

Sachiyo Ito & Co. brings classical dance to Japanese Festival



Japanese classical dance expresses emotion through gestures.

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The Japanese Festival isn't all drummers, vendors, origami and anime. This year, it will also feature Sachiyo Ito & Company, a troupe specializing in Japanese classical dance, in five performances over three days.

Ito, born in Tokyo and based in New York, came to this country in 1972. She has worked as an artist, choreographer and teacher ever since, bringing a greater understanding of Asian dance forms to Western audiences for more than 40 years, performing everywhere from New York's Lincoln Center to Alaska — and, over the years, at the Japanese Festival.

Ito and five of her colleagues will perform three 19th century Kabuki dances, one Okinawan court dance (closer in style to Chinese than to classical Japanese) and two pieces that Ito choreographed in the Japanese classical style.

Kabuki theater was actually invented by a woman, Izumo no Okuni, a remarkable talent and great beauty, in 1603. She founded an all-female troupe and quickly gained competition from other groups. As has so often been the case with theater over the centuries, though, Kabuki soon became associated with immorality. In 1629, the ruling military government, the Tokugawa shogunate, banned women's participation in what had very quickly become a popular art form.

"It was sensational theater, like a dance revue with a short skit," Ito says. "The dance has been the essence of dancing and the essence of Kabuki since the early 17th century. More and more dances have been created. Even the acting, even the fighting, is a dance in Kabuki. The dance developed together with the drama. It is storytelling, gestures to help tell a story."

The oldest dance still preserved dates from the late 1600s.

After the 1920s, Ito says, "Women began to perform (Kabuki) publicly, professionally, in the concert halls. Much of our repertoire comes from 19th century Kabuki dances, but there are many (newer) dances that choreographers, both men and women, have created based on Kabuki styles. Today we even use western music sometimes, such as Beethoven."

Ito decided to include Okinawan dance in the program after a recent visit to the University of Missouri-Columbia. Meeting members of the audience, "I

realized there were many Okinawan people in St. Louis and that we should do something for them,” she says. “We are bringing a really big hat for (the dance), and hoping we can bring it into the plane. Sometimes we have trouble with that.”

Okinawa, part of an archipelago south of mainland Japan, is located between China and Japan and was influenced by both cultures over many centuries. Dance and opera were first presented there for Chinese emissaries beginning in the 1790s, Ito says. Okinawan dance is influenced by Noh theater, a predecessor to Kabuki that developed in the 14th century.

“Dance is a mirror of a culture,” Ito says. In Okinawan dance, “You see the costumes, how different the walk is, the stance. Okinawan makeup is closer to Chinese; it’s more pink. Japanese makeup is white. The music is different; Okinawan music is like Indonesian, more Southeast Asian.”

All of the dances, she says, are feminine; the dancers use their long sleeves and fans in expression. In one, “Wisteria Maiden,” the dancer “is the spirit of the wisteria flower; she drinks wine, gets a little bit drunk, and falls in love with a pine tree. Just enjoy the mood and enjoy the beautiful costumes, just as if you are in the Botanical Garden, enjoying the flowers.”

A narrator will introduce each brief dance to help audiences unfamiliar with the particulars of the art form understand what they’re seeing and hearing. Each performance will last just under an hour.

What Sachiyo Ito & Company at the Japanese Festival • **When** Noon and 5:30 p.m. Saturday; 5:30 p.m. Sunday; 10:30 a.m. and noon Monday • **Where** Shoenberg Theater, Missouri Botanical Garden, 4344 Shaw Boulevard • **How much** Included in festival admission fee • **More info** 314-577-5100; missouribotanicalgarden.org

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