
Children's and Youth Theatre

The Revival of Summer Festivals in the Wake of the Pandemic

Ota Akira

The green shoots of recovery seemed to be appearing little by little in the world of children's and youth theatre in 2022. For two long years, not only theatre performances but also entrance and graduation ceremonies and many other school events had to be postponed because of COVID-19. I am sad to think that children's recollections of their school life during the pandemic will be dominated by memories of days spent wearing masks and using hand sanitizer. Amid this situation, teachers changed tack in their response, and it did seem to become easier to hold theatre performances in schools. However, COVID-19 continues to spread nonetheless. Whereas early 2020 saw audience members testing positive and performances being shelved to prevent the spread of infection, today we see a growing number of performances being canceled or postponed due to performers and artists falling ill. While the barriers to staging performances might be lower, one has to say that difficulties continue.

Some creative groups are starting to speak up about having to stage inefficient performances, as the government's vague criteria about the COVID-19 countermeasures required of schools and children, and the decision to leave matters up to local governments mean performers are forced to accommodate venues and even response measures that differ from one performance to another. In particular, where avoiding closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings has been a condition of performing I have heard that giving two performances a day has become the norm, with groups compelled to perform three times or even more in some cases. But despite the increased number of performances for a single visit, the performers, unfortunately, do not receive any

additional compensation in their fees, so creative groups continue to be placed at a disadvantage. In this sense, therefore, the increased number of performances cannot necessarily be said to show that we are currently seeing a recovery.

The Revival of Summer Festivals

One major topic in the world of children's and youth theatre at present is the revival of summer festivals. Performing arts festivals for children are held at a number of locations across the country every summer. The pandemic affected them in varying ways, with some being stopped completely while others continued online or in a scaled-down form. We are now starting to see the return of festivals with in-person audiences. Accordingly, I would like to showcase the children's and youth theatre festivals held in Japan this year.

The Japan Union of Theatrical Companies for Children and Young People held the 50th Summer Holiday Children's and Youth Theatre Festival (Natsuyasumi jido seishonen engeki fuesuteibaru) (July 23–August 1; Kokumin Kyosai coop Hall / Space Zero). This festival took place for many years at Tokyo Metropolitan Children's Hall in Shibuya, but following the hall's closure in 2012, the event moved to its current venue at Space Zero. Organized by creative groups, the festival sees participating organizations working together on arrangements, including shared leaflets and other advertising activities. It is an event that children in the metropolis look forward to every year, with many school groups enjoying the performances.

Also known as the International Theater Festival Okinawa for Young Audiences, *ricca ricca*festa* (July 23–31; Cultural Arts Theater and other venues) began life as the Kijimuna Festa, held primarily in Okinawa City, but has changed its name and venue as it has grown into an international festival. The 2021 event took place in January of that year, when the overseas performances were staged remotely only, but this summer saw eight productions brought to Japan from other countries. Many of the productions invited to participate were those originally due to take part in the 20th ASSITEJ World Congress but which were unable to be staged in Japan, and there was a palpable sense of joy at being able to watch them live in person.

The 2022 Great Exhibition of Performing Arts with Children in Kofu (Kodomo to butaigeijutsu daihakurankai 2022 in Kofu) (July 29–August 1; Kofu Civic Hall) saw Kofu City welcome a festival that was, until the year before last, held annually at Tokyo's National Olympics Memorial Youth Center. This marked the second time the festival had been held outside Tokyo, following its hosting in Sendai last year, when the Tokyo Olympics meant the center was unable to be used and the festival organizers took the decision to make it an event hosted in a different part of Japan each year. With Kofu City serving as the co-organizer and neighboring local governments also providing support and cooperation, the festival received ample publicity and the sight of so many children at the venue left a lasting impression. In addition to watching performances, hands-on experience was also a key theme, and the workshops and other spaces where people could try new things attracted a lively crowd. Next year's festival will be held in Niigata.

078 In Fukushima, Kitakata 21st Century Theatre 2022 (August 5–7; Kitakata Plaza and other venues) made a long-awaited return to being held at multiple venues this summer, after being significantly scaled down last year. It was the first large-scale edition of the festival since the core executive committee members had made way for a younger cohort the year before last, when the event marked its 20th anniversary. What was especially striking was the excellent balance achieved in the event's running, with creative groups, local government, and local citizens coming together to deliver what can only be described as the very ideal of a festival in a provincial city. I will never forget the committee's original chairperson saying when founding this festival, "I was a full-time farmer and couldn't go to other places to attend festivals. That's when I realized that we should set one up in our own backyard." One hopes that the next generation will maintain this spirit of determination and go from strength to strength.

Following its cancellation last year, Nagano's Kids Circuit in Saku 2022 (August 5–7; Cosmo Hall and other venues) this year saw a number of performances sell out almost as soon as tickets went on sale. While this festival does not have a very long history, it was clear that the citizens of Saku had been looking forward to the event.

The final mention goes to Osaka's Children's Theatre Festival in Kishiwada (August 18–21; Kishiwada Namikiri Hall), which was held for the 29th and, I am told, final time this year. This is a compact festival where one can see all the productions in a single day at Namikiri Hall. Typically, for a city with Osaka's merchant heritage, audience members get 500 yen back if they stay to watch three performances. Another distinctive feature of the event is that all performances are followed by a talk session. Rather than the audience discussing their thoughts on what they have just watched, the main purpose of these sessions is for performers and artists who have been watching them to talk about the performance in order to inform future creative endeavors. I am sure a number of theatre companies have been able to fine tune their productions as a result of these sessions. Sadly, this year sees the curtain fall on the theatre festival in Kishiwada, but I gather a Kansai-based festival will continue with a shift of location to Kobe's Nada ward next year.

One festival that, unfortunately, was canceled again this year was the Iida Puppet Festa 2022 (August 4–7). Making the call on whether to cancel performances is very tricky, and a lot depends on the mood of the local government and the public in a particular area because festivals are large in scale and involve a lot of coming and going by people. But I also got the impression there was a growing sense that it is precisely at times like this that we need festivals. It would be fair to say that efforts by those on the front line to stage performances after establishing proper guidelines, taking great care and not pushing things too far made the summer of 2022 a very hot and exciting one in the world of children's and youth theatre.

Public Support Facilitating Encounters with the Performing Arts

Let us now return to the topic of theatre performances in schools. As outlined above, one would have to say that theatre performances organized by schools have still not returned to their pre-pandemic state. However, in light of this situation, the Agency for Cultural Affairs implemented the Restoring Opportunities for Children to Appreciate and Experience Culture program. Funded from the FY2021 supplementary budget, this program focused on holding performances

and workshops for children unable to engage with the performing arts due to the large number of events canceled as a result of the pandemic. It evolved out of another program implemented in the last fiscal year entitled Supporting Opportunities for Children to Appreciate and Experience Culture and features two approaches: the program selection approach, under which schools can choose from a list of productions suggested by the Agency for Cultural Affairs; and the school-initiated approach, under which schools can choose for themselves which productions they arrange. The school-initiated approach, in particular, offers a substantial level of freedom, providing public funding from the Agency for Cultural Affairs for productions chosen by schools, without the conventional constraints of having to choose from a predetermined list. The high level of interest in this program was demonstrated by the number of applications, which exceeded expectations.

Tokyo Metropolitan Government also implemented a similar program. The Make Children Smile Project offered children the opportunity to watch performances and talks and to engage in hands-on activities at their schools. Via a number of umbrella organizations, creative groups proposed productions and programs, with schools choosing which ones they wished to implement. What was groundbreaking was the fact that the Japan Union of Theatrical Companies for Children and Young People took on the work of performing arts administration. Many of the schools applying had never hosted performances before, so I cannot help but hope that this project's achievements will bear more fruit in years to come.

Such public support reduced the financial burden on schools and increased the number of performances given by creative groups, thereby more or less enabling the latter to make up for the performances they had lost. In addition to these economic effects, the performances brought creative groups into contact with the views of both children and their teachers. At many of the schools where my own theatre company performed, the teachers in charge of organizing the performances often said that they had been looking forward to the show or that they had enjoyed the performance even more than their students, which made me keenly aware of the need for theatre performances in schools. It occurred to

me that, along with the appeal of the stage itself, the timeless sight of children watching the stage encourages the adults who chose the performance. At this point, there are many concerns about performances in schools in the coming fiscal year, with bookings few in number or coming with conditions attached. However, those on the front line are looking forward to seeing how the new programs implemented during the pandemic develop.

Outstanding Remakes and Nonverbal Productions

Finally, I would like to introduce a number of productions that I saw this year.

Theatrical Group EN's *Beauty and the Beast* (*Kireichan to kedamono*) (written by Nicholas S. Gray, translated by Kikuchi Shoichi, adapted by Tanikawa Shuntaro, and directed by Komori Mimi) is a remake of an earlier production of this classic fairy tale previously performed under the more formal Japanese title *Bijo to yaju*. Box seats for children were available for the first time in quite a while, and the whole performance was suffused with the joy of performers and crew alike delighted to be back in action. The young man who served as the narrator was an outstanding character who played a major supporting role by engaging with the children in the audience and who helped to supplement words and scenes that children might have missed in this dialogue-heavy play. Even small children could enjoy this production right through to the end as a result.

La Strada Company's *La feuille les feuilles* (directed by LONTO) featured a guest appearance from musician Xymox in addition to two members of the company. This nonverbal tale is warm, comforting, and enjoyable to the end. It is a production in which audience members of all ages will warm to the three performers; everything about this play conveys a stylish impression, from the music and the set design featuring autumn leaves that seem to dance as they fall to the costumes and the gestures of the performers.

ART in Asibina's *Grandpa Gonzo Goes to Town* (*Gonzo-jiisan machi wo iku*) & *Paper Party* (directed by Kano Yudai) is a double bill of nonverbal productions. Drawing upon this theatre company's expertise in games using paper, *Paper Party* creates a tale that audiences can enjoy with peace of mind. But at the end of the day, the other production outclassed it for entertainment value. The artistry

in this performance lies in using nonverbal techniques to create an understanding with the audience about what is happening on stage while slightly shifting it as the play progresses. The children's anticipation grows with each successive scene as their expectations are met or defied. Reminiscent of a high-quality skit, it is a production that the whole family could enjoy.

While one can predict that the situation in 2023 will remain tough, I believe artists are keen to appear in front of children and lift their spirits with good humor, through good times and bad. There are many other things I could write about but space does not allow. As such, I would like to conclude this round-up with my hope that as many productions and as many artists as possible will have the opportunity for encounters with children in the coming year.

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(Translation: Eleanor Goldsmith)