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Spectacular visual feast set on water  
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Mizumachi. **Ishinha** Theatre Company. Torrens Parade Ground.

FOR **Ishinha**, which specialises in outdoor performances, set design and location are as important as the show itself.

Seen for the first time outside Japan, the company reveals a spectacular visual feast with Mizumachi -- The Water City.

A great deal of planning and skill has been put into the building of the open-air temporary theatre, with its centrepiece of a huge pool of water set on stage.

With wonderful lighting and seamless prop changes, the water represents a canal running through an industrial district, murky marshes in the slum of migrant workers, a great river and a huge ocean.

In quite simple terms, the two-hour show, which evolves around the water, is about the drifting lives of poor migrant workers who came to Japan in the early 1900s, especially those from Ryukyu, the southernmost islands of Japan. There are 13 "chapters", the title of each one announced to the elevated audience by a small screen to the side of the stage.

That is the only English aid provided, for this Osaka-based company, naturally, performs in Japanese. While the language barrier is largely overcome by the sheer visual beauty of the spectacle, the key to fully enjoying the show is to read the synopsis of each chapter, either in the program or on the large story boards erected outside the theatre entrance.

There are many highlights, from the swift, stark transformation of the stage into the bustling marsh slum of Water Town and the drunken madness of Nostalgia, to the cute young girls of A Spinning Factory and the serene simplicity of A Battle Ship. But it is the musical use of language (the key to jan jan opera) and the clever mix of drama and movement against a brilliant backdrop that makes this piece so special.

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