

Living with COVID-19 and Supporting Ukraine

Urawa Makoto

Pandemic Hits Small- and Medium-Sized Companies Hard

In 2022 we entered the third year of the pandemic, and we now understand more about the virus. As the vaccine take-up improved and people became more resistant to the virus, fewer and fewer people became gravely ill. Some of the strict COVID-19 restrictions were lifted during the second half of the year. Although COVID-19 cases hit a record high in the summer, people were beginning to embrace life with COVID-19.

The shortening of the quarantine period and the easing of close contacts rules had a huge positive impact on the ballet world and on society as a whole. On the other hand, the number of COVID-19 cases reached a total of twenty-nine million nationwide by the end of the year. It was common for ballet dancers to get COVID-19, but most performances were not cancelled.

The overall number of productions is now getting close to pre-COVID-19 times, especially in metropolitan areas. Producers revised their COVID-19 measures for the second half of the year. More and more companies stopped asking audience members for their names and addresses. But almost all of them continued to ask people to take their temperatures, sanitize their hands and wear masks. Audiences were also requested to leave venues in orderly groups after shows.

Despite the easing of restrictions, organizers still had to pay for the extra staff members and materials necessary for COVID-19 measures. This hit small- and medium-sized companies hard, financially. They had to put up with strict regulations for over two years, and some lost students along the way. They have not yet recovered from this huge blow. Established companies are more likely to

get public support from government bodies, such as the Agency for Cultural Affairs and the new COVID-19 scheme AFF (Arts for the future!) 2. However, small- and medium-sized companies are less likely to get this kind of support, and many of them are having problems organizing showcases for their students.

Japanese Ballet World Shows Support for Ukraine

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in late February was one of the most shocking events of last year. For most of the 20th century, Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union, and Kyiv Ballet was very popular in Japan. Moreover, many Russian and Ukrainian ballet dancers visited Japan to perform as guest dancers, and some even stayed to make Japan their home. Also, many Japanese dancers trained in ballet schools in Russia. Japan has always had a strong connection with ballet dancers in Donetsk as well as Kyiv. The Russian and Ukrainian dancers who are currently in Japan must be feeling uneasy, but they are continuing to perform as usual.

I wonder how Japanese ballet companies have reacted to this war.

Japanese ballet dancers made no distinction between Ukrainian and Russian dancers before the war broke out. But the mayhem caused by the invasion of Ukraine by Russia has had a huge impact and created confusion in the Japanese ballet world. Male Ukrainian ballet dancers are fighting in the war (and I have heard that some have died), and female dancers have been forced to flee the war zones. Many Japanese dancers showed their support for these Ukrainian dancers in various ways.

For example, Kusakari Tamiyo, the former principal dancer at Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo and who is now more active in theatre, hosted a charity concert. She had been a frequent guest performer for Ukrainian ballet companies in the past. As the artistic director, she gathered top-class Japanese ballet dancers from inside and outside Japan for her charity concert entitled "BALLET GALA in TOKYO." Some companies have supported and collaborated with Ukrainian dancers who have fled to Japan. Okamoto Rumiko asked a Ukrainian dancer and refugee to perform in her charity concert for Ukraine and invited her to talk about her still raw experiences of events in her country. In Osaka, ballet dancer

Hariyama Emi produced a charity concert entitled “One Heart 2022.” These charity concerts were held all over the country.

The Kyiv Ballet (National Opera of Ukraine) which was in limbo due to the war was able to perform in Japan thanks to Terada Nobuhiro’s great efforts. Terada is originally from Kyoto and danced with the company over many years. Dancers who managed to get out of Ukraine toured Japan from July to August with “Kyiv Ballet Gala 2022.” Terada, who was assistant artistic director of the company at that time, became artistic director in December, succeeding Elena Filipieva, who is well known in Japan. The company changed its name to The Ukrainian National Ballet and came back to Japan to do a full production of *Don Quixote* in December.

Stand-Out Trends of 2022

I would like to look at the Japanese ballet scene as a whole. As I mentioned previously, the ballet industry is slowly getting back on its feet, thanks to the great efforts of all the ballet companies and dancers. I have already pointed out a number of times in this column that Japanese ballet companies are based in and mainly perform in densely populated areas, such as Kansai, Chubu and especially Tokyo. This tendency has become even stronger since the pandemic. We can now see a widening resource gap between large and small companies, both inside and outside these regions.

Particular trends became apparent in 2022.

First, there were more performances in concert or gala form with fewer dancers that contained short pieces, such as solos and pas de deux. We used to have festivals featuring top dancers in the past, but now we have more variety. This is because it has become difficult for a foreign company to put on a full production due to the pandemic. That is why a few main dancers were chosen to come to Japan and dance short pieces. Second, more and more Japanese dancers have become prominent overseas, and they would gather during the off season and give performances in Japan in not only Tokyo but throughout the country.

This type of production must have a strong theme or a clear objective. The charity concert for Ukraine was one good example. “Special Gala; Scenes du

Ballet (Ballet no jokei)” attracted a lot of attention. This was a tribute to maestro Fukuda Kazuo, who turned 90 this year and has established his status as a ballet conductor in Japan. Various ballet companies that have worked with him contributed to the production. And “Ballet Espoir,” produced by the ballet dancer Kyoto Yuichiro, focused on a new generation of dancers living in Japan. The visual imagery accompanying the dance performance left a strong impression.

Some companies presented ballet pieces by deceased choreographers. This is very rare in Japan. This year we had Theatre de Ballet Company, based in Nagoya and led by Tsukamoto Yoko, present the Fukagawa Hideo version of *Don Quixote*, which had a distinct atmosphere of its own. Tani Momoko Ballet presented *Les Misérables*. It was choreographed and directed by Mochizuki Norihiko, the former artistic director of the company. Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo revived *ASUKA*, the last piece conceived by the late Maki Asami. K Ballet Studio, based in Osaka, presented Yagami Keiko’s renowned contemporary ballet piece two years in a row. But these companies were simply repeating repertoire that they had already been done in the past. It would be ideal to have a system that enables other companies to present classic pieces simply by following some necessary procedures.

More and more theatres around the nation are being rebuilt or refurbished due to aging or to make them earthquake resistant. This year, Mielparque Hall (formerly Tokyo Yubin Chokin Kaikan), the much-loved concert hall where many ballet productions and competitions were held, closed its doors. Most ballet companies do not have their own venues, and it has now become more difficult to find a space to perform.

Since the pandemic, ballet companies have been streaming their performances in various ways. We will have to wait a bit longer to see whether this trend continues.

A Busy Year for The Tokyo Ballet and a Fresh Start for Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo

Now I would like to mention some ballet companies that stood out this year.

It was Yoshida Miyako’s third year as artistic director of New National

Theatre, Tokyo. The theatre marked its 25th anniversary this year and premiered a new version of *Giselle* directed by Yoshida Miyako to kick off the 2022/2023 season. This piece was meticulously structured as well as being orthodox. The gorgeous set design suited the National Theatre well. The theatre is attracting good audiences and is trying to increase the number of performances for both classic and contemporary pieces. However, this might require some reorganization.

The Tokyo Ballet was one of the most active companies during COVID-19. Its principal dancer, Ueno Mizuka, has transformed the concept of a ballerina in Japan with her dynamic style. In 2022, she played the lead roles in the classics *Swan Lake*, *Don Quixote*, and *La Bayadère* and showed off her everlasting talent. This was her last performance in classical repertoire. The company premiered *Romeo and Juliet*, choreographed by John Cranko, and also presented *Béjart Gala*, marking forty years since the company first performed his piece *Bolero*.

K-Ballet Company led by Kumakawa Tetsuya revived *Carmen* and *Cleopatra* with a fresh cast, both pieces choreographed by Kumakawa. It also kicked off a new project *K-BALLET Opto* with a show “Petit Petit Petit” featuring three short contemporary pieces, including one choreographed by Mori Yuki.

As mentioned, Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo, which lost its founder last year, presented *ASUKA* as well as *Notre Dame de Paris* choreographed by Roland Petit, a new beginning for the company. Matsuyama Ballet Company featured Morishita Yoko, who is in her mid-70s, as the lead dancer, as usual. Her extraordinary charisma shined through as she played the lead role in all of its full-length productions.

Kawaguchi Yuriko, from Ballet Chambre Ouest, danced *Tatyana* for the last time; it was a very moving experience. Noriko Kobayashi Ballet Theatre commemorated its 50th anniversary. Companies such as the already mentioned Tani Momoko Ballet, The Inoue Ballet Foundation, Tokyo City Ballet, Star Dancers Ballet, and NBA Ballet Company were all very active and presented new works and new interpretations.

Yamato City Ballet led by Sasaki Mika is attracting a lot of attention these days. She produced an anthology series featuring various choreographers as well

as *The Glass Slipper*, choreographed by Homan Naoya, which is a contemporary interpretation of *Cinderella* and set in the contemporary apparel industry. It created a major buzz.

Japan Ballet Association, which serves the Japanese ballet scene, presented the Japanese premiere of *La Esmeralda* in March. It was choreographed by Yuri Burlaka, who mainly used Zoom to communicate with the dancers. The association uses Zoom for various purposes as a COVID-19 measure.

Sadamatsu-Hamada Ballet Stands Out in Kansai and Chubu

Ballet companies based in the Kansai and the Chubu regions are gradually getting back on their feet. The one that stood out the most this year was Sadamatsu-Hamada Ballet, based in Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture. It presented a full version of the classic, *Copélia, Creative Dance Recital 33, The World of Ballets Russes (Ballets Russes no sekai)* as well as a contemporary version of their much-loved signature show *The Nutcracker*. The company, which is very progressive, commissioned a young outside choreographer to re-interpret the piece. Ballet Company West Japan, which marked its fifth anniversary this year, is also making itself known on the ballet scene.

In Osaka, Jinushi Kaoru Ballet Company presented a double bill featuring two full-length classical productions with young as well as veteran dancers, just like the previous year. This year, its *Cinderella* was full of fresh new ideas, and its *Giselle* featured the ballet dancers Ono Ayako and Okumura Kosuke from National Ballet of Japan. It was a return for Okumura Kosuke who started his career with Jinushi Kaoru Ballet Company. Homura Tomoi Ballet Company, with its long history, is still progressing steadily, commissioning Shinohara Seiichi to choreograph *Cleopatra*. Noma Ballet Company, Kitayama Onishi Ballet Company, Company Deco Boco, and Michiko Sasaki Ballet Studio are all busy while taking necessary COVID-19 measures.

The Agency for Cultural Affairs is preparing to relocate to Kyoto (scheduled to be finalized in March 2023), but most ballet companies in Kyoto have not fully recovered from COVID-19. Ryuko Arima Ballet, which managed to stay afloat, presented *Romeo and Juliet*.

The two major companies in the Nagoya region, Ochi International Ballet and Matsuoka Reiko Ballet, simply did their annual showcases and did not take on any large-scale productions. However, Sumina Okada Ballet School and Setsuko Kawaguchi Ballet continued to present new works, as usual. Theatre de Ballet Company, which marked its 40th anniversary this year, presented “Autumn Ballet Gala Concert 2022,” combining a contemporary piece with short classic pieces, as well as *Don Quixote* choreographed by the late Fukagawa Hideo.

Tokoiriya, based in Okinawa and led by Midorima Ryoki, presented a piece inspired by old Okinawan traditions at Naha Cultural Arts Theater NAHArt in February. It also performed in Tokyo in spring and autumn, as it did the previous year.

It was still difficult to invite foreign artists to do a full production in the first half of the year. Nevertheless, dancers from The Stuttgart Ballet came to Japan in March and from The Royal Ballet in July. But these were both galas featuring a few top dancers. From autumn, things got slightly better; The Houston Ballet presented *Swan Lake*; Les Ballets du Monte Carlo presented *The Taming of the Shrew*; and as previously mentioned, The Ukrainian National Ballet presented a full ballet production.

While ballet competitions are coming back to life all over the country, some have cancelled or simplified the award ceremonies in order to survive the pandemic.

Urawa, Makoto

His real name is Ichikawa Akira. He is a former professor of the faculty of Business Administration and Corporate Culture at Shoin University and a former advisor for the dance sector of The Association of Public Theaters and Halls in Japan. He has contributed to various newspapers and magazines as a dance critic. He is a long-time committee member for the Agency for Cultural Affairs as well as other bodies. He has also been on the judging panels of various dance competitions and awards.

(Translation: Ishikawa Mai and Donncha Crowley)