

I am really excited to share with you one of the most popular folktales from Japan, "Little One-Inch". My parents used to read this to me when I was little. My Dad, Melvin Sturz, was stationed in Okinawa, Japan during World War II. He came home speaking fluent Japanese and he brought back a deep love of the Japanese people and culture. I grew up going to Japanese restaurants, sewing kimonos for my dolls, practicing Sumi-e painting and reading Japanese folktales. I hope you enjoy this story as much as I do.

- Lisa Aimee Sturz -

The Story

The story of Little One-Inch is considered to be part of the *otogizōshi*, a group of illustrated Japanese stories from the Middle Ages dealing with worldly concerns like love and marriage, spiritual devotion, martial combat, and the supernatural. Indeed, Little One-Inch has all of these elements and embodies the most common themes in Japanese folk tales.

The first theme is that those who are devout and pray often are blessed with a child. Megumi and Hiroshi visit the Shinto shrine every day and raise a child in their old age. The second theme is that the accomplishments of these children are extraordinary. Little One-Inch survives a dangerous river storm, defeats a giant ogre, and magically grows to normal size. The third theme is that said child grows up to have a good marriage and carries a special family name. Issun-boshi (Little One-Inch) marries an official's daughter and is a recognized samurai.



There are many similar stories in various cultures around the world including the 16th century English folktale, "Tom Thumb", the French "Le Petit Poucet", the German "Der Kleine Däumling", and "Pollicino" from Italy.

The Puppeteer

I have been a professional puppeteer for almost forty years. I studied theatre, art, and mythology in college and then completed an M.A. in Experimental Theatre and an M.F.A. in Puppetry. I have worked with many styles of puppetry in feature film and television, theatrical productions, opera, museums, parades, schools, libraries, and special events. I have built giant forty foot figures and tiny detailed ones. My company, Red Herring Puppets, specializes in "edu-tainment" for family and school audiences. Although I have years of experience, this is the first time I have ever performed a full length solo show. It is one of the hardest things I have ever done. I thank my director, Rebecca Williams, and my husband, Mark Blessington who have both given me much encouragement along the way!

PRODUCTION and PUPPET DESIGN

Toy Theatre is a form of miniature theater dating back to the early 19th century in Europe. They were often paperboard replicas of popular theatrical productions from the opera houses and larger theaters. They were sold as kits containing paper dolls, scenery, and costumes for families to assemble and perform. In the last two decades there has been a resurgence of toy theatre amongst puppeteers and hobbyists who have been using the old techniques to create original works.



I adapted this style for Little One-Inch because it accommodates the detailed scenic elements, scrolling backdrop, and varied locations I envisioned to best tell the story. The size allows me to travel and present the piece as a solo performer. I thought it would be fun to create the story of a miniature person in a miniature theatre,



Marionettes are puppets controlled from above using strings. The name comes from the French word which means “Little Mary” as they were first used in pageant plays within the Church. The ones used in “Little One-Inch” have stuffed cloth heads, jointed wooden bodies, and sewn costumes. Most of them have a central steel rod which moves their head. This adaptation is usually referred to as a “Czech marionette” as it was popularized in the former Czech republic. Similar figures were also popular in Scissily.

I needed to adapt the controls to suit my need for the puppets to be small enough to work in one hand (sometimes two in one hand), yet large enough to be seen in a school or library setting with up to 250 children seated on the floor.

The oni (ogre) is a giant table-top combination rod puppet and marionette made from foam. His limbs are strung together with rope. He has a wooden control rod to open and close his mouth, but he also has a string attached to his right arm that is worked from above.

Cast of Characters

There are fifteen puppets used in my production. Half of them are different versions of the central character - Little One-Inch. As the story develops, I needed puppets that had different attributes. I use a Little One-Inch baby puppet (1), a two year-old chasing a mouse (2), a tiny man (3), travelling in a rice bowl (4), swimming in the river (5), riding on a fish (6), holding a sword (7), and finally a full grown man dressed as a Samurai (8).

The other characters include:

Megumi, his mother, an old woman whose name means blessing and kindness.

Hiroshi, his father, a quirky oldman whose name means generous and tolerant.

Reika, (pronounced LAKE-A), the lovely young daughter of a wealthy Lord. Her name means delicate flower petal.

The Lord, Reika's father, a kind and noble wealthy gentleman.

Servant, a helpful chap who runs the household for the Lord.

Cow, a friendly neighborhood cow.

Oni, a Japanese giant troll

Sumi-e (Japanese Black Ink Painting)



The scrolling backdrop I use in the production is painted with special bamboo brushes and ground ink in the style of Japanese Sumi-e which has its roots in Chinese calligraphy. This 2000 year-old art form is spiritually rooted in Zen Buddhism with an emphasis on concentration, clarity, and simplicity. The aesthetic is based on the beauty of each individual brush stroke. Releasing the ink onto blank paper was also a metaphor for the courageous Samurai gathering focus on the brink of combat.

The brushes are made from the hair of weasel, wolf, leopard, badger, goat and other wild animals. Most artists paint on silk or "rice paper" made from cotton, hemp, mulberry and various other plants. I used Tyvek, an industrial grade paper product that is tear resistant.




Japanese Vocabulary

Arigato gozaimasu- Thank you very much.

bamboo- a woody grass with a hollow stem that grows abundantly in Japan.

edamame beans - young soybeans in a pod.

Douitashimashite- You are most welcome.

geta –  wooden soled Japanese sandals with solid platforms on little stilts, called ha (teeth).

Hanafuda – a card game consisting of 48 cards divided into 12 suits of 4 cards each. Each suit is named after one of the twelve months and each is represented by a flower.



Ikebana- Japanese art of floral arrangement

Issun-boshi – The exact translation is 3.3cm. high samurai. In English, this popular Japanese folktale is known as *Little One-Inch*

kami - sacred spirits which take the form of wind, rain, mountains, trees, and rivers. According to Shinto beliefs, humans become kami after they die and are revered by their families.

kimono – a traditional T-shaped robe often made from silk

konichiwa – How are you?

kotatsu- low, wooden table top covering a charcoal fire , often built into the table itself

koto- a traditional Japanese stringed instrument with thirteen strings and thirteen bridges.

It was introduced to Japan from China in the early 7th century.



Ohio goziamas – Good morning

onigiri- a popular Japanese traveling food made from sticky rice with sesame seeds.

origami- Japanese art of paper folding

Oyasumi nasai- Good night.

oni - gigantic ogre-like creature with sharp claws, wild hair, and two long horns growing from its heads. They are often depicted wearing tiger-skin loincloths and carrying iron clubs.

shamisen – a three strings instrument plucked like a banjo. The body is more like a drum often made of stretched dog skin.

Samurai – a Japanese warrior who follows a strict code of honor.

Sumi-e - Japanese black ink painting

Shinto – an animistic ancient religion practiced in Japan

tanuki- a racoon dog often given magical attributes in Japanese folklore such as shapeshifting and trickery.

tatami -woven grass mats used as floor cover

yen- Japanese currency

youkoso - welcome

