, the troupe will also perform outside London at museums in Oxford and Maidstone.

Oxford Performance

Date: Thursday, 6 September 2012, 13.00 – 13.45
Venue: The Ashmolean Museum of Art & Archaeology, University of Oxford
Website: <http://www.ashmolean.org/events/SpecialEvents/?id=148/>
Presented by The Japan Foundation

Maidstone Performance

Date: Friday, 7 September 2012, 13.00 – 13.45
Venue: Maidstone Museum, Kent
Website: <http://www.museum.maidstone.gov.uk/news/174/>
Presented by The Japan Foundation



Shishi-Odori (Deer Dance)

Shishi-Odori is a popular folk performing art in the Tohoku (northeast) region of Japan. Though varied in styles and forms, the main feature of the dance is the dancer's mask called *Shishi-Gashira* (deer mask), representing an imaginary creature as a messenger of God. Two types of Shishi-Odori can be found in that

region; in the first type, each dancer is also a musician, at the same time holding a drum hung at the waist and carrying two long bamboo sticks called *Sasara* on their back. In the other type, the dancers wear a wide drape and dance to music played by side musicians.

Both types of Shishi-Odori are performed as rituals on different occasions, such as a memorial service for ancestral spirits or in order to purify evil spirits, or sometimes in expression of gratitude for an abundant harvest. Although there are many different theories on the origin of Shishi-Odori, each shows a strong connection between people who lived in that region and the nature around them.

Kanatsu-Ryu Shishi-Odori (Kanatsu Style Deer Dance)

The Kanatsu-Ryu (Kanatsu Style) is said to have originated during the Edo Period (1603-1867), when the Shishi-Odori was passed on from Miyagi Prefecture to residents of the city of Esashi (now Oshu City), and to this day has been handed down through generations as a religious performing art.

Although numerous dance troupes have formed and disbanded over the years, the Kanatsu-Ryu has long maintained its dynamic and sophisticated performance and remains one of the leading Shishi-Odori styles. Kanatsu-Ryu troupes, beginning with Kanatsu-Ryu Yanagawa Shishi-Odori (Yanagawa Deer Dance Troupe), which is a designated intangible folk cultural asset of Iwate Prefecture, have presented their dance at various places in Japan, as well as overseas countries such as the United States, Russia and Bulgaria. The performers invited to the UK are comprised of members of the Yanagawa, Ide, Karuishi, Urahama and Matsuyama dance troupes which represent this tradition, deriving from Oshu and Ofunato cities in Iwate, and Osaki city in Miyagi.

About The Japan Foundation

The Japan Foundation is Japan's public institution dedicated to sharing Japanese culture and language with people throughout the world. By presenting diverse aspects of Japanese culture, we create platforms of communication and understanding between the peoples of the world and Japan.

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