

国際演劇年鑑 2024

Theatre  
Yearbook  
2024

Theatre  
in Japan

日本の舞台芸術を知る

NOH and KYOGEN – KABUKI – BUNRAKU – MUSICALS – CONTEMPORARY  
THEATRE – CHILDREN'S and YOUTH THEATRE – JAPANESE CLASSICAL  
DANCE – BALLET – CONTEMPORARY DANCE and BUTOH – TELEVISION DRAMAS

公益社団法人 国際演劇協会日本センター  
ITI / UNESCO



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# Theatre Yearbook 2024 Theatre in Japan

Published in March 2024

Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute (ITI/UNESCO)  
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# Foreword

The Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute is a public interest incorporated foundation that belongs to the international network of National Centres and professional organizations in approximately eighty countries and regions that constitutes the International Theatre Institute (ITI), which is a non-governmental organization under the umbrella of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The preamble of the UNESCO Constitution begins with the famous phrase “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” Article 3 of the standing rules of the Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute stipulates that the purpose of the Centre is “to contribute to the development of culture and the realization of peace in Japan by deepening mutual understanding and facilitating the creation and exchange of theatre and dance, based upon the purpose of the UNESCO Constitution.”

The Japanese Centre has published the *Theatre Yearbook* since 1972. Starting in 1997, it has been published in two parts: “Theatre in Japan” (English version) for readers outside Japan and “Theatre Abroad” (Japanese version) for domestic readers. The yearbook’s publication has been commissioned and funded by the Agency for Cultural Affairs since 2011, and the Centre began publishing an online edition in 2014.

Under the same Agency for Cultural Affairs program, we have staged readings every year since 2009 to introduce remarkable plays from around the world as part of our research activities to promote international theatrical exchange. In 2023, we marked the fifteenth consecutive year of the “Theatre Born in Conflict Zones” series by staging a rerun of a play from Israel that was highly acclaimed at its premiere in 2020. Dealing with the topic of the 1995 assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, this play happened, by strange coincidence, to mirror the reality of 2023.

Just as we appeared to be heading out of the pandemic, Russia invaded Ukraine, and conflict escalated between Israel and Palestine. The world today thus seems poised to regress into a century of war.

I wonder how the performing arts will reflect these turbulent times.

This year’s *Theatre Yearbook* again features many reports from members of the global theatre community, both within Japan and overseas. It is my sincere hope that the *Theatre Yearbook* will prove a useful aid for learning about the world through the prism of the performing arts and deepening mutual understanding.

We look forward to your continued support and cooperation with the activities of the Japanese Centre of ITI in the years to come.

March 27, 2024

In commemoration of World Theatre Day

Nagai Taeko  
President

Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute

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- The articles in this publication report on the performing arts in Japan from the previous calendar year.
- Names are presented in the respective style of their country/region of origin. For Japanese names, the order is family name, followed by given name. The names in the contributor profiles are presented with a comma and in the following order (except for individuals with only one name): family name, given name.
- Titles for traditional Japanese performing arts (Noh, kyogen, kabuki, bunraku, Japanese classical dance, etc.) are presented in the following order: *Japanese title (English Title)*.
- Other titles of works are presented in the following order: *English Title (Japanese title)*.
- The English play titles, theatre venue names, and other formal names are the official ones or, when no official English name is available, newly translated for this publication.

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**Shots from the Performing Arts in Japan  
in 2023**

## Noh and Kyogen



Hosho Kinya in *Danpu (The Holy Wind)*,  
40th Anniversary of National Noh Theatre:  
Special Feature Program of Noh Performance  
Photo courtesy of the National Noh Theatre



Katayama Kurouemon in *Matsukaze (Pining Wind)*  
Ohstuki Noh Theatre Independent Performance Noh Series:  
Ohtsuki Bunzo Explains the World of Noh  
Photo: Moriguchi Tokuko





Tomoeda Takehito in  
***The Attractive Aspects of Noh -Sumidagawa***  
***(The Sumida River)*** Photo: Ishida Yutaka



Tsujii Hachiro in  
***Nagara (Nagara Bridge) old-style variant***  
SQUARE Troupe Photo: Tsujii Seiichiro

## Noh and Kyogen



Mikata Shizuka in *Ikarikazuki – Funadashi no Narai*  
(*The Anchor Draping – Ghost Ship variant*)  
The 46th Theatrenoh Tokyo Recital  
Photo: Watanabe Shinya

Nomura Mansai in  
*Noh-Kyogen Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*  
©Gotouge Koyoharu / Shueisha  
©Gotouge Koyoharu / Shueisha /  
OFFICE OHTSUKI Photo: Seno Masashi





Aoki Ryoko in **Contemporary Music x Noh**  
**10th Commemorative Performance**

Photo: Minamoto Tadayuki



Nomura Mannojo in **Sakka (Sakka the Leech)**  
Flat Kyogenkai Photo: Ogishima Ray

## Kabuki



Nakamura Hayato as Lin Chong in *Shin suikoden (The New Water Margin)*, Kabuki-za, August 2023. ©Shochiku



Ichikawa En'o II (left) as Sato Tadanobu (actually the fox Genkuro) and Ichikawa Danshiro IV (right) as Hayami no Toda in the *Yoshinoyama* scene from *Yoshitsune senbon zakura (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees)*, Kabuki-za, July 2002. ©Shochiku

Ichikawa Danko as Taira no Tomomori in  
*Fushicho yo hato o koete (Phoenix, Cross the Waves)*,  
Meiji-za, May 2023. ©Shochiku



Kataoka Nizaemon as Yosaburo  
in the *Genyadana* scene  
from *Yowa nasake ukina no yokogushi*  
(*Scarfaced Yosaburo*),  
Kabuki-za, April 2023. ©Shochiku

# Kabuki



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Onoe Matsuya as Mikazuki Munechika in  
***Touken Ranbu (Swords Boisterous Dance)***.  
Shinbashi Enbujo, July 2023.  
©NITRO PLUS·EXNOA LLC /  
Touken Ranbu Kabuki Production Committee



Onoe Ukon as the *shirabyoshi* dancer Hanako in  
***Kyoganoko musume Dojoji (The Maiden at Dojoji Temple)***,  
Kennokai, Onoe Ukon independent performance, vol. 7.  
©Kennokai, Photo: Taguchi Masami

## Bunraku



Curtain call on the final day of the National Theatre Farewell Performance. Photo courtesy of the National Theatre



*Terakoya (The Village School)* scene from *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy)*. From the left, Yoshida Bunshi, Yoshida Bunsho, Kiritake Kanjuro (all puppeteers), Toyotake Rosetayu (chanter) at *Bunrakusai Tenchikai* (Bunraku Festival, "upside down" event). Photo: Ogawa Tomoko

# Bunraku

Their tears, burst forth.



*Ninokuchimura (Ninokuchi Village)* scene from *Keisei koi bikyaku (The Money Courier of Love)* at Theatre1010, Discover Bunraku December performance. Photo courtesy of the National Theatre



*Fuingiri (Breaking the Seal)* scene from *Meido no hikyaku (The Courier for Hell)*, November Bunraku Performance, marking the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Chikamatsu's death. Photo courtesy of the National Bunraku Theatre





Yoshida Tamao in ***Nagamachi ura (The Back Alley at Nagamachi)*** scene from ***Natsu matsuri Naniwa kagami (The Summer Festival in Osaka)***, from Summer Vacation Bunraku Performance. Photo courtesy of the National Bunraku Theatre



Yoshida Tamasho as the ghost of Taira no Tomomori in the ***Tokaiya (Shipping Office)*** scene from ***Yoshitsune senbon zakura (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees)***, from ***Bunraku muso keishoden (Bunraku Dreams: A Tale of Succession)*** event. Photo: Katsura Hideya

## Musicals



*Moulin Rouge! The Musical* Toho Co., Ltd. Photo courtesy of Toho Theatrical Division



**Colorful**

Amuse Inc. x  
Setagaya Public Theatre  
Photo: NAITO



**Ragtime** Toho Co., Ltd.

Photo courtesy of  
Toho Theatrical Division



**Spy x Family**

Toho Co., Ltd.  
©Endo Tatsuya / Shueisha inc.

## Musicals



*Pacific Overtures* Umeda Arts Theater Co.,Ltd. Photo: Oka Chisato, courtesy of Umeda Arts Theater



*School of Rock* Horipro Inc. Photo: Tanaka Aki, courtesy of Horipro inc.

## Contemporary Theatre



*University of Laughs* PARCO Theater Photo: Hosono Shinji



*Prisoners of the Occupation* Theatre Office Natori Photo: Sakauchi Futoshi

## Contemporary Theatre



*The Window of Spaceship "In-Between"* Chelfitsch  
Photo: Maezawa Hideto



*Measure for Measure*  
New National Theatre, Tokyo  
Photo: Hikiji Nobuhiko



*Jazz Daimyo* KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theatre Photo: Hikiji Nobuhiko



*Football Time* Kani City Cultural Creation Center ala Photo: Hattori Takayasu

## Contemporary Theatre



*A Rabbit Rides the Waves* NODA MAP Photo: Shinoyama Kishin



*Sometime* SIS Company Photo: Miyakawa Maiko





*Parasite* Bunkamura Theatre Cocoon Photo: Hosono Shinji



*Momonba's Tie Trap iaku* Photo: Kimura Yoichi

## Children's and Youth Theatre



*Tell Me Where You Want to Go* Akita Ujyaku & Hijikata Yoshi Memorial SEINEN-GEKIJU



*Sleeping Rabbit* Theatre KOORO Photo courtesy of Theatre KOORO



*Cat Runs* Puppet Theatre PUK ©H. Nakamura



*Cherry Blossom Blizzard: The Rice Bowl Siblings Go on a Trip* Produced by Puppet Theatre Toramaruza

## Children's and Youth Theatre



*Wind's Dream* to R mansion Photo: Kaneko Manaho



*Knitting Nana* Shoshinz Photo: Lilly Lenz

## Japanese Classical Dance



National Theatre August Buyo Presentation,  
***Masterpieces of Traditional Japanese Dance III:  
Onoe no Kumo, Shizuhataobi***  
***(The Journey of the Woman Driven Mad by Grief)***

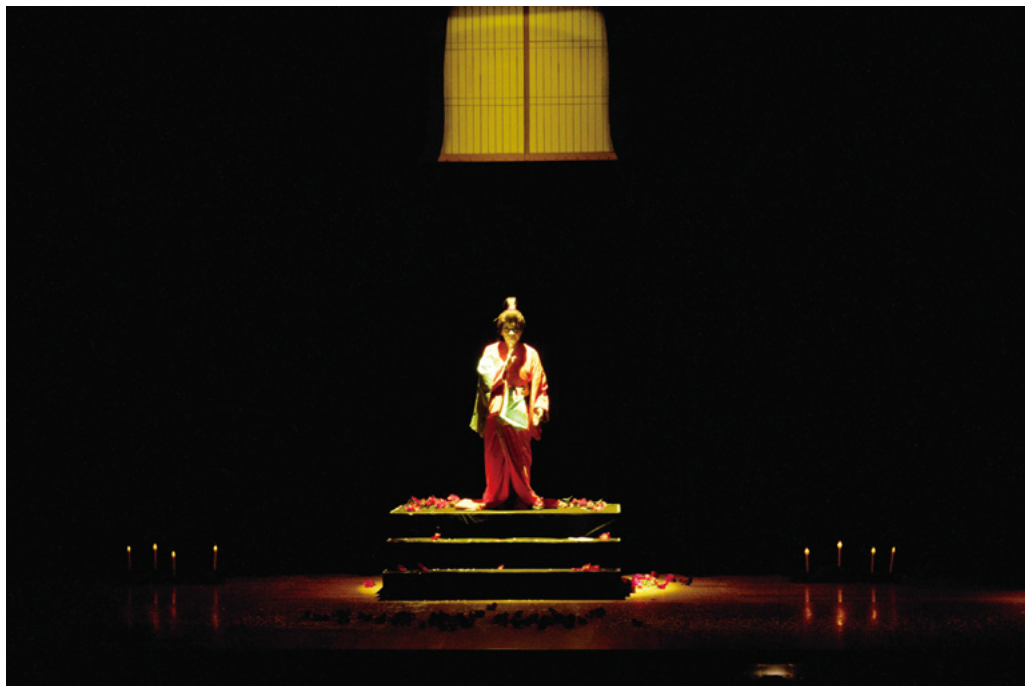
Inoue Yachiyo as Kyojo (a mad woman) and  
Inoue Yoko as Santaro.

Photo courtesy of the National Theatre



Recital of the Tokyo Mizuki School,  
Kiyomoto Narrative Music:  
***Neko no Koi Musundari ya Nehoregami***  
***(A Cat's Love; No Sooner Consummated Than  
I Awake with Tangled Hair),***  
Mizuki Yuka. Photo: Kotobuki Shashin

## Japanese Classical Dance



U mewaka Kanjiro Special Recital *Tsubakihime Dojoji (The Lady of the Camellias at Dojoji Temple)* Umewaka Kanjiro.  
Photo: Video Photo Saito



Yokohama Noh Theatre, Special Performances Part 3: Nihon Buyo by Artists Closely Related to the Yokohama Noh Theatre, Nagauta Lyrical Music: *Tsuna Yakata (Watanabe Tsuna's Battle Camp)*, Fujima Etsuko as Tsuna's old nurse Mashiba, who is actually the demon Ibaraki, and Hanayagi Motoi as Watanabe Genji Tsuna. Photo: Ogata Misako, courtesy of the Yokohama Noh Theatre

## Ballet



*The Sleeping Beauty* Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo Photo: Shikama Takashi



*The Sleeping Beauty* Sadamatsu-Hamada Ballet Photo: Furuichi Eiji (TES Osaka)

## Ballet



*The Sleeping Beauty* K-BALLET TOKYO ©K-BALLET TOKYO



*The Sleeping Beauty* The Tokyo Ballet Photo: Matsuhashi Shoko





*Giselle and Albrecht* Matsuyama Ballet ©A.I. Photo: Iijima Naoto



*Le Corsaire* Ochi International Ballet Photo: Okamura Masao (TES Osaka)

## Contemporary Dance and Butoh



*The third act of Kaguyahime* dir. Kanamori Jo / Tokyo Ballet Photo: Matsuhashi Shoko



*Rimbaud Poems: From A Season in Hell to Illuminations* Teshigawara Saburo Photo: Abe Akihito



*Pop Life* Condors Photo: HARU



*Please applause when the conductor appears* Kurata Midori (Art Saitama 2023) Photo: Maruo Ryuichi

## Contemporary Dance and Butoh



*Jankenpon* Ito Kaori ©Odawara Art Foundation



*f Macbeth* Nakamura Yo Photo: Maezawa Hideto



*Alien Mirror Ballism* Iwabuchi Teita Body Map Photo: Maezawa Hideto



*Mi toto matatakima iremono* Seki Kaori Punctumun Photo: Matsumoto Kazuyuki

## Contemporary Dance and Butoh



*jactynogg zontaanaco* contact Gonzo and yang02. Photo: Takano Yurika



*Totem: Void and Height* Sankai Juku ©Sankai Juku

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in 2023**

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## Noh and Kyogen

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# Deepening and Expanding

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Oda Sachiko

A strong sense of a further generational shift in the world of noh and kyogen was felt in 2023. Kamei Tadao of the Kuzuno school of *otsuzumi* (hip drum), who had long led the entire noh musical repertoire, passed away on June 3 at the age of 81, and Yamamoto Noritoshi of the Okura school of kyogen, whose booming voice and stunning performances were characteristic of his work, died on November 2 also at the age of 81. They each left talented sons to succeed in their roles. Overall, the depth of artistry shown by the veterans, the fine activities of the mid-career performers, and the growth of the young kyogen performers were in evidence, and there were notable performances that broke new ground based on noh and kyogen. (The performance dates in 2023 are listed along with the titles, program titles, and venues.)

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### Maturity and Challenging at the Age of 58

The noh performer and theorist Zeami (c. 1363–c. 1443) said that a noh actor begins training at the age of seven and reaches his peak of maturity in skills and fame around the age of 34 to 35 (*Fushikaden, Style and the Flower*, “Items concerning the practice of noh in relation to the age of the actor”). Applying this model to the present day, he would be perhaps around 58 years old. The reason I thought about this was that I noticed that many of the performers who have been active this year were born between 1964 and 1967. This means that they are around 58 years old, an age where they have accumulated their skills. They possess both the position and practical capabilities to stage productions, as well as enjoying sufficient energy and physical strength to make their unique stage performances blossom. The following lists some of them, with “maturity” and “challenging” as keywords.



As an example of maturity, I would like to give Hosho Kinya (1967–) of the Hosho school of *waki* players, who was designated a living national treasure at an exceptionally young age in the noh and kyogen world. On May 30, as part of a special program commemorating the 40th Anniversary of National Noh Theatre: Special Feature Program of Noh Performance, he premiered *Danpu* (*The Holy Wind*) in which the *waki* General *Ajari* (Acharya) played an outstanding role, continuing his tradition of debuting secret and major pieces. Kinya's stage performance had a sense of confidence, demonstrating his strong knack for getting inside the work. And even when he appeared quietly, he created superb scenes. At the beginning of the piece he introduces himself, inviting the audience into the story. After that, responding to the *shite*'s intentions, he empathizes with him with great sincerity, and he is relied upon by all the accompanying players.

Among lead performers, Katayama Kurouemon (1964–), who is also the president of the Kyoto Kanze-kai, is top of the list in terms of maturity. For several years now, he has been challenging himself in various *shite* roles not only in his home base of Kyoto but also in the Kansai and Tokyo areas as well as on a nationwide scale through such activities as the "Japan Nationwide Nohgaku Caravan!" and other events. I have never seen a performance in which he has relaxed even for a moment. Rather than employing his accumulated skills to give a safe performance, he throws in all the physical and mental energy he can muster in the instant, producing an unanticipatedly high level of passion and excitement.

For example, in *Ohtsuki Bunzo Explains the World of Noh* (December 16, Ohtsuki Noh Theatre), the second half of *Matsukaze* (*Pining Wind*), and in *Tawamure no mai* (*Playful Dance variant*), the actor entered the stage in the second part like a gust of wind dancing on a bridge. Having embraced a pine tree in the *noriji* monosyllabic rhythmic section, "pines bending in the seabreeze," he moved to the stage and cried out "I mourn the pine tree!" as if it were his deceased lover. He then exclaimed, "I have missed you so!" and completed the performance of the "madness of love" in which the pine tree appears to be the image of his deceased lover. There were also reckless moments. In *Nonomiya* (*Shrine in the Fields*) *ogamidome* (*prayer-ending variant*) (June 29, The 17th

Nikkei Nohgaku Appreciation Society, the National Noh Theatre), he took a large stride out of the Torii shrine gate at the pause in the “*ha-no-mai*” dance, suddenly stood still, took a few steps backward, and collapsed with his hands outstretched. Although this may have been an expression of the despair of trying to overcome the “something” that was binding him, symbolized by the Torii gate, and finally not being able to do so, the movements were too “raw.” This, however, is not a major flaw. He has the power to involve the audience with his singing, which seemed to swell on various waves. He is also an excellent chorus leader.

Tomoeda Takehito (1967–) of the Kita school took on the challenge of staging *Sumidagawa* (*The Sumida River*) (October 20, The Attractive Aspects of Noh, Cerulean Tower Noh Theatre) with a rare *kogaki* (variant version) “with a boat, without a child, and without a grave mound.” This is a masterpiece in which a mother encounters what may be interpreted as the ghost of her child, or in other variants shown as merely the mother’s vision, so the child does not appear. Takehito did not present the child’s grave mound either, the visual focal point of the stage picture, but instead presented a boat as a vehicle that leads from “this shore of hope to the other shore of despair.” These two variant aspects were probably the first of their kind in the modern era. The mother’s despair was powerfully expressed, beginning with the sympathetic *waki* (boatman) (Hosho Kinya), the chorus, led by Kagawa Seiji, the flute (Takeichi Manabu), the *kotsuzumi* shoulder drum (Narita Tatsushi), the *otsuzumi* (Okura Keinosuke), and even the stage assistant. This year, Takehito performed *Nonomiya* (*Shrine in the Field*), *Kinuta* (*The Fulling Block*), the special *Kiyotsune netori* variation (the flute player comes forward to face and accompany the ghost of Kiyotsune), and other pieces, all imbued with a desire to construct a unique theatrical world by devising his own chants and forms.

Narita Tatsushi (1964–), a *kotsuzumi* shoulder drum player of the Kouryu school, won the Encouragement Prize for Upcoming Artists at the Cultural Art Festival in 2016 for his work in *Obasute* (*The Abandoned Woman*) and other works. He often performs with Takehito, as in the above-mentioned *Sumidagawa* and *Kinuta*, and performed in *Higaki* (*Cedarwood Fence*) (September 18 at the Noh and Music Retirement Commemorating Performance

of Noguchi Denosuke, the Ohstuki Noh Theatre). In recent years, he has added a bold flamboyance to his solid and elegant style. His stage performances have also increased.

The 26th performance of SQUARE Troupe, founded in 1998 by Takahashi Shinobu, Tsujii Hachiro, Yamai Tsunao, and Inoue Yoshiaki of the Komparu *shite* school, featured the *fukkyoku* (revived) noh play *Nagara* (*Nagara Bridge*) (July 17, the National Noh Theatre). The main character is an old man who was erected as a human pillar for the construction of a bridge. Tsujii Hachiro (1966-), who played the *shite*, reexamined the chant score and staging of the piece since the time of the Meiji Restoration and presented a script and staging that were close to the original as an “old style variant.” The forms were polished, and the performance had a realistic and powerful feel. Once the basic style of a revival is completed at its debut performance, it is difficult to alter. The generosity of the people involved, which permitted the re-staging of this revival, and the support of the accompanying cast, including *waki* player Hosho Tsunezo, contributed to its success. Tsujii has been making a name for himself as chorus leader in recent years.

A similar case can be seen in Mikata Shizuka’s (1966-) *Ikarikazuki* (*The Anchor Draping*) *Funadashi no Narai* (*Ghost Ship variant*) (The 46th Theatre noh Tokyo Performance, July 8, Hosho Noh Theatre), an “old performance” of *Ikarikazuki* that was first performed at the Ohstuki Noh Theatre in 1999 (*shite*, Asami Masakuni). However, rather than following the original script, Mikata used it as base for his own interpretation of the direction and acting. The final scene in which *shite* Taira no Tomomori, who has witnessed the downfall of the Heike clan, submerges himself in the water with a huge anchor raised above his head is both vivid and lyrical, leaving a deep and lingering impression. The precisely constructed stage of Mikata, where logic is often the primary concern, was here characterized by the sudden appearance of a dreamlike world, which was utterly fascinating.

Other noteworthy performers included Kano Ryoichi (1967-) of the Kita school, who has a proper artistic method, and Shirasaka Nobuyuki (1965-) of the Takayasu school of *otsuzumi* strongly supporting the foundation of a piece.

Fukata Hiroharu (1967–) of the Izumi school kyogen, with his straightforward personality, made a steady step forward with his performance of the major debut piece *Hanago* (Mistress Hanago) (May 4, The 18th Kyogen Zazanza, the Hoshō Noh Theatre).

### **Moving beyond Noh and Kyogen**

Nomura Mansai (1966–) of the Izumi school of kyogen is at the forefront of activities that aim for a wider range of performing arts while energetically utilizing the techniques of noh and kyogen. He is armed with a wealth of experience in both noh-kyogen and contemporary theatre, and his ideas concerning the method of connecting the two have been further refined. His new kyogen play *Ayu* (*Sweetfish*, premiered in 2017), incorporates meta-theatrical techniques to depict the desires and frustrations of youth with scenes from nature. And *Mansai Bolero* (premiered in 2011) breaks barriers between East and West to create a new celebratory dance that sublimates the auspicious nature of *Sanbaso* with classical and Western dance aspects and which has been performed several times this year. In 2022 (July–December) and 2023 (May–October), the company directed the *Noh Kyogen Demon-Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*, based on the popular manga by Gotouge Koyouharu, in which he played the role of Kibutsuji Muzan and several other roles (supervised by Ohstuki Bunzo). Touring noh stages in six cities (Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, Fukuoka, Nagoya, and Yokohama), the production drew full houses, attracting manga fans who had never heard of noh and kyogen. The production was experimental and stimulating, employing as much novelty as possible in the space and traditional techniques of the noh stage, and by making abundant use of lighting and new masks, the serious and the comical, the fantastic and real, all unfolded speedily. The division of labor between noh and kyogen was also removed, and Mansai's acting ability was on full display in Muzan's monologues and other dialogue.

### **Other Noteworthy Performances**

The Ren'niku Kobo, which has been deeply involved with noh since its founding in 1971, performed Heiner Müller's masterpiece *Hamletmachine* (October 4–9,

the Ueno Storehouse), directed by founder Okamoto Akira, with Sakurama Kinki of the Komparu school performing. Kinki's performance was brilliant as he created a fertile atmosphere with the slightest of movements.

Aoki Ryoko, a noh singer who has been pursuing the musicality of chant and collaborating with many contemporary composers, presented the concert series *Contemporary Music x Noh* (November 30, Small Hall, Tokyo Bunka Kaikan). This is the 10th in the series, which was launched in 2010 as a forum for new music for noh chant, and it featured pieces from her repertoire as well as premieres. Aoki's activities as a catalyst are noteworthy as it is interesting to see how chant, deconstructed into sounds and words, is transformed and reborn as new music.

Ishida Yukio of the Izumi school of kyogen performed *Clarimonde*, which is from a novel written by Theophile Gautier and translated by Akutagawa Ryunosuke, in a one-man performance (November 29–December 2 at Tessenkai noh-gaku Training Center) entitled *Kyogen Master Yukio Ishida's Solo Activities vol. 1*. He spoke without music, lighting, or equipment, sometimes walking onto the stage in his *montsuki hakama* (traditional Japanese male kimono with a crest). I was surprised to see that the technique of “voice” he has cultivated in Kyogen slid almost directly into the novel narration, resulting in a rich expression. A new rakugo-like work, *Kamitchi*, was also performed at the same time. Further progress is eagerly awaited.

## Young Kyogen Performers

The audience enjoyed the variety of artistic styles of various families and individuals in kyogen. Veteran and mid-career performers were all powerful, and also young performers in their 20s and 30s are thriving. Nomura Mannojo of the Izumi school, who has been playing more and more major roles, together with his younger brothers Kennosuke and Shinnosuke launched the *Flat Kyogenkai* for the younger generation and gave two performances on April 16 and October 15. Ogasawara Hiroaki of the Izumi School, who performed *Sanbaso* at *The 11th Tokyo Ennen-no-kai* (Hosho Noh Theatre) on August 19, and Nomura Nobutaka of the Izumi School, who performed *Tsurigitsune (Snaring the Fox)* at The 65th

Kyogen Yarumai-kai Nagoya Performance (Nagoya Noh Theatre) on May 21, are also gaining strength. The most notable performer of the year is Nomura Yuki of the Izumi school, who is remarkable for his straightforward approach to his roles, his energetic acting, and his sense of style. His performance of *Shuuron* (*A Religious Dispute*) (October 9, “The 23rd Uzawa Hisa no Kai — the Memorial Performance of the 26th Anniversary of Uzawa Hisashi’s Death,” Hosho Noh Theatre) in which he played a Buddhist priest against his grandfather Mansaku’s monk was outstandingly entertaining and filled me with a sense of joy.

## Topics

The National Noh Theatre, which celebrated its 40th anniversary, held a variety of events, including special performances and public lectures, symposiums, and commemorative exhibitions (from May 2023 through March 2024).

On December 29, the Yokohama Noh Theatre, which opened in 1996, was closed for two and a half years as it underwent major renovation work. During the closure, *The Temporary Yokohama Noh Theatre* will be opened on the fifth floor of Landmark Plaza in Minatomirai, where exhibitions and lectures will be held.

*The Nohgaku Times*, which had ceased publication with the February issue, was published in a reduced “provisional” edition from the March to August issues, but it resumed in full force with the September issue. The decision was made by Maruoka Keiichi, the owner of the magazine, in response to entreaties to continue printing the magazine. The cooperation and support of the entire noh/kyogen world is essential for its continuation.

In April, Mori Tsuneyoshi and Noguchi Atsuhiko of the *waki*-style Hosho school changed their names to Hosho Tsunezo (the name of his maternal great uncle) and Tojo Atsuhiko (his grandfather’s maiden name), respectively.

## Major Awards

Order of Cultural Merit, Nomura Mansaku, Izumi school kyogen

Person of Cultural Merit, Kanze Kiyokazu of the Kanze school

Holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Property (individual recognition is

equivalent to a Living National Treasure), Kongo Hisanori of the Kongo school, Hosho Kinya of the Hosho *waki* school, and Shigeyama Shime of the Okura kyogen school

Kanze Kiyokazu, Member of the Japan Art Academy

Japan Art Academy Prize, Imperial Prize: Kongo Hisanori

POLA Award for Traditional Japanese Culture: Kamei Hirotada

The 45th Kanze Hisao Memorial Hosei University Noh Theatre Award: Oka Hisahiro, Kanze school Kamei Hirotada of the otsuzumi Kuzuno School

The 33rd Hosei University Seika Award: Sasaki Yoji (Noh Costume Producer Sasaki Noh Costume)

### **Oda, Sachiko**

She is a researcher of noh and kyogen and has a doctorate from the Graduate Department of Literature, Hosei University. Her main areas of research are the performance and history of and research into the classical works of noh and kyogen. Oda combines both research and performance activities, including theatre criticism, lecturing, commentary, and dramaturgy, for revived noh and restorations of ancient performance practices.

(Translation: Jonah Salz)

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## Kabuki

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# Kabuki in 2023: In the Shadow of Accelerating Generational Change

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Kodama Ryuichi

### The Ichikawa Ennosuke Incident

When looking back at 2023 in kabuki, it is impossible to ignore the tragic events that Ichikawa Ennosuke IV became embroiled in. On May 18, all three members of the family were discovered in a collapsed state at their shared home in Tokyo's Meguro district. His mother was pronounced dead at the scene and his father Ichikawa Danshiro a short while later. Ennosuke's life was saved.

That same day, the magazine *Josei Seven* published an article that raised allegations of power and sexual harassment against Ennosuke. Some early copies of the magazine had gone into circulation the previous day, May 17, and Ennosuke, as the article's subject, had been made aware of the allegations. Ennosuke was in the middle of a run of performances at the Meiji-za, but the theatre was dark on the 17th. He was arrested on June 27 under charges of aiding and abetting his mother's suicide. (He would be rearrested on July 18 on similar charges relating to his father's suicide.) In court, it was claimed that the entire family had decided to commit suicide because of the magazine article. On November 17, Ennosuke was sentenced to three years imprisonment, with the sentence suspended for five years.

This was an unparalleled scandal, but the kabuki world will be also directly affected by the loss to the stage of an actor who had manifested his considerable talent across multiple areas, including acting technique, planning, production, and popular appeal. This was also the loss of an actor who had contributed hugely to kabuki by continuing to appear at the Kabuki-za during all the suffering and exhaustion of the pandemic. How this story will develop is, at this point, anyone's guess.



## The Deaths of Ichikawa En'ō and Ichikawa Danshiro

At the same time, the loss of the great Ichikawa Danshiro IV in such an entirely unforeseeable way is a source of great regret. Ill health had kept him away from acting for several years, but the tragic events also permitted some reporting of Danshiro's recent health, and we thus learned that he had been engaging in rehabilitation in an attempt to return to the stage. That news made his loss all the more poignant.

From the same family, Danshiro's brother Ichikawa En'ō II (formerly Ichikawa Ennosuke III) passed away on September 13 at the age of 83. Since his collapse in 2003, he had barely been seen on stage, but we must not forget that from the 1970s to the 1990s, he was one of the most powerful driving forces behind modern kabuki. He began to carve out a unique path for himself in kabuki in 1963 when his succession to the Ennosuke name was followed soon after by the deaths of his grandfather En'ō I (Ennosuke II) and his father, Danshiro III. These deaths left him an orphan in the theatre world. I felt a deep emotion when I realized that the deaths last year of the brothers En'ō and Danshiro happened exactly 60 years after the deaths of the previous holders of the same names, their father and grandfather.

If we are to look for some light in this chain of tragedy, let us find it in the way the younger actors rose to the challenge of suddenly having to step into some major roles. At the time of the incident, Ennosuke was in the middle of a run of performances at the Meiji-za. The afternoon show was the first revival in forty-four years of the strange play *Fushicho yo hato o koete* (*Phoenix, Cross the Waves*) while the evening show was another revival, the first in thirty years of *Gohiiki tsunagi uma* (*Everyone's Favorite Tethered Horse*). While the theatre was forced to cancel the afternoon performance on May 18, they were able to run the evening play by having Nakamura Hayato substitute for Ennosuke. Such a rapid and successful substitution was only possible because it had already been announced by Ennosuke that he and Hayato would swap roles on the final day of the run. Ennosuke's nephew Ichikawa Danko stepped into the afternoon show from May 20. Meanwhile in June, Nakamura Kazutarō took over Ennosuke's

role of Otoku in *Keisei hangonko* (*The Courtesan and the Hangon Incense*) at the Kabuki-za, and in August Nakamura Hayato again took on *Shin Suikoden* (*The New Water Margin*) at the same theatre. This existence of these reserves of latent talent is one of the strengths of kabuki, and by succeeding in getting the theatre through this crisis, audiences were unanimous that Hayato and Danko had both taken a great leap forward. In February 2024, Hayato and Danko have been double-cast in the main role in *Yamato Takeru*, the Super Kabuki classic originally created by Ennosuke III. The performance is sure to attract close attention as audiences try to discern signs of the Ennosuke family soaring back, phoenix-like.

### Accelerating Generational Change

Aside from En'ō and Danshiro, 2023 also saw the loss of Ichikawa Sadanji IV. He had been active since 1970 as a supporting actor, primarily in the role of the villain. His unique character brought him fans from all generations. He was also a mainstay of the Onoe Kikugoro Troupe, and the key roles he would have performed will now be handed down to a new generation.

In 2023, we also lost Ogi Chikage, the wife of the late Sakata Tojuro IV, as well as Nishikawa Senzo X from the traditional dance world and the *nagauta* shamisen players Kineya Kisaburo and Kineya Katsukuni. The glacial generational change of the past few years suddenly seems to have picked up its pace.

After his final performance in the musical *Man of La Mancha*, Matsumoto Hakuo stepped back from this signature hit role. Since his break from performing in late 2022, he does not seem to have returned to a state of perfect health. Rumors also circulated about the health of Onoe Kikugoro, and late in the year, it was announced that he is suffering from spinal stenosis and sciatica. Compared to the major generational change between Showa and Heisei, the great stars of our era have maintained an astounding level of health on stage. However, now it seems as if the deeper shadows of aging have finally crept closer.

In this moment, among the current crop of stars, Kataoka Nizaemon presented us with a dazzling series of classic performances in *Reigen Kameyama hoko* (*The Blood Revenge at Kameyama*, February, Kabuki-za), *Yowa nasake ukina*

*no yokogushi* (Scarfaced Yosaburo, April, Kabuki-za), and *Yoshitsune senbon zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees, June, Kabuki-za). One of contemporary kabuki's problems lies in the fact that the next best performances were seen not from the generation who are now around sixty but from those in their 40s or even the younger generation in their 30s. so the theatre lacks an actor who can take a leadership role for the generation who are now in their 60s.

With the early deaths of Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII and Bando Mitsugoro X and Nakamura Fukusuke IX's illness, which has prevented him from succeeding to the Utaemon name, the gravitational pull of this generation has been gravely weakened. Yet at the same time, this generation does possess some rich resources. Nakamura Karoku was named a Living National Treasure in 2023, but, unfortunately, he is not the kind of actor who could take on a leadership role. Between the first post-war generation who led the theatre until the 1980s and the current generation of stars (the third post-war generation), there came the "gap generation," which included actors like Nakamura Jakuemon IV, Nakamura Shikan VII, Nakamura Tomijuro V, Nakamura Senjaku II (who later became Sakata Tojuro IV), Sawamura Sojuro IX, Ichikawa Monnosuke VII, and Sawamura Tanosuke VI. In the same generation, there were also several actors who shifted to film in the 1950s, including Yorozuya Kinnosuke, Okawa Hashizo, Ichikawa Raizo, and Kitagami Yataro. Those that remained in kabuki were able to manifest some substantial acting skills, but after the ebbing of the first post-war generation, there were none who managed to truly dominate the art as troupe head. Of course, the nature of leadership has changed outside kabuki too, so it may just be that we are losing in every area the kinds of leaders who can propel Japanese society and politics forward through their own drive and power. Or perhaps, our society itself no longer requires those kinds of leaders. In either case, the generation of actors now in their sixties have a lower level of art than the gap generation, and in the absence of a leader, they seem to be attempting to hand the leadership of the theatre to a younger generation. We thus find ourselves in a transitional moment.

## A Profusion of New Plays

2023 saw the performance of several newly written plays. These included *Final Fantasy X* and *Touken ranbu* (*Swords Boisterous Dance*), both based on computer games. There was an earlier 2.5 dimensional musical production of the latter. Then, there was *Lupin III*, based on the animated series *Lupin the Third* and which had enjoyed a prior dramatization by the Takarazuka Revue. We also saw two new works that drew on the oral *kodan* storytelling tradition: *Tawaraboshi Genba*, conceived by and starring Onoe Shoroku, and *Arakawa Judayu*, for which a second run has already been confirmed. There were second runs of several other recently written new plays, including *Shin onmyoji* (*The Court Astrologer, A New Version*), *Shin suikoden* (*The New Water Margin*), and *Mahabharata senki* (*The War Chronicles of the Mahabharata*). Following its successful showing at the Minami-za in Kyoto in 2019, there was a performance of *Cho Kabuki* at the Kabuki-za. *Cho Kabuki* brings kabuki together with cutting-edge technology and was first created for the Niconico Chokaigi event at Makuhari Messe, which was run by Japan's largest social video website. We also saw revivals of several works first performed in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Hana no gosho shimatsu* (*The Incident of the Ashikaga Shogunate*), *Fushicho yo hato o koete*, *Hadaka dochu* (*The Naked Journey*), and *Mito Komon*. This really was a very rich year for revivals, particularly if we include plays like *Dokuroni* (*Nun Dokuroni*), first performed in 1917, *Shinmon Tatsugoro*, which was revived from the Zenshin-za repertory, and *Nijo-jo no Kiyomasa* (*Kiyomasa at Nijo Castle*). The latter was originally performed by Nakamura Kichiemon I and was revived in 2023 as a memorial piece to the late Kichiemon II, who died in 2021.

Examining the motives behind these kinds of newly written works and revivals, we can see that the theatre is focusing on creating new audiences and attracting customers from other genres. Judging by the comments on X (Twitter) and elsewhere online about *Final Fantasy X*, *Touken ranbu*, and *Lupin III*, kabuki's attempts to attract the attention of a new audience has not been entirely unsuccessful. What is harder to estimate is just how many of those new customers who saw these productions will then be convinced to buy tickets to regular performances at the Kabuki-za. On top of that, the audiences who have long

supported kabuki can sometimes seem slightly weary of the continuous stream of these kinds of new works. It feels like kabuki is currently in a trial and error mode, figuring out just who its customers are and what kinds of performances they would like to see. A side effect of these strategies is that younger actors in their 20s and 30s now have fewer opportunities to act in classical kabuki performances, and the more ambitious ones have begun to put on more of their own independent performances. It is worth noting that these performances can attract relatively large numbers of fans. Much attention will continue to focus on whether the theatre should continue its barrage of new works in 2024 or if generational change in classical kabuki has the potential to attract both old and new audiences.

### **Difficult Road Ahead for the National Theatre Rebuild**

There will also be a significant impact from the October 2023 closure of the National Theatre on kabuki's current period of trial and error, not least because the closure represents the loss of a place that made possible risk and experimentation outside of the normal commercial imperatives. The theatre opened in 1966, and it was decided that a temporary closure would be necessary in order to rebuild. However, by late 2023, two rounds of the tender process had failed, and it now seems certain that there will be a delay to the projected six and a half years before the theatre can reopen. Replacement theatres are being identified on a performance-by-performance basis because the closure was rushed through before a proper decision was made about what to do in the interim period. No one seems to be overly perturbed that National Theatre performances are being put up in a variety of expensive rented theatres while the National Theatre building lies empty.

This is an extremely shabby way to treat a theatre that took a century of dreaming to bring to fruition, but it is also a precise reflection more broadly of the shabbiness of Japan's administration of culture, including a lack of clarity around responsibilities. We now find ourselves in a situation where the National Theatre lacks broad principles, a midterm vision, and detailed plans for the near term. The lack of awareness of this situation in wider society is in itself a reflec-

tion of the environment in which Japan's contemporary theatre culture exists.

Two months before its closure, the National Theatre followed its founding ideals by mounting a complete production of *Imoseyama onna teikin* (*Husband and Wife Mountains: A Mirror of Virtuous Women*). With many younger actors stepping into these roles for the first time, the production carried a sense of significance that gave me hope for the future. Yet at the same time, when I thought back to previous complete productions of the play, it was impossible not to notice the shortening of the running time and the cuts to some scenes, as well as the reduction in the sense of overall scale. In this question of run time and how it relates to the realities of the lives of contemporary audiences, let us just say that a review of the theatre's broad principles and its midterm vision has now become essential.

### **Kodama, Ryuichi**

He was born in Hyogo prefecture. After completing his doctorate at Waseda University, he worked at the performing arts department of the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties and Japan Women's University before returning to Waseda University as a professor. He participated in exhibitions at the Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum before becoming its director in 2023. He specializes in kabuki research and criticism. His edited volumes include *Noh/Bunraku/Kabuki* and *Saishin kabuki jiten* (*New Kabuki Dictionary*).

(Translation: Alan Cummings)

# Bunraku in 2023: A Period of Transition, Experiment and Challenge

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Kameoka Noriko

In 2023 the impact of the pandemic, which began in 2020, lessened in severity. Of course, infections continue, but it seems as though the performing arts world has finally resumed its former patterns of production. This is largely true for bunraku too although performers are still sometimes sidelined by illness, and the theatre is continuing with abbreviated running times and the consequent pattern of three shows per day. However, a more pressing problem is that audiences have not returned to the theatres. This is particularly true at the third (evening) show each day, where attendance by the elderly, bunraku's mainstay customers, has been notably poor. Theatre going is a habit, and once that habit is lost, for whatever reason, audiences will continue to keep their distance, and it becomes hard to rebuild. That said, the only solution is to present topical and attractive works with appealing casts that audiences will want to go and see. In 2023, we can at least say that the theatre tried a wide variety of strategies to appeal to its fans. These included the *Sayonara Koen (Farewell Performances)* sequence of bunraku masterpieces at the National Theatre in Tokyo in the run-up to its closure for renovation, full-length productions that straddled the three daily shows, as well as a series of productions at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka marking the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the theatre's greatest playwright, Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

There were also some glimmers of hope for the future. I was at the National Bunraku Theatre at the same performance as a group of middle-school students, and I was taken aback by just how entranced they all were by what was happening on stage. I remember how even in the recent past the *Bunraku Performance for Beginners* shows for students used to be greeted by a mood of apathy, with

many students falling asleep. Perhaps this particular group had studied the story and the art of bunraku in advance, or perhaps there are growing numbers of the young generation who lack the strange preconception that classical theatre is boring. Recently, there has also been a change in the kinds of plays put on at the *Bunraku Performance for Beginners* shows. This year, the selection was *Denchu ninjo* (*The Attack in the Palace*), *Enya Hangan seppuku* (*The Suicide of Enya Hangan*), and *Shiro akewatashi* (*Yuranosuke Vows Revenge*) scenes from *Kanadehon chushingura* (*The Treasury of 47 Loyal Retainers*). Students encountering these scenes from this profound play for the first time experienced something of bunraku's essential nature. We can only hope that these efforts will broaden the fan base and perhaps even encourage some young people to want to work as theatre practitioners.

054 Worryingly, however, the National Theatre's Bunraku Trainee Program for 2023 failed to secure a single successful applicant. Bunraku is often described as a theatrical form where success depends entirely on merit, and out of all the National Theatre's training programs, the bunraku program has long been one of the most successful. One problem may be the upper age limit of 23 for applicants since most people have little chance to come into contact with bunraku and enjoy it by that age. It is therefore challenging for potential applicants to gain an idea of what kind of work bunraku involves, what kind of training is required, and what pleasures it might offer. One mid-ranking puppeteer remarked, "Our work doesn't just involve transmitting the art and protecting its traditions. It is also creative, and if we cannot convince young people that it's cool, then no one will want to learn it." I agree that we should be doing more emphasize these aspects of bunraku.

The biggest news of 2023 was the closure for reconstruction of the National Theatre, bunraku's Tokyo home. Regular performances have been held at the National Theatre in February, May, September, and December since the theatre opened in 1966. With a capacity of 590, the small theatre was the perfect size for watching bunraku, and at one time, tickets frequently sold out. The reconstruction project was originally projected to take six years, however, it seems that the tendering process ended with no bids so that period will inevitably be extended.



In the interim, bunraku will be performed at Theatre1010 in Kita Senju in north-east Tokyo and other venues around the city.

There was a curtain call at the end of the third show on September 24, the final day of the run. The following day, the performers put on a special *Bunrakusai* (*Bunraku Festival*) event under the slogan, “Farewell, Farewell to the First National Theatre.” Fans had a chance to mingle with performers in the lobby before and after the show. The play was a so-called *tenchikai* (“upside down”) version of *Terakoya* (*The Village School*), where the chanters, shamisen players, and puppeteers swapped their usual roles. All the performers put so much commitment into their performances that they had the audience in stitches. There was also a roundtable with veteran performers who recalled the opening of the National Theatre, with contributions from Toyotake Sakitayu, Takezawa Danshichi, Tsuruzawa Seiji, Yoshida Kazuo, Kiritake Kanjuro, and Yoshida Tamao. The audience delighted in all their nostalgic stories of days gone by.

The first performance at the new theatre, Theatre1010, took place in December. The main performance was of the *Chikubushima yuran* (*The Return from Chikubushima*) and *Kurosuke sumika* (*Kurosuke’s House*) scenes from *Genpei nunobiki no taki* (*The Nunobiki Waterfall*). The run also included *Bunraku Performance for Beginners* shows, with a talk on the pleasures of bunraku and performances of *Dango uri* (*The Dango Sellers*) and the *Ninokuchimura* (*Ninokuchi Village*) scene from *Keisei koi bikyaku* (*The Money Courier of Love*). Theatre1010 normally puts on modern theatre productions, and for the bunraku performances, only the ground floor (seating approximately 550) was in use. I heard reports that sound quality varied depending on where you were sitting. The audience seats are on an incline, which makes the stage easy to see, but those in the front rows are forced to look up. The performances followed the same three-part style as the December shows at the National Theatre, with the cast being mainly drawn from the mid-ranking and younger ranks. These performers had a rare chance at some major roles, and their efforts were greeted with warm applause from the audiences.

The February 2024 Tokyo performances will be held at Nippon Seinenkan (near Gaienmae station), while the May performances will return to Theatre1010.

At this point, it is hard to tell what impact the lack of a permanent base in Tokyo will have. But let us hope that it can become a chance to cultivate new audiences for the theatre.

The year of 2023 marked the three hundredth anniversary of the death of Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the playwright who wrote many of the puppet theatre's best-known works. Just as in previous years, this meant that in February bunraku presented a selection of Chikamatsu's classics in Tokyo. This year's selection was *Shinju ten no Amijima* (*The Love Suicides at Amijima*), *Kokusenya kassen* (*The Battles of Coxinga*), and *Onnagoroshi abura jigoku* (*The Woman Killer and the Hell of Oil*). To further mark the occasion, the theatre presented *Sonezaki shinju* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*) in Osaka in April, with the puppeteers Yoshida Tamasuke taking on the role of Tokubei and Kiritake Kanjuro the role of Ohatsu. This was a fresh pairing for bunraku which was repeated in the November performance of *Meido no hikyaku* (*The Courier for Hell*).

There were several memorable performances last year. The new year's performance in Osaka of *Dannoura kabuto gunki* (*The Battle of Dannoura*) was rich and satisfying. The production struck a wonderful balance between the chanting of Toyotake Rosetayu as Akoya, Takemoto Oritayu as Shigetada, and Toyotake Yasutayu as Iwanaga. To this was added the tonal sharpness of Tsuruzawa Tozo's shamisen, the accompaniment of Tsuruzawa Kantaro, Tsuruzawa Seiko's skill on the three instruments (*shamisen*, *kokyū* and *koto*) in the play's most famous scene, and finally the peerless puppetry technique demonstrated by Kiritake Kanjuro in the role of Akoya. The April and summer vacation shows featured a complete performance of a single play straddling both months, a style of production which was impossible during the pandemic. The play chosen was *Imoseyama onna teikin* (*Husband and Wife Mountains: An Exemplary Tale of Womanly Virtue*). The April show included the *Daijō*, *Ouchi* (*Great Prologue: The Imperial Palace*) to *Shibaroku Chūgi* (*The Loyal Sacrifice of Shibaroku*), and *Imoyama Seyama* (*Mt. Imo and Mt. Se*) scenes while the summer vacation show included the scenes from the Omiwa plotline. In the *Imoyama Seyama* scene, Takemoto Rodayu chanted the role of Daihanji while Takemoto Shikorodayu played Sadaka. Both chanters were promoted to the rank of *kiriba gatari* (chanters who

can take on climactic scenes) last year. They performed over the heads of the audience from platforms set up on either side of the stage, truly putting body and soul into their chanting.

The May and August/September shows in Tokyo featured a complete performance of one of the theatre's three great classics, *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami* (*Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*), split over the two months. This was a concentrated demonstration of the full power of bunraku and was an overwhelmingly emotional experience. The one slight disappointment was that Living National Treasure and Person of Cultural Merit (which he was awarded in 2021) Toyotake Sakitayu had to miss the full run due to illness (he passed away on January 31, 2024). In his place, his student Takemoto Oritayu put in an energetic and committed performance.

Turning to happier news, fans were delighted at the announcement that puppeteer Yoshida Tamao has been named a Living National Treasure. The highlights of Tamao's art are the sense of life and drive that he is able to bring to his characters, particularly in historical plays, as well as his full-bodied sense of emotional expression. This year, he was able to demonstrate the full range of his skills, taking lead roles in both history and domestic plays, including Jihei in *The Love Suicides at Amijima* (February), Daihanji Kiyozumi in *Husband and Wife Mountains: An Exemplary Tale of Womanly Virtue* (April), Danshichi Kurobei in *Natsu matsuri Naniwa kagami* (*The Summer Festival in Osaka*, summer show), Abe no Sadato in *Oshu Adachigahara* (*The Revenge of the Abe Clan*, November), and Nanpo Jujibei in *Hikimado* (*The Skylight*, November). Since he succeeded to the name of his teacher and Living National Treasure Yoshida Tamao I in 2015, Tamao II's work has been eye opening. With this honor, he now becomes the third active puppeteer to become a Living National Treasure, alongside Yoshida Kazuo and Kiritake Kanjuro. While their ages vary slightly, they have each become a Living National Treasure at virtually the same age, and interestingly, all three were the leading pupils of puppeteers who were themselves Living National Treasures: Yoshida Bunjaku for Kazuo and Yoshida Minosuke for Kanjuro. They have been great colleagues and friendly rivals for over half a century now, and each is now capable of taking on lead roles that

demonstrate their unique approaches and characters. The mental and physical harmony they can create when performing together is one of the strongest attractions of contemporary bunraku.

There was also the cheering news that puppeteer and Living National Treasure Yoshida Minosuke, who retired in 2021, will be awarded the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon this autumn. The fascinating feminine charms of the many *onnagata* roles that he created will live forever in our memories.

Turning to the mid-ranking performers, the puppeteer Yoshida Tamasho was awarded one of the Osaka Cultural Festival Awards. The award was based on his powerful performance of Takechi Mitsuhide in *Ehon taikoki (A Picture Book of the Taiko Hideyoshi)* at last year's *Bunraku wakate kai (Bunraku Performance by Young Performers)*, but the judges also noted the contribution made by his self-produced show *Bunraku muso keishoden (Bunraku Dreams: A Tale of Succession)* in providing study and performance opportunities for younger performers. The performances at this show attracted a lot of attention by showcasing something you would never see in a regular performance: students taking the lead puppeteer role while their teachers took the left arm role. The event was staged in Tokyo for the first time in 2023 at the National Noh Theatre in September. After all his years of toiling in the shadows, Tamasho firmly grasped the chance to take on the lead role of the ghost of Tomomori in *Yoshitsune senbon zakura (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees)*, and the fruits of his arduous training were plain to see.

There were many other independently produced shows put on by mid-ranking performers last year. Toyotake Yasutayu and Tsuruzawa Seiko continue to engage with puppet-less performances at the *Sujoruri no kai*, and they presented the *Kansaku sumika (Kansaku's House)* scene from *Nichiren shonin minori no umi (Nichiren and the Waters of Dharma)* in Osaka and Tokyo. They also appeared in December in Sakai in *Yura no minato sengen choja (Sansho the Bailiff in Yura Harbor)*. These are valuable efforts to perform pieces that are hardly ever staged at regular scheduled shows. In September in Osaka, Toyotake Yoshihodayu and Tsuruzawa Tomonosuke collaborated with the actress Kaneko

Ai in a new play that is based on Lafcadio Hearn's *The Story of Mininashi Hoichi*. The play was titled *Miminashi Hoichi monogatari (Hoichi the Earless)*, and it combined contemporary narration with joruri. In another new experiment, the puppeteer Yoshida Minoshiro performed as Sekidera Komachi to experimental piano music by the Paris-based composer Nakano Koki at the ROHM Theatre in Kyoto in May. It is wonderful to see new forms of art being created by young bunraku performers, and I look forward to seeing what kind of future awaits bunraku through the preservation of the classics in combination with these kinds of experiments.

Finally, it was announced that Toyotake Rodayu will succeed to his grandfather's name in April 2024, becoming Wakatayu XI. His grandfather was the Living National Treasure Toyotake Wakatayu X. Wakatayu I was also the first chanter to use the Toyotake surname. Expectations are high for this latest Wakatayu.

### **Kameoka, Noriko**

She is a special reporter and editor of the cultural section of the Osaka head office of the *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper and is responsible for coverage of Japanese traditional performing arts. She joined the newspaper in 1990. In addition to theatre reviews and interviews, she also writes the ongoing columns *Riken no ken (Seeing Yourself from the Outside)*. She has published several books, including *Bunraku zanmai (Devoted to Bunraku)* and *Yume: Heisei no Tojuro Tanjo (A Dream: The Birth of a Heisei Tojuro)*, and she coauthored *Umewaka Rokuro ke no shigei (The Consummate Art of the Umewaka Rokuro Family)*.

(Translation: Alan Cummings)

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## Musicals

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# Back to Normal with a Myriad of Shows and Stars: Ensembles and Kids Light up the Stage

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Nakamura Masako

After three years of gloom and doom under the weight of the COVID-19 pandemic, Japan's musical theater world seemed to be getting back to normal in 2023, as the tight grip of infection-prevention and control measures restraining production companies as well as audiences loosened following the reclassification of the disease into the same category as the flu. Nevertheless, some productions had to cancel shows or arrange understudies presumably because someone in the company was feeling sick. Still, the Japanese musical scene showed off a rich harvest of shows both imported from abroad and created by domestic production companies.

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### Powerful Principals and Ensembles

The most talked-about musical in Japan in 2023 was probably *Moulin Rouge! The Musical*, which premiered in Japan at the Imperial Theatre. The venerable playhouse was literally suffused in sensuous red light, transporting the audience into the show the moment they entered the lobby. The stage adaptation of the 2001 Baz Luhrman film, which premiered on Broadway in 2019, won 10 Tonys and continues to run at the Al Hirschfeld Theatre in New York, was presented to Japanese audiences in full scale by a top-notch cast.

The leads—Nozomi Futo and Hirahara Ayaka as the nightclub singer Satine, Inoue Yoshio and Kai Shoma as the aspiring songwriter Christian, and other principal members—were brilliant, as expected, but the ensemble members also did a wonderful job, testifying to the rising skill of musical performers in Japan. Everything from the dazzling stage set to the gorgeous costumes of the original

Broadway production was replicated on stage, making me wonder how the show could recoup the production costs from only a two-month run. But soon, news came out that the show would be coming back to the Imperial Theatre in June–August 2024, with another two-week run following in September at the Umeda Arts Theater in Osaka.

In recent years, Japanese productions of foreign-made musicals have been staged in Japan relatively quickly after the original premieres, but some take much longer to arrive in Japan. One such show was *Ragtime*, which made its Japan debut a quarter of a century after its Broadway premiere in 1998. Set in early twentieth-century New York, it tells the story of three ethnic groups—Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, African-Americans, and the white upper class—struggling to overcome the realities of a divided society for a better future. The realities of a multi-ethnic society are often difficult for Japanese audiences to fully understand, not to mention the challenges that Japanese actors face in portraying different ethnicities on stage. Director Fujita Shuntaro developed a unique way to tackle this task by assigning different costume colors to represent the ethnic groups: gray for the Jews, bright colors like red, yellow, and green for the African-Americans, and white for Caucasians. The ensemble members adapted their acting to fit the intended representation of the costume colors they wore in different scenes of the play.

*Dreamgirls*, which portrays a trio of African-American singers aspiring for stardom, was another. The Japan premiere came more than 40 years after the show opened on Broadway in 1981. Racial issues, as well as musical numbers studded with R&B and soul that require vocal prowess, must have been contributing factors. But Nozomi Futo, cast as Deena Jones, and other skillful singers made the Japanese production possible. It was directed by Manabe Takashi of Haiyuza theater company, known for his witty interpretations of straight plays. In his first foray into musical theater, he accentuated the subtle emotions behind overt aspirations for success in show business.

Like Manabe, other theater directors who have won critical acclaim in straight plays are now getting into the world of musicals. Setoyama Misaki gave a shot at Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Beautiful Game*, a somber story of teenagers

on a local football team amid turmoil in Northern Ireland. Setoyama emphasized how the boys sought their own rightful cause as they became embroiled in religious hostility.

Collaborations with foreign creators have also become common. The Osaka-based Umeda Arts Theater co-produced a wonderful remake of Stephen Sondheim's *Pacific Overtures* with London's Menier Chocolate Factory under the direction of Matthew White. The story about the Westernization of nineteenth-century Japan, triggered by the arrival of American warships on its shores, ran in a shortened 105-minute version (sans intermission) of the John Weidman-written show that premiered on Broadway in 1976. Paul Farnsworth created a stylish stage set inspired by traditional Japanese art and architectural structures.

After the show finished its run in Tokyo and Osaka from March to April, it was restaged at the Menier Chocolate Factory in London, officially opening in December for a limited three-month run. The show received positive reviews from UK critics, winning 4 stars from *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and the *Evening Standard*.

## A Wave of Original Musicals

Original musicals gained even more momentum in 2023. Many were adaptations of comic books or novels, but there were also shows made from scratch. Theaters that have never produced their own original musicals before rode the wave as well.

Meiji-za Theater, known for staging a wide variety of shows ranging from traditional Kabuki theater to play and concert-style shows of popular singers, kicked off its 150th anniversary year with *Cesare Il Creatore che ha disrutto*, a musical adaptation of a comic book of the same title by Soryo Fuyumi. It follows the story of Italian cardinal and mercenary leader Cesare Borgia in his young days, exploring the trajectory of a man who envisioned the unification of Italy during the years of Renaissance in the fifteenth century. Ogita Koichi wrote the libretto and lyrics; Shima Ken handled the music; and Koyama Yuna was responsible for the direction. Meiji-za dusted off its orchestra pit, which was locked away beneath the front-row area and had never been used since the current theater



opened in 1993, highlighting its commitment to the creative process.

Comic books are a treasure trove of material for original musicals in Japan. Toho Co., Ltd. staged *Spy x Family* at its Imperial Theatre, and *Nodame Cantabile* ran at the smaller-sized Theatre Creation; both drew capacity crowds of passionate fans of the original work. Creating shows that can lure these fans to other types of musicals would be a good next step in working to grow the market.

Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo's Setagaya Ward collaborated with Amuse Inc., a major entertainment company that has been beefing up its production of original musicals in recent years, to stage *Colorful*, its first original musical production since it opened in 1997. Based on a best-selling novel by Mori Eto about a dead soul who gets the chance to give life another shot, the musical was produced as part of the theater's summer program designed for young audiences. Covayashi Caori wrote the libretto and lyrics and directed the show, which featured lilting music by Osaki Keiko.

Amuse Inc. also had its own project, a new musical produced by Shindo Haruichi, the guitarist and songwriter of the popular rock band Pornograffitti. Titled *Vagrant*, the show is set in early twentieth-century Japan and portrays two wandering entertainers who help the residents of a faltering coal-mining town salvage their way of life. Shindo co-wrote the script with director Itagaki Kyoichi and created 20 new songs for the show. Since good music is key to a successful show, more and more songwriters on the popular music front, like Shindo, are becoming in-demand figures on the creative teams for original musicals in Japan.

A small but unforgettable piece was *Thousands of Nights, Thousands of Stars* (Hoshi no Kazu hodo Yoru wo Kazoete), a story about a loving, retired couple faced with the grim realities of dementia. It was produced by TipTap Theater Company, known for heart-moving musicals based on original stories that shed light on ordinary people's lives.

In March, Shiki Theatre Company wrapped up its Tokyo run of *The Boy and the Beast*, a spectacular show based on an animated film by Hosoda Mamoru. After recording a total audience turnout of 238,000 over 11 months in Tokyo, the show moved on to the company's theater in Osaka in December for a 24-week

run. *Jack O Land: Yuri and the Devil's Whistle*, adapted from a picture book that follows the adventures of an orphaned boy in a mysterious castle in search of a magic flute, was a new show that catered to younger, school-age audiences. The company also announced that it will stage a new musical, *The Ghost & The Lady*, starting May 2024. The work, based on a comic book by Fujita Kazuhiro, depicts a fantastic love story between Florence Nightingale and a ghost who loves theater.

### **Korean Musicals on the Rise, Talented Kids Shine on Stage**

Another notable recent trend is the rise of Korean musicals being staged in Japan. Korean production companies are running far ahead of Japan by creating an ongoing string of new shows with an eye to overseas markets over the last 20 years thanks to supportive government policy in Korea.

In 2023, Korean shows across a broad range of themes and subject matter premiered in Japan. *Marie Curie* portrayed the life of the famous scientist from a feministic point of view, while *The Origin of Evil by Darwin Young* focused on the distortion arising from Korea's class society. *Xcalibur* depicted Britain's legendary King Arthur, with music by hitmaker Frank Wildhorn. In *Beethoven's Secret*, Michael Kunze (book and lyrics) and Sylvester Levay (music and orchestration) explored the hidden life and emotions of Ludwig van Beethoven by patchworking together familiar pieces by the famous composer.

In December, a Korean arts management team hosted *K-Musical Roadshow in Tokyo*, a showcase of Korean musicals. Japanese theater producers and musical fans were invited to the one-day event to see highlight scenes from up-and-coming shows. More Korean musicals are sure to continue to tap the Japanese market in the years to come.

Child actors are also taking to the stage these days, and their talent shone through in 2023. In *Matilda*, based on the British author Roald Dahl's children's novel and produced by the UK's Royal Shakespeare Company, four girls were cast to play the precocious heroine, who fights against her uncaring parents and oppressive teachers to win a better future. When I had the chance to see the show in London about 10 years ago, the theater was packed with schoolchildren, and I knew the show would certainly help nurture future theatergoers and performers.

*School of Rock* is a production where children go beyond just singing and dancing—they unleash their emotions playing guitar and drums live on stage. The show is a rock musical based on the 2003 film of the same name, with music written by Andrew Lloyd Webber, and depicts kids in a prestigious but suppressive prep school finding their confidence through rock. *Matilda* and *School of Rock* were both produced by HoriPro Inc., which drew on its experience with the Japanese premiere of *Billy Elliot* in 2017 and *Oliver!* in 2021. Without a doubt, watching peers light up the stage stimulates youngsters in the audience and is bound to cultivate affection toward musicals in the future.

## A Bitter Legacy

In the midst of a booming musical industry, a bitter legacy lingering backstage came to light at the prominent all-female Takarazuka Revue Company. In September, a young member of the company's Cosmos Troupe was found dead in a suspected suicide, and her family asserted that it was the result of harassment by senior members of the company and prolonged work hours. In November, Takarazuka admitted to chronic overwork among company members and rearranged its stage schedules, including reducing the number of weekly performances from 10 to 9 shows a week. In December, the company announced that it would cancel all events commemorating its 110th anniversary in 2024 as well as shows by Cosmos Troupe members through the end of March.

Takarazuka Revue, which started out as an attraction for a hot-spring spa in 1914, now runs theaters in Takarazuka City, Hyogo Prefecture, and in Tokyo, with an annual estimated audience turnout of 2.8 million. Constantly creating new shows from subject material that draws from all ages and cultures, it is known as a powerhouse of original musicals. It also stages overseas musical beautifully, such as the French rock musical *Le Rouge et le Noir* and *1789: Les Amants de la Bastille*, just to name two significant shows in 2023. In times of growing public awareness of human rights, long working hours and harassment issues are coming under increased scrutiny, even in the entertainment sector. Takarazuka, whose members are indispensable for its spectacular shows that light up Japan's musical industry, is no exception.

In April, Matsumoto Hakuo lowered the curtain on *Man of La Mancha*, the Broadway musical he had starred in since its Japan premiere in 1969, after a total of 1,324 performances. Hakuo was to bid farewell to his signature role the year before, but the show was suddenly suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. When I look back at half a century of constant progress in Japan's musical theater toward its current popularity, it comes to mind how important it is to carry out each and every staging the right way to push the musical industry another step forward.

**Nakamura, Masako**

Jiji Press staff writer Nakamura Masako joined the Japanese news agency in 1988 and started out as an English news writer. She was later assigned to the Cultural News Section to cover areas in lifestyle and theater, including traditional performing arts. She is a member of the planning committee of the Japan National Press Club and also a member of the selection committee for the Tsuruya Namboku Drama Award.

# The Hope and Potential of Theatre in a “New Pre-War” Year

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Yamaguchi Hiroko

“It might be a new pre-war.” That was the answer media personality Tamori gave when asked on a TV program at the end of 2022, “What kind of year do you think next year will be?” I don’t know the actual intention behind these words, but they spread through society like a prophecy in 2023.

The government promoted measures that could dismantle the “pacifist nation” framework established after World War II, such as possession of enemy base strike capability, a significant increase in defense spending, and approval of arms exports. Overseas, in Ukraine and Gaza, battles are raging. With the current sense of war as a raw reality, plays looking at war and postwar periods have become more vividly personal.

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### How Do People Live amid War?

Mitani Koki’s *University of Laughs* (*Warai no daigaku*) was staged for the first time in twenty-five years, in the first PARCO Theater production ever directed by Mitani. Set in Tokyo in 1940, the play depicts the seesaw-like battle between a comic playwright named Tsubaki and a censor named Sakisaka over a script written by Tsubaki. Sakisaka sees no need for comedy in a time of national emergency and picks the script apart mercilessly in an effort to shut down the production. But Tsubaki accepts all the censor’s suggestions, and his script becomes even funnier as he rewrites it. Tsubaki uses his intelligence when dealing with constraints on expression, while Sakisaka begins to display a surprising instinct for comedy. For a short while, a room in police headquarters turns into a liberation zone for laughter. Very soon, however, this is all eclipsed by war.

At the end, when Tsubaki is called to battle, Sakisaka tells him, “Stay alive. Come back.” This is the opposite of the words people uttered in public at the time. The fictional genre of comedy liberated the human spirit from the oppressive reality of war. This is the power and hope of theatre.

Plays that reported on factual history included Seinenza Theater Company’s new work *National News Agency Doumei* (*Doumei tsushin*), written by Furukawa Takeshi and directed by Kuroiwa Makoto. An inside look at a news organization during wartime, the production conveyed a sense of tension in its portrayal of reporters conflicted between news coverage and national policy propaganda.

Plays by Inoue Hisashi, which are frequently performed by the theatre company Komatsuza, have repeatedly asked audiences to think about the meaning of war and peace. An especially striking production in 2023 was *Flowers Blooming in the Darkness* (*Yami ni saku hana*). Directed by Kuriyama Tamiya, the play offers a hopeful portrayal of people living through the period following defeat in the war while also looking squarely at the responsibility of those who stirred up martial spirit, as well as the tragedy of class B and C war criminals. Adding to the weightiness of these themes is the main character’s line, “We mustn’t forget what happened. Pretending to forget would be even worse.”

In February, Theatre Office Natori presented *Prisoners of the Occupation* (*Senryo no shujintachi*), two plays depicting the reality of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation (written by Einat Weizman and Dareen Tatour and directed by Ikuta Miyuki). Based on on-site workshops, the production conveys the harshness of life in this land and the dignity of human beings. Natori also presented a repeat production (directed by Ikuta Miyuki) of Nicolas Billon’s *Butcher*, which depicts inter-ethnic hatred, cruelty, and revenge with frightening intensity.

Plays advancing sharp indictments of the pain of war were David Haig’s *My Boy Jack* (directed by Kamimura Satoshi and presented by Sunrise Promotion Tokyo), portraying an upper-class British family whose son goes to fight in the First World War, and Stephen Metcalfe’s *Strange Snow*. The latter, directed by Inaba Kae and presented by the Strange Snow Production Committee, addresses the trauma of a soldier who has returned from Vietnam.

## More and More Neighbors with Different Cultures

There were over 3.2 million foreign nationals living in Japan as of the end of June 2023—about fifty percent more than a decade ago. The presence of neighbors with different languages and cultures has become normal. At the same time, an immigration control system and administration that is neglectful of foreign residents' human rights, as well as everyday frictions and discrimination, are deep-rooted problems. Numerous works reflecting this reality were presented.

The main character of *Hotel Immigration* (written and directed by Shimori Roba and produced by Theatre Office Natori) is a woman looking after a young Cambodian man who is provisionally released from an immigration detention facility. The arts company Setagaya Silk offered one new and one older work written and directed by Horikawa Honoh: *Factory (Kojo)* and *Not Visible in the Night View (Yakei ni wa utsuranai)*. Both plays are set in a factory employing many foreign nationals. In Haiyuza Theatre's *Unending Night (Kono yoru wa owaranu)*, written and directed by Ito Tsuyoshi, the characters include foreign residents—men and women, young and old—studying at a nighttime junior high school.

In KAAAT Kanagawa Arts Theatre's *End of the Rainbow Town (Nijimu machi no hate)*, written and directed by Tanino Kuro, the cast includes ordinary residents of Kanagawa Prefecture. This is a follow-up to the 2021 play *Rainbow Town (Nijimu machi)*, which depicts people of diverse origins coming and going on a run-down back street lined with a coin laundry, eateries, and the like. The town seems old and shabby, but the people live at a leisurely pace, and even coexist with robots and have a connection with outer space. The production's fantastical and elaborate stage design was quite fun.

Okada Toshiki wrote and directed Chelfitsch's *The Window of Spaceship "In-Between" (Uchusen in between-go no mado)*, which was produced with a group of actors whose first language is not Japanese. This sci-fi-style play about a four-person crew and one android roaming the universe in a spaceship was an exciting experiment that shed new light on Japanese-language theatre, which shares specific contexts within the unspoken.

## Accumulation and Continuity at the New National Theatre and the Richness of Regional Theatre

The New National Theatre, Tokyo, which does not have its own theatre company, has achieved impressive results in projects that involve substantial time and effort, including the KOTSU-KOTSU Project, which explores theatrical works for extended periods with no assumption that they will be staged, and the Full Audition Project, in which entire casts are selected through auditions. Both projects are led by artistic director Ogawa Eriko. The masterpiece *Angels in America*, written by Tony Kushner and directed by Kamimura Satoshi, was one of the stirring productions realized through the full audition system.

What will the New National Theatre accumulate and carry on as traditions of the theatre? Director Uyama Hitoshi offered one answer to this question when he was the theatre's artistic director by presenting Shakespeare's historical plays with a nearly unchanging group of actors and personnel starting in 2009. In a continuation of this tradition, *Measure for Measure* and *All's Well That Ends Well* were performed on alternating days in 2023. Some aspects of the plays, in particular the depiction of women, are quite out of step with contemporary sensibilities, but the performances, which were structured to portray solidarity among intelligent women standing up to selfish men, were quite effective.

In the world of public theatre, remarkable productions were presented by KAAT Kanagawa Arts Theatre, led by artistic director Nagatsuka Keishi. Among them was the Japanese-language premiere of *The Vacuum Cleaner (Sojiki)*, written by Okada Toshiki in 2019 for the Munich Kammerspiele in Germany. The daily life of a family consisting of a father in his eighties, a *hikikomori* (shut-in) daughter in her fifties, and an unemployed son in his forties is portrayed from the viewpoint of a vacuum cleaner. Through various innovations, such as a stage set floor built in an extreme U shape, director Motoya Yukiko skillfully crafted a stifling yet somehow comical household. This was followed by a succession of impressive productions including Arthur Miller's *The American Clock*, directed by Nagatsuka, and the Korea-Japan co-production *Three Sisters in the Colony (Gaichi no san shimai)*, with an adaptation and script by Sung Ki-woong and direction by Tada Junnosuke. *Jazz Daimyo*, adapted for the stage from the novel



by Tsutsui Yasutaka (with a performance script by Fukuhara Mitsunori and Yamanishi Tatsuya and direction by Fukuhara), is a delightfully entertaining production in which the social conditions of the Bakumatsu period and the woes of a small feudal clan are wrapped in an unprecedented style of comedy. The audience was enthralled by the play's "theatre music," which is unlike the music in conventional musicals.

At Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo, Kyogen (traditional comedy theatre) actor Nomura Mansai directed *Hamlet* in performances held in March. Mansai, who was the theatre's artistic director for twenty years and retired at the end of March 2022 (succeeded by director Shirai Akira), had long been applying Japanese classical forms in his staging of Shakespeare's plays, and this production of *Hamlet* was the culmination of that endeavor.

Kani City Cultural Creation Center ala in Gifu Prefecture, which each year disseminates throughout Japan the plays developed in its creation residency program, presented *Football Time (Football no jikan)* in seven cities around the country. Marugame High School Drama Club in Kagawa Prefecture won the Grand Prize in the 2018 National High School Drama Competition for the original play (written by Toyoshima Noriko and the drama club members), which Misaki Setoyama revised with additional elements and directed in the "ala" production. In the story, students at a Taisho-Era girls' high school who studied free of restrictions and enjoyed playing football (soccer) along with their young female teacher are forced into the "good wife, wise mother" educational mold imposed by the new school principal. On the horizon of these young women who refused to give up, Setoyama placed today's world in which women are active as soccer players and as photographers who document their matches—highlighting both the social changes that have come about and the problems that women still face.

### **The Impact of *Usagi, Nami wo Hashiru*, and Theatrical Works of Striking Originality**

An individual play that made a major impact was NODA MAP's *A Rabbit Rides the Waves (Usagi, nami wo hashiru)*, written and directed by Noda Hideki. With *Alice in Wonderland* and *Peter Pan* as central motifs, the issue of abductions by

North Korea gradually emerges from a dizzying intersection of elements, including playwriting AI. Audience members were deeply affected by the irrationality of the situation in which a nation's crimes, and diplomatic powerlessness, perpetuate victims' suffering, and by the steely determination and profound sorrow of a mother waiting for the return of her daughter.

*To Deliver Human Souls (Hitodama wo todoke ni)*, written and directed by Maekawa Tomohiro and produced by Ikiume, is a mysterious tale centered on a woman who heals physically and emotionally injured people deep in a forest. Tsukikage Bangaichi's *Life in the Doldrums (Kurashi nazumu bakari de)*, written by Fukuhara Mitsunori and directed by Kino Hana, depicted the reckless adventures of three drab fifty-somethings to exhilarating effect. The young creator Kato Takuya wrote and directed *Watako's Entanglement (Watako wa motsureru)*, which was produced by Takumi, and SIS Company's *Sometime (Itsuzoya wa)*. In these productions, he demonstrated his powers in depicting the workings of the human heart in minute detail.

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The iaku production *Momonba's Tie Trap (Momonba no kukuri wana)*, written and directed by Yokoyama Takuya, portrays the relationships among a mother, father, and daughter who lead a self-sufficient life in the mountains. The play underlined the issue of so-called second-generation followers—children bound by the religious beliefs of their parents.

### Theatres in a Year of Milestones and Post-COVID Developments

Two artistic directors who led public theatres for many years have handed the baton to younger successors. At Matsumoto Performing Arts Centre in Matsumoto, Nagano Prefecture, director and actor Kushida Kazuyoshi (born in 1942) has retired, and the theatre's leadership structure has changed to a three-person artistic directors group, including Kinoshita-Kabuki director Kinoshita Yuichi (born in 1985). At Za-Koenji Public Theatre in Suginami-ku, Tokyo, playwright and director Sato Makoto (born in 1943) was succeeded by playwright, director, and actor Shirai Keita (born in 1974).

Different approaches were used in appointing the new directors. In Matsumoto, specialists prepared a report that evaluated the theatre's achievements

and made recommendations for its continuation and development, and they selected its new leaders through a committee process. Sugunami-ku issued an open call and selected the theatre's new director from among seventy-four applicants. These methods, which gave transparency and sustainability to the theatres' leader selection processes, will surely be referred to as examples going forward.

Among privately owned theatres, two theatres in Shibuya, Tokyo, marked important milestones. It was the fiftieth anniversary of PARCO Theater, and this important year was commemorated with outstanding plays, including the aforementioned *University of Laughs* (*Warai no daigaku*), *Rabbit Hole*, by David Lindsay-Abaire (directed by Fujita Shuntaro), and *The Seafarer*, by Conor McPherson (directed by Kuriyama Tamiya).

Theatre Cocoon, which temporarily closed in April 2023 due to reconstruction of a neighboring building, focused on staging its own productions at other theatres. At the new Theater Milano-za, in the Kabukicho area of Shinjuku, Cocoon staged a succession of much-talked-about hit productions, including *Evangelion Beyond* (original idea, composition, direction, and choreography by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui); *Parasite*, adapted from the Korean film of the same name (script and direction by Chong Wui Shin); and Kara Juro's 1985 play *A Cry from the City of Virgins* (*Shojo toshi kara no yobigoe*), directed by Kim Soo-jin. At the historic Shinjuku Kinokuniya Hall, Cocoon presented a double bill consisting of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Betsuyaku Minoru's *Fade Away, Laura* (*Kienasai Laura*), written as a sequel to the former. (Both were directed by Watanabe Eri.)

While the COVID-19 pandemic greatly harmed the world of theatre, in some cases it also led to improvements. For example, more productions are hiring understudies in case of a sudden illness in the cast, and understudies are clearly credited in programs. This is a positive development that also connects to improvements in the working environment of theatre settings.

One of the large-scale initiatives currently in progress is the Eternal Performing Arts Archives and Digital Theatre, which preserves a variety of records in digital form. In addition to collecting materials provided by creators and theatrical organizations, the project is engaged in filming productions with

fixed 8K stage cameras and also holding screenings of the films.

When 8K videos are projected on a large screen in real-life size, they make quite a strong impact. Audiences can experience what might be called a new kind of theatre viewing that is different from conventional stage broadcasts. In addition to their archival value, the films can be screened in regions where it is difficult to stage touring productions, and barrier-free support such as subtitles and audio guides can be easily implemented, offering accessibility to a wider audience. All these features may lead to an increase in revenues. The development of projects opening up new possibilities for theatre seems to hold great promise.

**Yamaguchi, Hiroko**

Reporter for the Asahi Shimbun. Born in 1960, Yamaguchi joined the Asahi Shimbun newspaper in 1983. In the course of her career, she has worked in its Tokyo, West Japan (Fukuoka), and Osaka offices as a reviewer and reporter in the field of cultural news, with a particular focus on theatre. She has also served on the newspaper's editorial board and as a culture and media editorialist. Yamaguchi is a part-time lecturer at Musashino Art University. She is co-author of *The Work of Ninagawa Yukio (Ninagawa Yukio no shigoto)* (Shinchosha, 2015).

(Translation: Valerie Frasier)

# Progress amid the Chaos

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Ota Akira

In the world of children's and youth theatre, as in other genres, 2023 could be described as a battle with the post-Covid situation. Due to the impact of the pandemic, some students did not see the faces of their friends and others around them without a mask for the entirety of their junior or senior high school years. Quite a few children have become too accustomed to working out the distance between themselves and others, or they have become unable to live life without a mask, to the extent that they are resistant to others seeing their face. The things that are so important in order to live alongside others in society have, since the pandemic, become transmuted within children into sources of anguish. I have witnessed this reality for myself.

As the national government has not stipulated a policy, all aspects of the response have been left to the discretion of local governments or schools. Being at the mercy of these decisions, the situation in schools is exhausting right now. The novel coronavirus was at last recategorized as a Class 5 infectious disease (placing it on a par with diseases such as influenza and measles) on May 8, 2023. Since then, those involved in this field have likely been able to start preparing for performances based on pre-Covid norms. Theatre performances in schools have returned to being long-awaited events for teachers as well as students. I was particularly struck by how warmly they welcomed the artists. However, at the same time, the fact is that a remarkable number of such performances were reported to have been postponed or canceled due not only to Covid but also to the widespread outbreak of influenza. One factor behind this appears to be that the pandemic has created an atmosphere more conducive to the cancellation of events. Before the novel coronavirus emerged, schools sometimes opted to instruct a whole class or school year to stay home to prevent the further spread

of illness, causing large numbers of students to miss out on opportunities to watch performances, but it was rare for the performances themselves to be canceled or postponed. While the number of performances canceled or postponed increased during the pandemic, the groups giving performances are rarely paid a cancellation fee, which is a major blow to them. For example, all too frequently, there are cases in which schools simply do not understand that postponing a performance to the following fiscal year is effectively the same as a cancellation. Although the national and local governments did, in a number of cases, consider measures to provide compensation or redress for such situations during the pandemic, there are no such measures in place now that Covid has been downgraded to a Class 5 disease, nor are any under consideration. It would thus be fair to say that, in a sense, the conditions for staging theatre performances in schools have actually worsened compared to the pre-pandemic situation. The theatre company to which I belong is also increasingly requested to add a clause to its contracts with schools, stating that the schools will not be required to pay a cancellation fee if the performance is unable to go ahead due to infectious diseases or other unexpected events. When we are told that a school will not sign the contract without this clause, we have no choice but to accept it. There is a lot of food for thought here about problems with contracts, responses on the ground in schools, and other such challenges, most of which cannot be resolved by individual groups. As such, we might have to take the opportunity of having discussions involving bodies such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and the Agency for Cultural Affairs to raise the issues on a broader scale.

At the same time, a project launched during the previous fiscal year by Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education is providing a new ray of light for children's and youth theatre. The Hands-on Activities for Smiles and Learning Project (known during the previous fiscal year as the Make Children Smile Project) provides public schools in the metropolis with opportunities to experience a diverse array of hands-on activities. Around 90% of public schools in the metropolis submitted applications to participate, choosing from a menu of more than 200 hands-on programs that were divided into five realms: activities

involving working together to solve problems; activities that promote understanding of others and an inclusive society; activities focused on learning through encounters with science and advanced technology; school visits by Olympians and Paralympians; and activities that deepen the understanding of arts and culture. Schools are hosting hands-on activities that cultivate in children a richness of spirit by fostering, among others, positive and cooperative attitudes, communication skills, an understanding of others, curiosity and attentiveness, and intuition. Quite a few schools applied for programs with hands-on activities that deepen the understanding of arts and culture, and one very significant result was an increase in the number of theatre performances at schools that had never previously hosted them. Of course, one factor behind this was the fact that Tokyo Metropolitan Government covered all the associated expenses, so schools bore no financial burden. Nevertheless, the fact that we were able to increase opportunities for performances in schools and have a large number of children watch them will serve as highly persuasive evidence of the need for performing arts in school settings when it comes to discussions with both national and local governments. I cannot help but hope that this situation will continue.

This, then, was the environment in which various productions emerged in 2023, including both entirely new works and new revival productions. Prominent among them were outstanding productions aimed at older teenagers.

Akita Ujaku & Hijikata Yoshi Memorial SEINEN-GEKIJO's *Tell Me Where You Want to Go (Ikitai basho wo dozo)* (written by Setoyama Misaki and directed by Otani Kenjiro) incorporated contemporary themes with the story of a high school girl and an AI robot on a journey together to find an unknown place called Nera. Where do children want to go? This play encourages children to pluck up the courage to take the first step toward wherever it is they want to go.

Theatre KOORO's *Sleeping Rabbit (Nemutte iru usagi)* (written by Kurumizawa Shin and directed by Takahashi Masanori) dealt with an attack on a homeless man by Osaka teenagers in 2012. By regarding both the young assailants and the elderly man attacked as three-dimensional characters and painstakingly depicting their respective circumstances, the play highlights the fact that this incident could have happened to anyone. Audience members cannot help

but think that this case is closely connected to the systems in Japan that generate inequality and discrimination. This piece also serves to pose the question of how people can make choices that prevent such incidents from occurring.

Other fruits of 2023's theatrical harvest in this genre include Dora Theatre Company's *Afterschool of the Red Nose* (*Makka na o-hana no hokago*) (written by Onishi Hiroki and directed by Otani Kenjiro), Tokyo Engeki Ensemble's *Run, Melos, Run* (*Hashire merosu*) (written by Dazai Osamu and directed by Koke Yoshinori), and Theater Urinko's *Closet Q* (*Kurozetto Q*) (written and directed by Tanabe Tsuyoshi).

Next, I would like to highlight two plays in the puppetry genre. The first is Puppet Theatre PUK's *Cat Runs* (*Neko hashiru*) (written by Kudo Naoko and adapted and directed by Shibasaki Yoshihiko). The book on which it is based is so famous that it has, unsurprisingly, been staged by numerous professional and amateur puppetry groups and theatre companies. Worthy of note is the guest appearance by an actor from La Clarté Puppet Troupe, making this production a collaborative endeavor between well-established puppetry companies in east and west Japan. Efforts to deepen exchanges between puppetry groups, for which Zenninkyo—Japan's national association of dedicated puppet theatre companies—is playing a central role, are giving rise to new collaborative works of this nature in a way that was hitherto unthinkable. This production seemed to herald a breath of fresh air.

The other play I wish to mention in this genre is the Puppet Theatre Toramaruza-produced *Cherry Blossom Blizzard: The Rice Bowl Siblings Go on a Trip* (*Sakura fubuki: Kyodai-jawan ga yuku*) (written by Nakagawa Seiko and directed by Kusunoki Tsubame). Although produced by Puppet Theatre Toramaruza, which is located in the city of Higashikagawa, Kagawa Prefecture, this play is a collaboration between two venerable puppetry companies from the Kansai region, Kyoto Prefecture's Kyogei Puppet Theatre and Osaka Prefecture's La Clarté Puppet Troupe. This performance, directed by Puppet Theatre Tsubameya's Kusunoki Tsubame, again evoked the sense of a new wind blowing through the world of puppetry. Furthermore, the origins of this production can be traced back to the playwriting course organized by the Japan Union of



Theatrical Companies for Children and Young People in 2015. At the time, the course was one of the organization's centerpiece human resource development programs. The play's author, Nakagawa Seiko, participated in the course when it was held in Kansai. I was also able to attend the play's premiere, which took the form of a reading; even then, I thought it an outstanding piece that was good enough to perform unchanged. The fact that this work has finally been staged at the very heart of the puppetry world after all this time is in itself a dramatic development, and I was truly delighted to see that it had found life as the kind of spectacular play at which puppetry excels. It has become a play that I hope as many children as possible will encounter.

Another noteworthy piece in 2023's crop of productions was Musical Company It's Follies' musical *Baumkuchen and Hiroshima* (*Baumkuchen to Hiroshima*) (script and lyrics written by Onishi Hiroki and directed by Isomura Jun), a tale with fantasy elements that is based on the true story of a German who came to Hiroshima as a prisoner of war and became the first person to make Baumkuchen cake in Japan. While set against the backdrop of Hiroshima and war, which inevitably has dark and negative connotations, the characters' cheeriness, the story's progression, and the power of sweet treats all helped to turn this theatrical production into a positive prayer for peace.

In the baby theatre genre, I would like to highlight Performance Company to R mansion's *Wind's Dream* (*Kaze no mita yume*) (written and directed by Dalija Acin Thelander). While it was not a new production, it was one I had been waiting to see for a while as the pandemic had hindered opportunities to stage it. Employing scenic designs on quite a large scale, the performance takes babies and their family members on a journey into a special perspective on the world, employing techniques that include meticulously calculated lighting and movement. In regard to the latter, this piece incorporated movements with the slow tempo found in Japan's distinctive theatrical forms of Noh and Kyogen, which I felt matched the flow of time that is experienced by babies.

Finally, I wish to mention Shoshinz's *Knitting Nana* (*Amiami baachan*) (written by Inoue Shiho and directed by Yanomi). Shoshinz is a theatre company led by Yanomi, who has for some time been active in the field of physical comedy

on the international stage. The costar in this two-hander was Theater CAN Seigei's Asano Kasane, someone with whom Yanomi has long wished to work. The play tells the tale of an elderly lady with dementia and her daughter. While not specifically positioned in the genre of theatre for children, the fact that this production costarred Yanomi and Asano, who are both popular actors in this world, meant that children were conspicuous among the audience. And there was plenty of laughter from the children and adults alike. I hope that this production will enjoy a lengthy run as a comedy that children and their families can enjoy with peace of mind.

While 2023 remained chaotic, marked by the failure to extricate ourselves from the disruption of the pandemic, I believe it was thanks to the heroic efforts of adults who were keen to reconnect children to the performing arts that we managed to ensure stage performances did take place. Although metrics, such as the number of performances and audience figures, would suggest a considerable recovery, one still cannot say that we have returned to the pre-Covid situation. However, the challenge that remains for us going forward is not to merely return to how things were before but rather to address the need to expand children's and youth theatre into new forms.

**Ota, Akira**

Since joining Tokyo Engeki Ensemble in 1996, he has produced most of the company's productions. He has given many lectures and workshops as the director in charge of developing human resources at Japan Union of Theatrical Companies for Children and Young People. In 2004, he studied at the youth theatre department (Unga Riks) of Sweden's National Touring Theatre (Riksteatern) for a short period under the Agency for Cultural Affairs Program of Overseas Study for Upcoming Artists. Among his other positions, he is currently a representative of the Japan Baby Theatre Network and vice chairman of the Japan-Korea Theater Communications Center.

(Translation: Eleanor Goldsmith)

# Hope in the Possibilities of Nihon Buyo Beyond the Needs of Preservation and Transmission

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Hirano Hidetoshi

2022 was the last year of open applications to participate in the annual National Arts Festival, which is sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Beginning in 2023, there was a new policy of only admitting productions produced by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and this was implemented in the National Arts Festival, which was held from October 1 to November 26. But in practice, this meant no more than including the usual presentations of such public entities as the New National Theatre, which emphasizes contemporary theater, opera and ballet, the Japan Arts Council (National Theatre), which emphasizes traditional performing arts, the Association of Japanese Symphony Orchestras and the National Theatre Okinawa. Probably the fact that something that proclaims itself to be an arts festival that represents the culture of Japan was carried out in such a cheap and lazy way was because of cost cutting, and one cannot escape the conclusion that as far as working to support the culture of Japan, the Agency for Cultural Affairs is not doing its job.

For the world of Nihon Buyo, the annual National Arts Festival has served as a testing ground to present both traditional works and new creations, and it has a record of achievement over the 70 years that it was held. But the end of open admissions meant a drastic reduction in the number of presentations produced by individuals to compete in the National Arts Festival. This brought an abrupt end to this accumulation of artistic achievement and creation. This is a matter of deep concern for the future of Nihon Buyo.

## Performances Commemorating the End of the Original National Theatre Building

The National Theatre first opened in July 1966 and closed at the end of October 2023. All the performances produced by the National Theatre since September 2022 were labeled “Farewell to the First National Theatre.”

Among them were the following five performances of Nihon Buyo: *The World of Suodori — Breathing Life into Tradition and New Creation* (March 18), *Traditional Japanese Dance and Music by Up-and-Coming Performers* (April 22), *Masterpieces of Traditional Japanese Dance II* (May 27), *Traditional Japanese Dance for Adults and Accompanying Children* (July 28) and *Masterpieces of Traditional Japanese Dance III — The Finale of Fifty-Seven Years of Performances of Traditional Japanese Dance at the National Theatre* (August 11).

The artistic director of *The World of Suodori* was the Nihon Buyo critic Marumo Yuka. She emphasizes *suodori* as “dance pieces created in the Showa (1926–1989) and Heisei (1989–2018) periods, based on classical *buyo* with a new sensibility.” But I believe that it is a mistake to regard the origins of *suodori* to be in the Showa and Heisei periods. I think the origins should be set in the 17th century during the early Edo period in the *kinagashi shosa* (dance performed in ordinary kimonos) that is described in the book *Bukyoku Senrin (A Forest of Dances and Dance Fans)*. So in contrast to the stage art of kabuki, it was an art form that could be performed in ordinary rooms. Without taking that into account, it is impossible to think properly about the future direction of Nihon Buyo. As is clear from Marumo’s definition of *suodori* as “fundamentally dancing without a special costume,” she regards it as a modern art form, with pieces created after it became a stage art, and there is no concept that it is dance performed in ordinary rooms in contrast to the stage art of kabuki. Based on this, there is a distinctive concept in Japan of the body, and there is a tradition and creation based on it. *Suodori* is unique to Nihon Buyo, and future directions will come from that fact.

The *Masterpieces of Traditional Japanese Dance* series was a collection of dances from the Showa and Heisei eras applying Marumo’s concept for *suodori* to dances originating in kabuki Buyo as an art form that connects to the future.

## New Challenges for the Nihon Buyo Association

On July 21, Nihon Buyo received the designation of being a Japanese Important Intangible Cultural Property, and the Nihon Buyo Association established the Nihon Buyo Preservation Association within it. On August 3, a general meeting to establish this group was held at Ginza Blossom. This is a new responsibility for the Nihon Buyo Association, and this group will focus specifically on the preservation and transmission of Nihon Buyo. It will be interesting to see how it develops.

On January 15, the association held the annual *All Schools of Nihon Buyo Young Artists Dance Recital*, which is the ultimate testing ground for young Nihon Buyo dancers, and seven dances were presented. It is striking that forty years ago, the same presentation had different matinee and evening programs for an entire week. While on one hand, you could say that in some ways the selection has become more rigorous, on the other hand, this also reflects how small the pool of active young Nihon Buyo artists has become. I hope that there will be projects to train Nihon Buyo artists on a much broader scale.

On February 11 and 12, the Nihon Buyo Association held its annual recital in the Large Theatre of the National Theatre, which featured 20 dances. There were no special projects sponsored by it, and it felt like a giant version of a dance teacher's student recital. I would like to see some special projects aimed at the preservation and transmission of Nihon Buyo. During June 3–5 at the Small Theatre of the National Theatre, there was the Association's annual presentation of a new Nihon Buyo piece by its group *Mirai-za = SAI (The Theater of the Future = Succession And Innovation)*. This was the group's sixth production *Mai-Hime (The Dancing Girl)*, with the script by Saito Masafumi, staging by Nishikawa Sen'yoichi, choreography by Fujima Etsuko, Hanayagi Shue and Nishikawa Senmorihiko and with special instruction in Kyomai by Inoue Yachiyo. The writer describes it as "the journey and growth as an artist of a young girl named Mai," and "how Mai awakens to dancing, and going beyond boundaries of time and space, she encounters the great artists of Nihon Buyo and eventually discovers the joy of doing her own dance." In other words, it is a story of a young Japanese girl who meets famous dancers of the past, like

Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto, Kaguya, Shizuka Gozen, Okuni, and a kabuki *onnagata* female role specialist. At this point she returns to the present, meets a *geiko* and is led to a wonderful world of dance. Finally, she grasps the most profound secrets of Nihon Buyo and ecstatically performs a wild dance as a ceremony of celebration. However, I did not really feel a sense of the character's growing mastery of dance. This is a frequent problem with these new creations by the association, and I feel that they need to consider their projects from the very fundamentals and start with daily life and then work to lift the creation up from that base.

### Two Ambitious Programs at the Yokohama Noh Theatre

The Yokohama Noh Theatre is a public cultural organization in Yokohama city, which is near Tokyo. It has been producing programs of traditional Japanese performing arts, concentrating on noh and kyogen, as special programs titled *Special Performances in Gratitude for the 28 Years Since the Opening of the Yokohama Noh Theatre on the Occasion of its Temporary Closing*. On September 9, there was *Special Performances Part 2: 600 Years of Ryukyu Performing Arts*, and on October 29, there was *Special Performances Part 3: Nihon Buyo by Artists Closely Related to the Yokohama Noh Theatre*.

The first special program begins with the celebratory piece *Ofu Omoro* and then continues along the line of historical development with the programs Classical Performing Arts, Kumi Odori, Zatsu Odori, Okinawa Plays and New Dances for a veritable picture scroll of Ryukyu Buyo. The second performance featured the dancers Mizuki Yuka and Fujima Etsuko, who have been closely associated with the Yokohama Noh Theatre since its beginning. Writing about Yuka, the producer of the program said: "They say that beautiful women are fearsome. I want to show that fearsome quality." Regarding Etsuko, he said, "She has a fresh, clean line to her art, and I want to bring that out." Yuka performed the role of the wife Tamanoi in the familiar kabuki comic dance *Migawari Zazen* (*The Zen Substitute*), and Etsuko appeared as the old woman Mashiba, who is actually the demon Ibaraki, in the dance *Tsuna Yakata* (*Watanabe Tsuna's Battle Camp*). In *Migawari Zazen*, Tamanoi discovers that her husband who claims he

spends all night doing Zen meditation is actually going to see his lover and is getting his servant to take his place by wearing a concealing robe. After Tamanoi discovers the deception, she takes the servant's place under the robe and listens to her husband describe his night of love. In kabuki, Tamanoi is usually performed as broad farce, but when Yuka performed the role as a woman, rather than a man playing a female role, she expressed the feelings that a woman would have in this situation. This was indeed a masterful example of reinterpreting a kabuki dance so that it would be a Nihon Buyo dance. *Tsuna Yakata* is based on the story of Watanabe Tsuna cutting off the arm of the demon Ibaraki and going into seclusion to prevent the demon from regaining its arm. But the demon appears disguised as Tsuna's beloved aunt Mashiba, the woman that raised him, and he eventually lets her in. The dance ends with the demon triumphantly flying off with its arm. Etsuko's performance was powerful and was aided by the appearance of Hanayagi Motoi as Tsuna. Not only was it scary in all the right places, as Mashiba, Etsuko also brought out the loneliness of an old woman on her own, making it a performance truly worthy of a female Nihon Buyo performer. These achievements, coming from a partnership between a regional artistic organization and Nihon Buyo, are an example that other cultural institutions should watch and learn from.

## Two Creative Productions

The first production was based on *Neko no Shosa (Cat Dance)*, which was performed by the famous Edo period *onnagata* Mizuki Tatsunosuke as part of *Shiki no Goshō Zakura (The Four Seasons of the Imperial Palace Cherry)*. The Mizuki school was named after this legendary kabuki *onnagata* and as a signature piece for this school of dance had it recreated as the Kiyomoto piece *Neko no Koi Musundari ya Nehoregami (A Cat's Love; No Sooner Consummated Than I Awake with Tangled Hair)* (Recital of the Tokyo Mizuki School, April 1, Large Theatre of the National Theatre). The protagonist, Himematsu, while agonizing over her desire for her older brother, hears a brother and sister cat making love noisily outside. At first, she is jealous, but gradually her feelings grow more intense, and she transforms into a cat. The highlight is her crazed, ecstatic dance when she is

transformed into cat.

The second piece was a new dance by Umewaka Kanjiro, the Gidayu narrative musical piece *Tsubakihime Dojoji* (*The Lady of the Camellias at Dojoji Temple*), which takes Violetta from the opera *La Traviata*, which is based on Dumas's novel, and puts her into the context of the Dojoji story about a woman transformed into a serpent through jealousy, (lyrics by Kazu Hajime, composed by Toyozawa Seijiro, *Hayashi* flute and percussion composition by Mochizuki Choji and choreographed by Umewaka Kanjiro, April 7, Nihonbashi Gekijo). It was a satisfying experience, with such elements as the Gidayu music, design, lighting and stage setting combining to make it a comprehensive multimedia stage piece. In particular, the sensuality of Kanjiro's interpretation of the operatic character and the almost eerie feeling of his dramatic performance brought out a fresh attractive quality in the dramatization of the Dojoji story.

### **Fujima Naozo, a Very Active Newer Artist**

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Fujima Naozo had a recital, *The Third Naozo Recital* (July 25, Small Theatre of the National Theatre), which included two classics *Ukarebozu* (*The Happy Begging Priest*) and *Shunkyo Kagami Jishi* (*The Mirror Lion Dance*) and one contemporary piece, *Sasori to Kaeru* (*The Scorpion and the Frog*) (lyrics and choreography by Fujima Naozo, composed by Kineya Fumiya and *hayashi* flute and percussion composition by Yamaguchi Kotaro, Tosha Yukimaru and Mochizuki Kimiho).

This recital was supported by the activities of two groups, Reimei no Kai, a group of young male Fujima school dancers, and Soten, a group of young traditional musicians. The contemporary piece was a repeat performance of a piece created by Soten. Seeing the vigorous activity, using techniques derived from the experience of learning and performing the classics, I look forward to seeing how this will take off and soar for Nihon Buyo.

### **As Always, There Were Many, Many Commemorative Recitals**

As the world of Nihon Buyo is now supported by the tradition of having schools of dance headed by *iemoto* and with succession often decided on a hereditary basis, commemorative recitals marking successions to the position of *iemoto*,



milestones of importance or the achievements of some artist of the past inevitably are a central part of the activities of Nihon Buyo. Whether that is good or bad probably needs some examination.

By date, there was the *Memorial Recital for the Sixth Anniversary of Ichiyama Sho'o's Passing: Ichiyama School Recital* (April 22, National Theatre, Large Theatre), *Fujima Kikuho Dance Recital Commemorating Her 88th Birthday and 60th Year as a Teacher* (April 29, National Theatre, Large Theatre), *Celebration of 90 Years Since the Revival of the Azuma School of Dance and in Memory of the 26th Year Since the Passing of Tokuho I: Azuma School Recital* (May 28, National Theatre, Large Theatre) and the *Celebration of Fujima Hideka's 90th Birthday: 31st Toyo Dance Recital* (June 13, National Theatre, Small Theatre). All of these were gala events and had full houses.

## The Bedrock of the Art of Nihon Buyo

It was good that this year the *Konohana Recital*, featuring the students of the late Hanayagi Toshinami, who was designated a Living National Treasure, was held by her son, Hanayagi Kan'ichi (September 28, National Theatre, Small Theatre). Her former students worked together to put on this recital as a memorial to her. Also, some of Toshinami's top students (Hanayagi Chizuhiko, Hanayagi Shue and Hanayagi Sasakimi) presented the *Sazanami Recital: A Collection of Choreography by Hanayagi Toshinami* (March 29, National Theatre, Small Theatre), which is a sign of the magnitude of Toshinami's contribution to the world of Nihon Buyo.

## Topics

Unusually, there were very few presentations of Kamigata Mai in Tokyo. The only striking examples were *Kamigata Mai: Recital of the Yoshimura School Commemorating the Name-Taking of the Soke Yoshimura Kisho and the 7th Iemoto Yoshimura Teruyuki* (August 13, National Theatre, Large Theatre) and the *Yoshimura Chihiro Mai Recital* (October 21, Kioi Hall, Small Hall). It is particularly sad that the regular performances of Kamigata Mai at the National Theatre have been canceled because many of its activities have been put on hiatus until the theater is rebuilt. I would dearly wish that they could be continued, even if it

means scheduling them at a different time of the year.

The groups that usually elicited commentary here, like Goyokai and Konokai, did not have particularly notable activities. This is probably because the young artists who have been active in these groups for so many years must now act as leaders in their various schools of dance and in the institutions of Nihon Buyo as a whole. However, there is some hope with the beginning of a recital series featuring Hanayagi Motoi and Fujima Etsuko (July 22, National Theatre, Small Theatre).

The 2024 Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology's Art Encouragement Prize went to Ryukyu Buyo dancer Shida Maki. Living National Treasure Nishikawa Senzo died on July 14.

Now, the Nihon Buyo Association will have the heavy responsibility of ensuring the preservation and transmission of Nihon Buyo. But the task of finding and training new talented performers cannot be done by the association alone. It will probably require a major effort, bringing in mass media and giving consideration to the various regions of Japan. There must be a strong stable system put in place to support Nihon Buyo, from the bottom to the heights of artistic achievement.

### **Hirano, Hidetoshi**

*Nihon buyo* (Japanese classical dance) critic. Born in 1944 in Sendai and graduated from the theatre division of the literature department of Waseda University majoring in kabuki. Worked for a publishing house as an editor for such periodicals as *Okinawa Performing Arts*, the quarterly journal *Folk Performing Arts*, and the monthly magazine, *Japanese Music and Classical Dance*. To explore the art of physical expression, he became a critic and is a member of advisory committees for institutions, including the Japanese Cultural Agency and the Society for the Advancement of the Arts in Japan. In 2016, his book *Critique: History of Japanese Physical Expression—Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Period* (Nihon Buyo-sha) was published.

(Translation: Mark Oshima)

# **Four Years into the Pandemic, the Ballet Landscape Begins to Morph**

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Urawa Makoto

Before I discuss the Japanese ballet scene in 2023, I would like to touch briefly on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus was finally downgraded in Japan from Class 2 to Class 5 (a common infectious disease) three and a half years after it began to spread around the world in early 2020. Although the move allowed people to take necessary measures at their own discretion, most theatres had their disinfectant stalls in place even at the end of the year. I noticed that roughly half of the people in the audiences were wearing masks. Before the pandemic, I had never seen so many masks in a theatre—even during the peak of the flu or hay fever season. This mask trend might become a new norm. Like all of us did, professionals in the ballet industry used the last four years to think about how to adapt to this new era. I am beginning to see new trends in the ballet world, and companies are moving in different directions.

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## **A Shift in the Ballet Environment**

Before going into the main topic, I want to review how the ballet environment has changed in the last few years.

First, there are fewer theatres and halls. I have talked about this trend every year in my column, but this year, we saw many more venues close: some for good, some for renovation, and some for extended reconstruction. The National Theatre, which stages traditional Kabuki and Japanese dance shows, will be closed for a long time; Nakano Sunplaza, once a famous landmark in the Nakano area, shut its doors for good; Saitama Arts Theater, which had put on many contemporary dance productions, announced its temporary closure. Shinjuku

Bunka Center and Nerima Culture Center were among the few remaining ballet venues, but they decided to close temporarily. These are just some examples in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Some new, impressive venues have emerged outside major cities, but on the other hand, some old, beloved venues in Yokohama, Nagoya, and Kobe are also scheduled to close permanently or shut down for a limited period.

As a result, there is more competition among companies to secure venues. Some can no longer use the venues that they have been using for a long time; some have to move their annual events to a different season. Those who choose a pricier venue take on the financial burden. On the other hand, choosing a cheaper option makes it harder for companies to keep their performance levels up to standard, and they have also lost income because there are fewer seats to sell.

Next, I would like to address how public funding has affected the ballet scene.

Last year, the Agency for Cultural Affairs launched the Art Caravan, a grant scheme to help artists recover from the pandemic, rejuvenate communities with the help of key organizations in the area, and restore cultural demand. The major companies in the Tokyo area are touring the country with Art Caravan support. For these leading companies, the aid has had significant benefits. They have more shows to perform, they are better off financially, and they can raise their profiles. The program also presents a great opportunity for young dancers. However, not everybody is happy about Art Caravan. It works well for some companies but not for others. One issue is that the Agency for Cultural Affairs sets the bar for securing assistance higher. For example, one of their criteria is whether a recipient organization can attract an audience or not, a condition that can widen gaps within the industry even more. The bigger and the more influential the company, the more likely it is to benefit from the scheme—but it will work against small, mid-sized, and regional companies.

Moreover, small businesses and freelance workers must deal with the newly introduced Qualified Invoicing System (a new tax regulation introduced in October 2023 for dealing with multiple tax rates), which is a major disadvantage for small ballet schools, freelance dancers, and theatre technicians.

The landscape of the ballet scene is slowly changing in this new

environment. This shift is affecting not just ballet companies but also ballet classes around the country. Ballet studios have been providing talented dancers to the ballet scene and supporting the scene financially. The number of students is falling for a variety of reasons, including the country's low birthrate, households' worsening financial situations, increased competition in the educational system, and less economic activity due to the pandemic. The younger generation is showing a stronger interest in new dance styles such as breakdancing, which is soon to debut as an Olympic sport. The changing status of ballet companies and the popularity of teachers can sway student numbers enormously. Some companies are starting classes for adults to attract more students, but the gaps in the industry continue to widen. While some companies can afford to employ a live orchestra for their student showcases, others are doing less showcasing or holding them jointly.

## **Responding to and Overcoming the Pandemic**

With this background in mind, I would like to discuss the ballet scene in detail.

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The first topic is how people have responded to and overcome the pandemic.

One idea that ballet companies came up with under the COVID regulations was to put on concert-style showcases of short pieces. They could avoid crowded rehearsals if the show comprised solos and pas de deux, and the stage sets could be very simple or done without altogether. They wouldn't need to hire an orchestra; they could use recordings instead. And even if they put together a team of popular foreign dancers and Japanese dancers based abroad, it would cost much less than a full ballet production with a live orchestra. Plus, they could lower ticket prices.

I had already seen this trend in 2022, but it became even more apparent in 2023. It reached its peak in July and August, when schools were on summer vacation and ballet companies took breaks from their in-house productions. For example, there were ten different concert-style shows for a total of twenty-three performances from late July to mid-August in the Tokyo metropolitan area alone. More than half of their titles included the words "Gala" or "Festival," and the productions had principal dancers from renowned foreign ballet companies

such as the Paris Opera Ballet and The Royal Ballet, as well as the National Ballet of Japan and other leading Japanese companies. Concert-style shows like these are held throughout the year in various locations.

In fact, it was a joy to see popular dancers from abroad and young Japanese dancers making their mark overseas. More than half of them performed pas de deux, but some performed contemporary pieces or new original work. The shows seemed to attract a good turnout.

I don't mean to denigrate galas or festivals, but a proper ballet production consists of two to four acts with its own full musical score. If ballet companies continue to produce concert-style showcases that feature excerpts or require only a handful of dancers, it will be difficult for *corps de ballet* or ballet companies with troupes of dancers to survive—not only dancers but also ballet music and set design will be in danger.

### **The Classic Among Classics: *The Sleeping Beauty***

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However, I have seen another trend that alleviates my concerns.

One good example is the variety of productions of *The Sleeping Beauty*.

Sadamatsu-Hamada Ballet presented their version in September, K-BALLET TOKYO in October, The Tokyo Ballet in November, and Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo in December. *The Sleeping Beauty* is considered “the classic among classics” because of its flamboyance and refinement. You need a tremendous amount of preparation and a proper system to put it on.

The fact that we are seeing so many companies stage this masterpiece proves that the ballet companies have survived the worst of the pandemic and are getting back on their feet. The companies that chose *The Sleeping Beauty* this year are all leading Japanese companies with their own policies and achievements, fully capable of putting on classics as well as contemporary pieces. K-BALLET TOKYO's version was directed by Kumakawa Tetsuya, The Tokyo Ballet's by Saito Yukari, and Sadamatsu-Hamada Ballet's—a new or revised version—by Sadamatsu Shoichiro. Asami Maki Ballet Tokyo meticulously revived the version originally directed by Terry Westmoreland in a traditional style. It was fascinating to compare these productions and their unique

interpretations with the original Marius Petipa version. To me, this is a gratifying, luxurious way to enjoy ballet.

Matsuyama Ballet, with their formidable track record, features Morishita Yoko, who is still attracting many fans in her mid-70s. The company's in-house choreographer, Shimizu Tetsutaro, directed *Giselle and Albrecht* with a traditional structure and style but with added depth and range. I saw many other companies in the regions tackling full ballet productions, which made me feel hopeful for the future.

### **Ambitions of The Tokyo Ballet and K-BALLET TOKYO**

I didn't see any major new productions by the National Ballet of Japan this year, but they had a balanced program of classic and contemporary work with an increase in the overall number of shows. The Tokyo Ballet made their first foreign tour (of Australia) since the pandemic began. K-BALLET added "TOKYO" to their name to make it clear to the world where they are based. These companies were very prominent this year with their satisfying programs, and they seemed eager to fulfil their ambitions.

Tani Momoko Ballet began using online platforms to promote their dancers and attract audience. The Inoue Ballet Foundation, NORIKO KOBAYASHI Ballet Theatre, Ballet Chambre Ouest, Tokyo City Ballet, Star Dancers Ballet, and NBA Ballet Company are all beginning to develop their own styles, making use of their local characteristics. Japan Ballet Association, the central organization for ballet dancers, continued to provide opportunities for their members to present classics or create new work, as it always does. Hagiwara Seiichi, a choreographer active all over the country, is putting on ballet recitals, one of them featuring the life of Charlie Chaplin. Yamato City Ballet, which produces unique new work every year, presented *Giselle* in two acts; the first act in the contemporary style and the second in the traditional style. The company is very ambitious to create new, full-scale work.

## Prominent Ballet Companies in Nagoya: Ochi International Ballet, Matsuoka Reiko Ballet, and Theatre de Ballet Company

In the Kansai region, Sadamatsu-Hamada Ballet, the longstanding Homura Tomoi Ballet Company, Jinushi Ballet Company—which ploughed a new furrow with the classic *Coppelia*—and Ryuko Arima Ballet in Kyoto are all looking prominent. The relatively new Ballet Company West Japan also gained attention for their new interpretation of *Raymonda*.

It was a good year for the ballet scene in Nagoya. The well-established Ochi International Ballet, with their long tradition, presented a revised version of *Le Corsaire* for the first time in a quarter of a century. One of the leading companies in the area, Matsuoka Reiko Ballet, did a gorgeous double bill of *Soirée de Ballet* (a masterpiece by the late Fukagawa Hideo, who died three years ago) and *Giselle*. Theatre de Ballet Company has also been putting on Fukagawa's work as well as other contemporary productions, while Setsuko Kawaguchi Ballet has been showcasing their interesting style with new, original work. Sumina Okada Ballet Company has been consistently presenting full-length ballet productions. Sassa Chieko Ballet Company had great success with their revival of *Love and Revolution – from Les Misérables*. Yukari Ballet presented *Carmina Burana*, a masterpiece choreographed by Sata Tatsue. Sasabe Kayo presented a Fukagawa piece for the first time. This region is finally coming back to life, returning to its pre-COVID state.

At the end of the year, there were two productions of *The Nutcracker* with live orchestral accompaniment in major cities in Japan's southern and northern reaches. In Fukuoka, far to the south, Sugai Ballet Studio gave their production in Hakataza Theater as part of Hinoki Stage Month for Citizens project, where residents can use the stage for presentations. In the northern city of Sapporo, the production was hosted by hitaru (Sapporo Cultural Arts Theater) and choreographed by Masako Senda, a prominent figure on the Sapporo dance scene. The three performances attracted a large audience.

It was very difficult to invite artists from overseas due to a mix of factors, including the pandemic, the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, the conflict between Israel and Hamas, and the weak yen. However, the National Ballet of



Ukraine (the former Kyiv Ballet) performed in Japan in the summer and at the end of the year. The Royal Ballet and the Hamburg Ballett also performed in Japan and featured notable appearances by Japanese dancers.

The number of dancers entering ballet competitions is dropping these days for various reasons similar to those I mentioned above. However, young dancers are showing an eagerness to go abroad, and more and more of them are seeking scholarships and recommendations for schools overseas.

### **Urawa, Makoto**

Born Ichikawa Akira, Urawa Makoto is a former professor of the Faculty of Business Administration and Corporate Culture at Shoin University and a former advisor to 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. In addition to serving as a long-time committee member for the Agency for Cultural Affairs and other bodies, Urawa has also been on the judging panels for various dance competitions and awards.

(Translation: Ishikawa Mai and Donncha Crowley)

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## Contemporary Dance and Butoh

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# As Wrongs Are Revealed Throughout Society, Indifference to Power and Protocol Means Dance Remains Uncorrupted

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Tsutsumi Hiroshi

The year 2023 saw an array of wrongs laid bare before society at large, with near-daily media reports on allegations of sexual abuse by Johnny Kitagawa, founder of Johnny & Associates, Inc. (now SMILE-UP); an attempted joint suicide by Ichikawa Ennosuke and his family as a result of reporting on sexual and power harassment allegations; and stories about bullying, power harassment, and overwork at the Takarazuka Revue. The systems and structures of the entertainment industry, so strict in its artistic requirements, were judged to be outdated conventions that infringe on human rights. Many similar scandals were uncovered in the economic and political spheres. What about the world of contemporary dance?

### Questioning the Japanese Approach to the Artistic Director System

Kanamori Jo's new memoir *Dance Company of Struggles* (*Tatakau buyodan*) laid bare the current situation of Noism, the company for which Kanamori acts as artistic director. Noism was formed in 2004 as Japan's first dance company with a permanent residency at a theatre—specifically, the Ryutopia Niigata City Performing Arts Center. The company seemed to be sailing before the wind, constructing methods, training dancers, and presenting original works to the world. Kanamori, however, describes a history of clashing with aimless administration and governance as Noism rose from a starting point without enough people, equipment, or money to become part of the city's cultural policy.

This year, Kanamori staged *Der Wanderer* (*Sasuraibito*), which put the

individuality of the company's members to use in its choreography, and premiered the double bill "Domain" (*Ryoiki*), consisting of *Floating Field*, commissioned from external choreographer Futami Kazuyuki, and *Silentium*, a duo work by Kanamori himself. Kanamori also restaged *Oni*, a collaboration with the taiko group Kodo, and presented the world premiere of the completed *Kaguyahime*, a Japanese grand ballet commissioned by the Tokyo Ballet and presented act by act over three years. *Kaguyahime*'s apt concept combined lyrical music by Debussy with abstract, simple costumes and sets in a manner that won much acclaim from audiences. The Tokyo Ballet is currently considering overseas performances.

For many years, Japanese public theaters appointed as artistic directors charismatic figures of the theater who then proceeded to operate in a privileged, top-down way. Recently, however, bottom-up initiatives rooted in local communities are attracting attention, and it is becoming more common for dancers to accept directorships. We are witnessing the beginning of an effort to establish a Japanese approach to the artistic director system that is open to and can coexist with society and regional communities.

Teshigawara Saburo serves as artistic director at the Aichi Prefectural Art Theater, where he holds workshops and takes an active role in training dancers within the community. Teshigawara was joined at the premiere of his new piece *Waltz* by Sato Rihoko and Javier Ara Saucó, and together the three danced their way with delicacy and freedom through countless classics of the waltz form. The "drawing dance" *Moonlight Painting* (*Gekkoga*) was a duo with Sato based on Haniya Yutaka's novel *Dead Spirits* (*Shirei*). In this work, a font of surrealistic imagery seamlessly transitioned to dance, accompanied by projected footage of Teshigawara himself drawing repeatedly on the same sheet of paper. In *Rimbaud Poems: From A Season in Hell to Illuminations* (*Ranbo shishu: Jigoku no kisetsu kara Iryuminashion*), Teshigawara performed alongside Alexandre Riabko, Ara Saucó, and Sato. The dancers stepped in and out of the pages of a gigantic book, lithely and toughly extending the improvisational movements developed through Teshigawara's unique methods. The Update Dance series at Karas Apparatus, Teshigawara's base of operations, also reached more than 100 pieces, revealing an

endless creativity reminiscent of a perpetual motion machine.

The Saitama Arts Theater has been undergoing renovations since October 2022, so the Condors, led by artistic director Kondo Ryohei, performed *Pop Life* at Saitama Hall instead. Despite the reclassification of Covid-19 from a Class 2 to a Class 5 infectious disease, gloom continues to reign both within Japan and around the world, with issues ranging from rising prices to the war in Ukraine—but Kondo decided to go in a pop direction all the same. Named after a song by Prince, *Pop Life* was a fun, pop performance on a stage adorned with colorful balloons. With the Saitama Arts Theater unavailable, Kondo also launched the Saitama Kaiyu project, traveling around the prefecture to uncover its diverse cultural resources. The reopening of the theater in 2024 will be marked by the staging of a commemorative piece called *Saitama Kaiyu Special Bumper Issue!* (*Saitama kaiyu tokudaigo!*)

At the Matsumoto Performing Arts Center, three artistic co-directors began their joint term in April 2024. The co-director with responsibility for dance will be Kurata Midori, leader of the akakilike dance company and known for her emphasis on co-creation with everyday people from various walks of life. This year, Kurata unveiled *Please applause when the conductor appears* (*Shikisha ga detekitara hakushu o shite kudasai*) at the Saitama Triennale 2023. To create this work, she put out a call for people who had quit ballet, then turned the stigma lingering in their hearts and their contemporary realities into scenes. The sheer cost of ballet in Japan forces many people to give it up against their will, and this piece gathered up that abandoned love of the art and unfolded it for the audience.

Umeda Hiroaki, in-house choreographer at Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse No. 1, continued his educational outreach initiatives and socially inclusive activities such as choreography workshops and “posture classes” for the general public. In the field of creative performance, he premiered both *Moving State*, which shares a uniquely conceived dance method called the Somatic Field Project, and *assimilating*, a new solo work. He also directed *Choreograph*, an installation demonstrating a fusion between dance and digital technology.

France-based Ito Kaori was appointed director of the TJP, Centre

dramatique national de Strasbourg – Grand Est. Under her direction, the TJP is devoting great effort to connecting with people of all generations in regional areas under the guiding concept of *kintsugi*, the Japanese method of mending broken ceramics.

In Japan, Ito staged two original works. In *An upside-down world* (*Sakasama no sekai*), created based on ideas from children, she worked with children from Yokohama's Chinatown, putting on a cheerful performance that seemed to overturn the toybox through constant contact between the audience and the cast and staff, eliminating any separation between them. *Jankenpon* was a mobile outdoor show filled with the spirit of play, taking place simultaneously at multiple locations around the Odawara Art Foundation's Enoura Observatory, established by contemporary artist Sugimoto Hiroshi. Ito led the audience from place to place as the play progressed, concluding with a dance overflowing with the spirit of freedom performed on the observatory's glass Noh stage with the seascape as backdrop.

## Realities and Fictions of the Body

Society conforms to systems and structures, but contemporary dance is different. It has no set forms and preserves no vested interests. It may be that corrupt structures are simply unlikely to arise in spaces where creation involves confrontation with the realities of individual bodies and talents on each specific occasion. In 2023, many dance works were also notable in their adoption of a kind of fictionality, as if to stand in opposition to reality.

Kitamura Akiko, known for many past international collaborations, premiered two pieces based on fieldwork. In *Echoes of Calling –rainbow after–*, she collaborated with a traveling performer called a *bakhshi* from Uzbekistan, a singer in the traditional *sean-nós* style from Ireland, and a dancer from Ethiopia. In a rubble-like set reverberating with a low, drone-like sound, the dancers received the words of a shaman, repeated them until they became onomatopoeia, and converted them into bodily movements used for communication. Their dancing in rainbow light seemed to recount aspirations for world peace. Meanwhile, Kitamura's *Soul Hunter* was a collaboration with Magenta, a young artist

from the Philippines, based on the legend of a hunter who went into the forest and never came back after possessing the spirit of a deer he meant to make his prey. Elite dancers exchanged nimble animal movements, depicting the reality of animism and shamanism in the present day.

Kuroda Ikuyo revived *YSee*, her dance interpretation of American singer-songwriter Joanna Newsom's album *Ys*. Ide Shigehiro (idevian crew) joined her for the project, and a newly added duet for Ide and Kuroda, "Clam, Crab, Cockle, Cowrie," made a fresh impression with its innocent depiction of the relationship between the protagonist and her protector.

Suzuki Ryu choreographed and directed *Rain*, a work produced by Karatsu Eri of DaBY. Based on the Somerset Maugham short story of the same name, *Rain* featured a lead performance by Yonezawa Yui—a principal of the National Ballet of Japan, and its greatest actor—along with an installation-like set by contemporary artist Omaki Shinji and stereophonic sound by musician evala. This ensemble came together to present a dance that was gripping and palpable in its symbolic depiction of a story-world also sharing elements with the Covid-19 pandemic.

Nakamura Yo presented dance dramas reflecting her unique understanding of gender. *fMacbeth* offered scenes from a contemporary perspective with a focus on words from the titular Shakespeare play that begin with the letter *f*. Thus, the struggle for the throne became a game of musical chairs, with "fair" or "foul" judged using triangular hand flags as if at a sporting event. When a game of catch between Banquo and his son is inherited by the heirless Macbeth, he soon runs out of people to play with, bringing the game to an end. Foul becomes fair as the work reaches a climax in which broccoli stands in for Birnam Wood. This creative approach, which involves reading the original work critically, flexibly incorporating ideas into the site of performance, and playing the results through to a conclusion, was also on display in Nakamura's *Roots in Orlando* ( $\sqrt{\text{Orlando}}$ ), based on the novel by Virginia Woolf.

Iwabuchi Teita Body Map premiered *Alien Mirror Ballism*, in which dancers embodying Iwabuchi's amoeba body method flexibly handled the scenes while musician Nukata Masashi confronted them with simple percussion. In the

closing section, the simple rhythm patterns and phrases heated up like progressive rock, building to a unique dance groove.

Kaori Seki Co. Punctumun's *Mi toto matatakima iremono* was a dramatic examination of the extremes of bodily possibility. The work had no concrete story, set roles, or dialogue. Dancers switched their acting on and off as they entered and left the acting area, calmly proceeding through subtle movements. The audience supplemented the scenes with their imagination. When the dancers suddenly stopped, let water drip from between their legs, and then started walking again as though nothing had happened, the effect gave the distinct impression of observing animals in their natural habitat. One scene, in which a device on a woman's back ruptured immediately after she started running, upon which she collapsed in a spray of blood as if shot, was especially vivid.

Dramatic bodies momentarily rose only to disappear again. Artistic expression designed to provoke the audience has evolved to a new level.

Nakama Ayaka premiered *The Odoriba Legend (Odoriba densetsu)* at Kyoto Experiment 2023. In this work, she dances the history of the Kansai dance scene during Japan's economic bubble, based on her own research and wearing a costume of her own making. A temporary venue was constructed for the performance on the former site of a municipal housing development in Kyoto, and Nakama incorporated the swaying of leaves and branches in the wind and the recently passed squalls into her movements, sharing a genuine experience at that place and time with the audience.

ChatGPT, launched the previous year, proved the forerunner of a generative AI boom in 2023. One work that responded to this was contact Gonzo and yang02's *jactynogg zontaanaco*. In this piece, a Segway and autonomous ground vehicle (AGV) equipped with live cameras by contemporary artist yang02 roamed freely throughout the venue, and the images they captured were translated into text and read aloud by AI. However, faced with contact Gonzo's performance, which involves improvisatory physical collisions in a manner that recalls wrestling or hand-to-hand fighting, the AI verbalizations were unable to keep pace. The result was repeated mistranslations, sometimes interspersed with remarkably literary phrases. The performance heated up violently, seeming to

suggest that the body will be humanity's last fortress.

Germany-based Kaido Chikako came to Japan to premiere two new works. *What we have lost* (*Watashitachi ga ushinatta mono*) was a male/female duet about what was lost during the Covid-19 pandemic, depicting a series of bizarre actions, performed with everyday household items during voluntary lockdown, that gradually render the actors genderless. *One Morning in Nara* (*Nara no aru hi no asa*) was a solo piece for a male dancer about the man who shot former Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. While singing the Yiddish folk song "Papirosn," the dancer put on a performance that laid bare the darkness in the hearts of children following their parents' religions and uncovered the brooding passions, transcending time and national divisions, of those who have been abused.

Amagatsu Ushio's Sankai Juku staged the world premiere of their latest work, *Totem: Void and Height* (*Totem: Shinku to takami*). Inspired by Nakanishi Natsuyuki's set design, the stage had a towering transparent totem at its center, with four spaces around it divided by a cross. In the past, Sankai Juku has presented many works that depicted ancient history or the vastness of the universe and then concluded with a group dance of the entire cast in harmony with nature. This work did not follow this pattern; instead, it presented discord and confusion and ended with solo scenes by young dancers accompanied by noise. At the curtain call, *Amazing Grace* was heard. A totem is a symbol of a particular group or tribe, but this work symbolically depicted the divisions faced by the current world.

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For better or worse, contemporary dance does not bend to power or protocol, which allows it to avoid corruption and continue to evolve. Its main focus is on harnessing the creative powers and talents of the artists involved, and pieces are supplemented by the imagination of the audience. The promise of spaces for free expression survives.



### **Tsutsumi, Hiroshi**

Born in 1966 in Kawasaki. Graduated in theatre studies at the Department of Literature at Bunka Gakuin. Worked as an editor of *Art Vision* art magazine, *Apo* entertainment information magazine, *Engeki Bukku* (Theater Book) theater magazine, and *Serifu no Jidai* playwright magazine, and as a publisher of *Bacchus* performing arts magazine, before going freelance. Has covered a wide range of performing art genres, including small theatre, *shingeki*-style (modern realism) theatre, underground (Angura) theatre, commercial theatre, traditional theatre, and dance scenes, and produced many special features. Edited *The Flying Dangoro Party in the Sky: "Rebirth of Acharaka"* (*Sora tobu kumo no ue Dangoro ichiza: "Acharaka saitanjo"*), *Performing Arts in Germany Today*, and *Peter Brook's The Road to "Battlefield,"* among other works.

(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)

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## Television Dramas

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# Looking Beyond the Make-or-Break Gambit of *Vivant*

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Kimura Takashi

### The Hit Drama That Told One Woman's Life Story—Five Times

As 2023 began, the TV drama world was still absorbing the shock of *silent* (Fuji TV). Broadcast in autumn 2022, *silent* still boasts the highest streaming figures of any television program to date and was particularly well received by the younger audience segments that are proving so challenging to the industry. Its lessons will surely be adopted as new guiding principles.

Scripts that emphasized conversational dialogue over eccentric characterization and shocking twists, direction that brought out not only psychological depth but also details of sound and set design, using places and objects as they truly are—the influences of *silent* were evident throughout 2023's crop of dramas. To the above list, we might also add a willingness to entrust both script and direction to relatively young talents around the age of thirty.

Some 70% of the winter season's dramas, which began broadcasting in January, were original stories, but by far the most popular was *Rebooting* (*Burasshu appu raifu*, NTV), which begins with protagonist Kondo Asami (Ando Sakura) dying in a car accident at the age of 33 and facing reincarnation as a giant anteater. Kondo decides to do her life over instead to earn a human rebirth, kicking off a story with plenty of room to breathe, as might be expected from a script by comedian Masuno "Bakarhythm" Hidetomo.

Repeating life over and over is a standard concept in content aimed at younger audiences, but *Rebooting* added unique elements: starting over as a baby while retaining memories, for example, or building up good karma to make wishes come true. The idle conversations between Ando and costars Kaho and

Kinami Haruka were as endlessly engaging as the skillfully incorporated references to songs and products popular in various decades. By the end of the series, Kondo has lived her life five times over. With the addition of Mizukawa Asami, the series established a quartet of actresses who created a moving depiction of friendship, resulting in a fantasy for a new age, combining a free, daring vision with an intricate and sensitive approach.

### Three New Drama Slots for the Second Year Running

Moving on to the spring drama season that began of April, one point worth noting is the addition of three new broadcast slots: the ABC Productions slot on TV Asahi at 10 p.m. on Sundays, the Kansai TV Productions slot on Fuji TV at 11 p.m. on Tuesdays, and the slot on NTV from 12:30 a.m. Saturday morning. This is the second spring in a row that three new slots have been added—a steady increase that reflects the vital role that commercial broadcasters have allotted to TV dramas in their future business plans. With declining broadcast revenues now an inevitability, the hope is that income from streaming will pick up the slack. This is expected to include income from advertising on free streaming services, membership fees from broadcaster-owned paid streaming services, licensing fees from overseas streaming, spin-offs, and more.

One spring drama that took hold of the discourse in an unusual way was *Even If You Don't Do It* (*Anata ga shite kurenakute mo*, Fuji TV). As might be expected from a story that focused on the issue of sexless marriages this series found a large audience, who enjoyed it secretly via streaming services. Its 54.81 million total streams on TVer during its three-month run were enough to achieve a tie for first place with the summer smash *Vivant*.

*Even If You Don't Do It* won over this audience with a thoughtful and sustained exploration of the psychological state not only of Yoshino Michi (Nao) and Niina Makoto (Iwata Takanori), whose sexual advances are rebuffed by their partners, but also those partners themselves, Yoshino Yoichi (Nagayama Eita) and Niina Kaede (Tanaka Minami). Instead of provoking with incendiary sex scenes and sparring women, the story aroused empathy through grounded depictions of human suffering, desperate searches for light amid the darkness,

and poignant monologues. The creative team on *Even If You Don't Do It* also produced the hit drama *Hirugao: Love Affairs in the Afternoon* (*Hirugao: Heijitsu gogo sanji no koibitotachi*) nine years ago, and although the new series was based on a popular manga, it showed the influence of *silent* clearly in its imagery and details.

### A Hit That Defied Genre Classification

Turning to the summer drama season, which began in July, it seems fair to say that *Vivant* (TBS) stole the show. With *Vivant*, Fukuzawa Katsuo was shooting a story of his own creation for the first time, and for the occasion, he assembled an all-star ensemble of 44 actors, a total cast and staff of 250, and some 3,000 heads of livestock for a shooting schedule that included two and a half months on location over a thousand-kilometer stretch of Mongolia. Over the course of the series, sparks flew from clashes between first-class actors like Sakai Masato, Abe Hiroshi, and Yakusho Koji; vast deserts were crossed by camel; and cars crashed by the dozen in extravagant set pieces—and it was all captured in imagery of such urgency that it seemed palpably present to the viewer.

One reason *Vivant's* story proved such a surprise was the production's unusual PR strategy. Nothing at all was revealed about the drama's characters, themes and goals, or even genre before the series began, and the full picture did not even begin to become clear until halfway through the story. This was the exact opposite of the approach of the simple morality plays represented by earlier works by Fukuzawa like *Naoki Hanzawa* (*Hanzawa Naoki*) and *Downtown Rocket* (*Shitamachi roketto*), and creating a mystery so complete that it obscured even the genre to which *Vivant* belonged proved a powerful strategy for capturing viewer interest.

New riddles and hints continued to appear throughout *Vivant's* broadcast, and the production's practice of openly encouraging theories and speculation through its official X (formerly Twitter) account was another reason for the show's growing popularity. During the six days between each broadcast, the account would reply to theories and share behind-the-scenes stories, establishing a dialogue that kept *Vivant* a topic of discussion for the entire week.

## The Monetization Strategy That Justified ¥100 Million per Episode

The length of *Vivant*'s installments also set the industry abuzz. Of the ten episodes, fully six were “expanded specials,” more than the standard 54 minutes in length. (Specifically, these were episode 1 at 108 minutes; episodes 2, 9, and 10 at 79 minutes; and episodes 3 and 5 at 69 minutes.) The total volume was effectively equal to 13 regular-sized episodes. This was not simply a matter of size; it reflected the production's uncompromising pursuit of story continuity and intrigue, with visible traces of cooperation from the network's programming and sales departments.

Each episode of *Vivant* reportedly cost ¥100 million to make, some three or four times the usual cost of a domestic drama. This too reveals not only the intensity and passion tangible throughout the production but also TBS's serious intent to find new revenue sources via streaming—including outside Japan's borders. Given the limitations of a business model reliant on Japan-only television broadcasts and the possible profits to be earned overseas, global content must be created in a new way, with an approach more akin to a production company than a traditional television network. *Vivant* felt like a challenge to the entire Japanese television industry.

Notwithstanding comments from producers at other networks about the inability of competing on budget grounds, it is a fact that certain aspects of *Vivant* cry out to be emulated. *Vivant* was successfully monetized in a multifaceted way—not just through broadcasts and streaming but also through new paid signups and fewer cancellations at U-NEXT, broadcasts of last-minute specials, paid fan meetings that could also be joined online, sales of merchandise of every kind (with new items released by the week), location tours created in collaboration with travel companies, and even hints of a sequel. In short, *Vivant* demonstrated one way in which drama production companies can earn production costs and profits from a variety of sources, avoiding overreliance on broadcast revenue alone.

## NHK Gets Serious: Two Ambitious Series in One Year

The biggest splash during the autumn drama season, which began in October,

was made by *Ooku: The Inner Chambers, Season 2* (NHK G). Season 1 of the story had been broadcast in the winter season of the same year, starting in January—no small feat given that both were period pieces with all the attendant challenges around costuming, art direction, and coaching actors in everything from language to gestures. The story covered the majority of the 250-year Edo period, depicting multiple generations of shoguns and their lives, making it the kind of monumental accomplishment that only NHK, with its wealth of people, money, and time, could pull off. Unfortunately, however, minimal recognition in its broadcast slot and the low penetration of streaming app NHK Plus meant that the number of actual viewers was relatively small for such a widely praised work.

Fuji TV has depicted the same “inner chambers” of the Edo shoguns in semi-regular dramas for decades now, but the 2023 NHK *Inner Chambers* was a dramatization of Yoshinaga Fumi’s manga, which adds a new gender-swapping twist to the theme. In Yoshinaga’s story, a deadly disease called the “redface pox,” which only affects men, spreads throughout Japan, devastating the male population and forcing a series of women to reign as shogun. This might sound far-fetched, but each episode made the story feel more plausible. Not only were the depictions of people and events true to history, the script and direction imparted an exquisite realism to the anguish and interpersonal bonds of the female shoguns and those around them.

Several fantasy-based works stood out in 2023. As well as the aforementioned *Brush Up Life*, there was *Why Didn’t I Tell You a Million Times?* (*100 mankai ieba yokatta*, TBS), *Pending Train* (*Pending Train: Hachiji nijusanpun, ashita, kimi to*, TBS), and *Ya Boy Kongming!* (*Paripi Komei*, Fuji TV). *The Inner Chambers*, however, which is delicately balanced between fact and fantasy, stood head and shoulders above the rest in terms of quality.

*The Inner Chambers* was also just one example of a notable tendency among this year’s TV dramas of exploring the bonds between women across differences of age, background, and social standing. Alongside, once more, *Rebooting*, other dramas meeting this description included *At Least on Sunday Night* (*Nichiyo no yoru gurai wa . . .*, ABC), *18/40: Unbreakable Bond of Dreams* (*18/40: Futari nara yume mo koi mo*, TBS), and *Sexy Tanaka-san* (NTV). Women are the main target

viewership for TV dramas, particularly on weekday nights, and there are many actresses with both the acting chops and the star power to carry such major roles; for these and other reasons, this trend looks set to continue.

## Dramas That Took Chances

Even aside from the series mentioned above, 2023 was a year of challenging TV dramas with a striking willingness to take chances. Examples include *War of Traps* (*Wana no senso*, Kansai TV), starring Kusanagi Tsuyoshi in his first commercially broadcast serial drama lead in six years; *Reversal Orchestra* (NTV), about the struggles of a second-rate orchestra; *unknown* (TV Asahi), a mysterious romantic suspense about vampires; *Wave, Listen to Me!* (*Nami yo, kiite kure*, TV Asahi), showcasing Koshiba Fuka's fully committed machine-gun delivery; *Passion for Punchlines* (*Da ga, jonetsu wa aru*, NTV), in which idols reenacted the lives and *manzai* comedy of Wakabayashi Masayasu and Yamasato Ryota; *Cinderellas of Midsummer* (*Manatsu no Shinderera*, Fuji TV), an ensemble romance perfect for summer beaches; *Hayabusa Fire Brigade* (*Hayabusa shobodan*, TV Asahi), an extended mystery about unsettling incidents and conspiracies in a rural town; *One Day: Wonderful Christmas Ado* (*One Day: Seiya no karasawagi*, Fuji TV), which devoted its entire season to covering the eponymous day in meticulous detail; and *My Beloved Flower* (*Ichiban suki na hana*, Fuji TV), which embraced the challenge of having four equal lead characters. As the number of timeslots devoted to dramas grow, stories that rely on old standbys like detective work, medical settings, and legal intrigue are at an ever higher risk of stepping on each other's toes or simply provoking boredom in viewers. We can expect producers to continue searching for new ideas through a process of trial and error.

Incidentally, to cover NHK G's morning dramas as well, the modern-day story *Fly Up!* (*Maiagare!*) ended in March, followed by *Simplicity/Full Bloom* (*Ranman*) and *Boogie-Woogie* (*Bugi-ugi*), both of which adopted the classic NHK morning drama format of tracing the pre- and postwar life story of a notable historical figure. Meanwhile, after venturing into the Kamakura period in 2022, NHK's historical taiga drama for 2023 was a return to the familiar Edo period

with *What Will You Do, Ieyasu?* (*Do suru Ieyasu*).

As the complete absence of the term “Covid-19” from this essay up to this paragraph might suggest, in the world of TV dramas, at least, the disease is considered a thing of the past, and production efforts are now focused on future success. Put another way, the TV industry clearly has high expectations for the drama as a genre at present, and cast and staff alike are fully present and fighting the good fight.

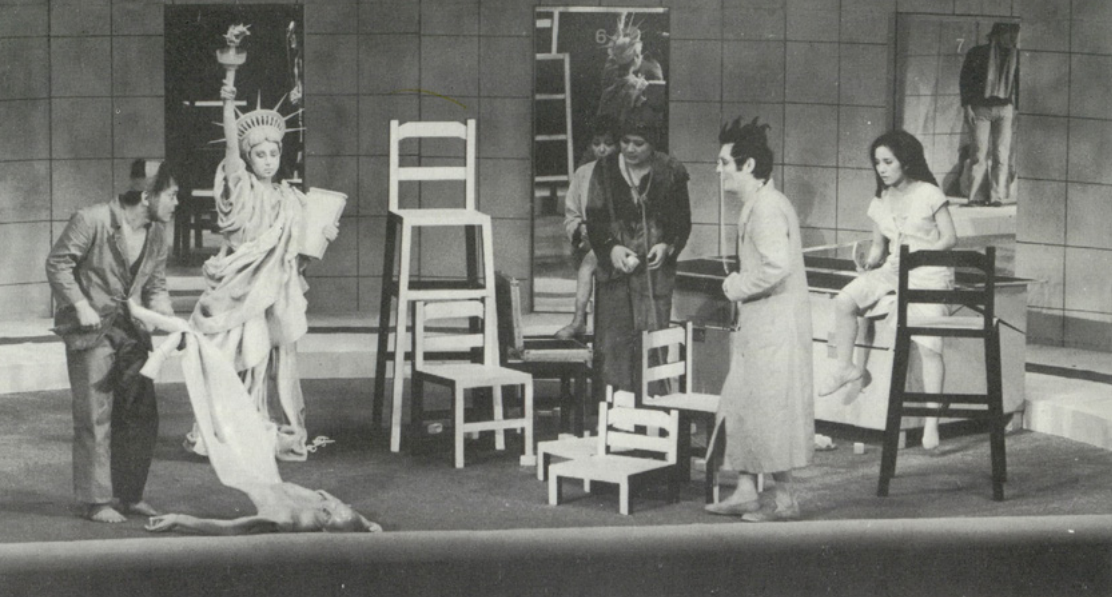
**Kimura, Takashi**

Columnist, consultant, and drama commentator. Writes 20 to 30 columns per month for magazines and websites, along with making appearances on shows like *Domo*, *NHK* and *New Weekly Critique on Fuji Television* (*Shukan Fuji Telebi hiho*) as a drama expert. Along with providing information to multiple television networks, active as an interviewer specializing in celebrities who has conducted more than 2,000 interviews. Watches every series of every drama broadcast across Japan. Author of books such as *84 Listening Techniques of a Top Interviewer* (*Toppu intabyua no kikiwaza 84*).



トピックス  
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**Developments in Japan and Overseas**  
**in 2023**



*Loving Glasses Are Colored Ones*, Abe Kobo Studio, Dir. Abe Kobo (1973, Seibu Theater [now the PARCO Theater])

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## Developments in Japan and Overseas

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# The Theatrical Experiments of Abe Kobo on the 100th anniversary of his birth

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From the 1950s to the 1980s, Abe Kobo produced avant-garde works as a novelist, playwright, and director. Born in 1924 as the eldest son of a doctor and graduating from the University of Tokyo's Faculty of Medicine, after debuting as a novelist, Abe continued his creative endeavors across varied media, including novels, theater, film, music, and photography, until his death at the age of 68 in 1993.

Abe was considered a candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature in his later years, and his works are highly regarded worldwide. His *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962) and other works have been published in over thirty countries and continue to be read today.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Abe Kobo's birth, so *Theatre Yearbook* will explore his theatrical activities through essays by researchers from both Japan and abroad.

## Abe Kobo and the Theater

Takahashi Nobuyoshi

In 1951, Abe Kobo was awarded the 25th Akutagawa Prize for his novel *The Crime of S. Karma*. He had been devoted solely to writing novels until then, but afterward, he also began writing scripts for movies and plays. His scriptwriting for film came to a provisional end with his 1971 film *The Cliff of Time*, but his playwriting continued; he led a theater troupe and directed plays himself until his health declined in 1982. During this period, he wrote nearly a hundred scripts for plays, revealing his strong interest in dialogue and acting.

The first play Abe wrote was *Girl and Fish* (13 scenes) in 1953, but his first play to be performed was *Uniform* by the theater group Seihai in 1955. Originally published in the magazine *Gunzou* in 1954 as a one-act play with five scenes, *Uniform* underwent significant revisions to three acts and seven scenes during Seihai's rehearsals. The reason for this change is detailed in testimony by Kurahashi Ken, the play's director: "In the original draft, the role of the wife didn't offer much for an actor to work with, but actors want to flesh out their roles. Pressed with that, Mr. Abe would ponder deeply during rehearsals, wondering how the wife would be feeling, whether she liked or disliked Chinsaa. 'You're right, her life isn't really depicted, is it,' he said. In the end, it turned out that the wife and Hige were having an affair" (*Nise-geppo, The Complete Works of Abe Kobo V, Sub-notes*<sup>(1)</sup>).

Abe experienced firsthand the challenges of translating written words into living speech. The Seihai actors were seemingly striving for a "sentimental acting" type of performance that Abe disliked<sup>(2)</sup>, but it was consistency of conversation conveyed solely through dialogue that drew him into the world of playwriting, becoming a foundation for his later focus on physiological acting. An

elated Abe himself said, “I now know that I cannot stop writing plays in the future. It seems something has been long suppressed and locked away within my ideas that can only be expressed through the dramatic form” (V, 62’). He then wrote two more plays in rapid succession.

One of those was *Slave Hunting* (5 acts, 18 scenes), first performed three months after *Uniform* by the Haiyuza Theatre Company under the direction of Senda Koreya. Abe considered this the first theatrical work he wrote with conviction, describing it as “my first play, written as such,” (XXI, 415), likely explaining his deep engagement with its themes. As further proof, he revised *Slave Hunting* twelve years later (revised edition, 7 scenes) and again twenty years later into *Slave Hunting* (12 scenes), indicating Abe’s continued preoccupation with that work’s themes.



*Slave Hunting*, Dir. Senda Koreya (1955, Haiyuza Theatre). Photo courtesy of Haiyuza Theatre

In any case, Abe began energetically writing plays for theater companies, obtaining a knack for writing and an increased interest in acting. In 1969, he finally directed one of his own plays, *The Man Who Turned Into a Stick* (3 scenes).

He directed *Guidebook* in 1971, then two years later established his own theatre company, Abe Studio. The inaugural performance of this company was the newly written *Loving Glasses Are Colored Ones* (32 scenes) for the opening of the Shibuya Seibu Theatre in June 1973. This was strongly supported by Tsutsumi Seiji<sup>(3)</sup>, an introduction by an editor from the Shinchosha Publishing Company.

Abe's plays can thus be divided into two categories: those written for other directors and those he directed himself. Specifically, the former category includes works from his first play up to *Involuntary Homicide* (1971), while the latter ranges from *The Man Who Turned Into a Stick* to *The Little Elephant is Dead (An Exhibition of Images III)* (1979). His revision of *You, Too, Are Guilty* for the fortieth anniversary of the Haiyuza Theatre Company in 1984 cannot be distinctly categorized due to a hiatus of Abe Studio activities.

Moreover, the former category of works can be subdivided into three periods. His early period, from 1953 to 1958, centered around *Slave Hunting* (1955) but includes *Girl and Fish* (first appearing in 1953), *Uniform* (5 scenes), *Uniform* (3 acts, 7 scenes), *Express Boat* (1955), *Perpetual Motion* (first appearing in 1956), and *The Ghost is Here* (1958). This period, an extension of his experimental phase of developing *Slave Hunting*, was marked by conscious attempts to introduce non-existent objects onto the stage.

His middle period spans five years, from the first performance of *The Final Weapon* in 1958, through *A Cute Woman* (1959), *Giant Legend* (1960), *The Day of Speaking Stones* (1960), *Island of Ghosts* (1960), *A Ghost Came to Town* (1962), *The Fortress* (1962), and *The Beggar's Song* (1962). Other than *The Fortress*, this period can be characterized by its use of *Sprechchor* (spoken chorus) and musical elements. However, the theme of non-existent entities continues in his two "Ghost" works.

His late period, lasting seven years, includes *You, Too, Are Guilty* (1965), *Friends* (1967), *Enomoto Takeaki* (1967), *Slave Hunting* (revised) (1967), and *Involuntary Homicide* (1971). As mentioned, this was the last period when Abe entrusted his plays to other directors, his final phase of playwriting to provide works for others. However, since he began directing in 1969, this seven-year designation is somewhat arbitrary and for convenience.

*The Ghost Is Here*, Haiyuza Dir. Senda Koreya (1958, Haiyuza Theatre)  
Photo courtesy of Haiyuza Theatre



*Giant Legend*, Haiyuza Dir. Senda Koreya (1960, Haiyuza Theatre)  
Photo courtesy of Haiyuza Theatre

1967, originates from his 1951 novel *Intruders*. He revisited *Friends* in a 1974 revised version, indicating that, like *Slave Hunting*, he pursued a single theme over nearly 24 years.

Fully grasping the overarching narrative of Abe's plays thus calls for an intricate analysis that intertwines multiple periods, even when simply attempting to categorize them into groups of works. It is in the period when Abe himself

Individually considering works in the first category, it becomes clear that chronological classification alone is sometimes insufficient. For example, determining whether non-existent entities like the dead or ghosts appear in the works of a given period is infeasible, and while we might try to define a period based on its musical elements, classical dramatic works like *The Fortress* become included. Therefore, we must simultaneously consider both chronological subdivisions and thematic classifications. In most of his plays, Abe developed themes he had initially explored in his novels. For instance, the theme of *Friends*, first performed in

took on the role of director that these intricately interwoven groups of works converge on a single proposition. This proposition is founded in the stage space as a fictional realm, one where the emotional acting of characters, their individuality and feelings, is dis-



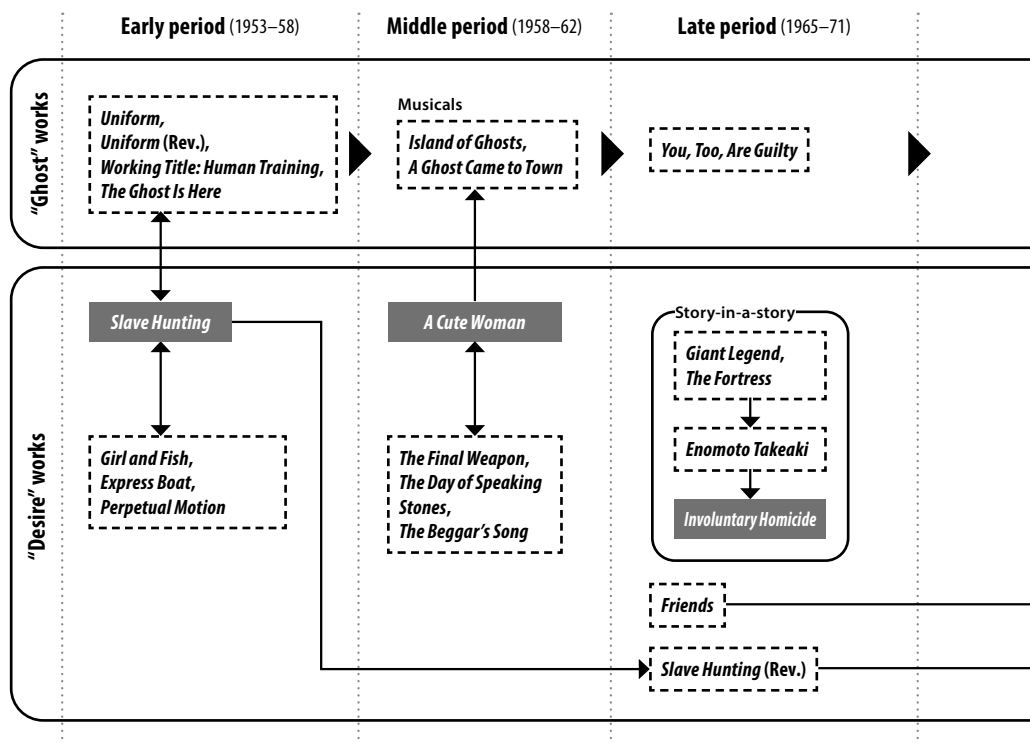
*Friends*, Seinenza Theater Company, Dir. Naruse Masahiko (1967, Kinokuniya Hall) Photo courtesy of Seinenza Theater Company

carded in favor of an abstract space that stimulates the audience's imagination. This approach shows Abe's desire not to cross genre boundaries merely in form but to explore the uniqueness of theater. As he once stated, "I dislike both novelistic theater and theatrical novels" (XXIV, 164). He employed two methods to achieve this: revising (or reworking) existing works, regardless of genre, and writing new plays that revisit existing themes. These revisions, predicated on his directing the revised works himself, differ in significance from those in earlier periods. Extracting and developing themes in those revisions was a means to liberate his works from the constraints of printed expression and to embody his vision within a stage space.

Revised works during this period include *The Man Who Turned Into a Stick*, *The Ghost Is Here* (revised) (1970), *Friends* (revised) (1974), *Ue (New Slave Hunting)* (1975), and *How to Save a Life* (1978). Works with revisited themes include *Loving Glasses Are Colored Ones* (1973), *Fake Fish* (1973), *The Dumb Waiter* (1973), *The Green Stockings* (1974), the four works in the *Guidebook* series (1971–1978), and the three works in the *Exhibition of Images* series (1977–1979). A visualization of interrelationships among all of Abe's plays would be like that shown to the right.

## ● Works Correlation Diagram

Era of Kobo Abe as Author (1953–71)



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## ● List of works (year of first publication)

*The Wall* (1951)  
*The Crime of S. Karma* (1951)  
*Intruders* (1951)  
*The Underwater City* (1952)  
*Slave Hunting* (1954)  
*The Appendix* (1955)  
*The Stick* (1955)  
*Intruders* [R] (1955)  
*Human Training* (1957)  
*The Dream Soldier* (1957)  
*Desertion* [R] (1957)  
*The Man Who Turned into a Stick* [R] (1957)  
*The Beggar's Song* [R] (1958)  
*Inter Ice Age 4* (1958)

*Solar Eclipse in Japan* [T] (1959)  
*A Ghost Comes to Town* [R] (1960)  
*Death of Another* (1961)  
 (Rev.: *An Irrelevant Death*)  
*How to Save a Life* [T] (1961)  
*The Sheep-Gut People* [T] (1962)  
*Intruders* [T] (1963)  
*Champion* [R] (1963)  
*Enomoto Takeaki* (1964)  
*The Cliff of Time* (1964)  
*The Witness* [T] (1964)

*Inter Ice Age 4* [C] (1965)  
*The Cliff of Time* [R] (1966)  
*Men* [R] (1968)  
*The Cliff of Time* [C] (1971)  
*And You, by the Way*  
 —*Peripheral Flights 2* [E] (1971)  
*The Guide*  
 —*Peripheral Flights 3* [E] (1971)



## Era of Kobo Abe as Director (1969–79)

### Revisions for the stage

*The Ghost Is Here* (Rev.)

*The Man Who Turned Into A Stick*

*Life-Saving Laws*

*Friends* (Rev.)

*Ue* (New Slave Hunting)

### Theme development

Complete dramatic attempts (mixed themes and integrated dramaturgy)

*Loving Glasses Are Colored Ones, The Green Stockings*

Guidebook series

*Guidebook, The Guide, The Underwater City, The Crime of S. Karma*

*Fake Fish*

An Exhibition of Images series

*An Exhibition of Images, Kidnapping, The Little Elephant Is Dead*

*The Dumb Waiter*

*The Satchel*  
— *Peripheral Flights 10* [E] (1972)

*The Box Man* (1973)

*An Open Secret*  
— *Peripheral Flights 39* [E] (1975)

*Secret Rendezvous* (1977)

*Kidnapping* (poem) (1978)

*The Little Elephant Is Dead* [C] (1979)

*Kangaroo Notebook* (1991)

Abbreviations

[C]: cinematic work

[E]: essay

[R]: radio drama

[T]: television drama

None: novel

*Friends*, Abe Kobo Studio, Dir. Abe Kobo (1974, Seibu Theater [now the PARCO Theater])



*Ue (New Slave Hunting)*, Abe Kobo Studio, Dir. Abe Kobo (1975, Seibu Theater [now the PARCO Theater])

For Abe, who says, “A novel is not something you think about and write. It’s a process of thinking through writing,” drama becomes “not something that is directed based on a script, but a process of using actors to produce a script in a theatrical space” (XXV, 537). In other words, in emphasizing the creative process, Abe started writing plays to that end. Given “the fact that we continue to live,

despite knowing that nothing lies ahead but the void of death,” “creation resembles life” in that “the completion of a work is its end, its death” (ibid., 224–225). However, unlike human death, this death in creation allows resurrection for the sake of new creations. In this sense, the death of a creation is “a state of apparent or feigned death,” and thus creation itself is not identical to life but “should be called a sort of apparent or feigned life” (ibid., 224). Then, noting that “writers who lose sight of the distinction between life and art cannot resist the temptations of suicide,” Abe explains the uncertainty of this distinction: “Compared to human death, this feigned death is of course relative. But it is relative to life; to the corresponding feigned life, it is somewhat absolute. To the entity that lived (created) this feigned life, it is death itself” (ibid.).



*Loving Glasses Are Colored Ones*, Abe Kobo Studio, Dir. Abe Kobo  
(1973, Seibu Theater [now the PARCO Theater])

*The Crime of S. Karma*, Abe Kobo Studio, Dir. Abe Kobo (1978, Seibu Theater [now the PARCO Theater])



So how can this disconnect between “relativity” and “absoluteness” be resolved? Abe explores the stage as a place to raise that question.

If literature could break out of its own confines to gaze upon time itself, and if music could break out of its confines to gaze upon space itself, and further still find a place in which they do not lose themselves...that is the stage I am contemplating now. For me, a new dramatic art is not about time being subordinate to space or space to time. Nor, of course, can it be some compromise between the two. It is the stage as a place where both are independent yet intersect. (XXIV, 512–513).

Actors performing on this stage become “messengers who can freely traverse the dual axes of time and space” (ibid., 513). To do so, actors must grasp the significance of physiological perception, thereby expressing time and space while also laying bare the relationship between what is real and what is fake (reality and unreality). The concept Abe devised to help actors understand this method

is “neutrality.”

Actors, he proposed, should not think through psychological portrayals in their heads and resort to “sentimental acting.” Rather, they grasp the psychology by physiologically recognizing the situation. They must not ignore physiology with a certain mold in mind. This is the essence of being an actor as an expressive entity. Take, for example, a scene where the actor is walking while deep in thought and bumps into someone. If those actions are meticulously planned according to a script, the focus of consciousness is dispersed between the thinking pose and the timing of some number of steps before bumping into the other person, resulting in a contrived, stereotypical performance. In reality, it’s rare for someone to walk while pretending to think with the intention of bumping into someone. Thus, if one truly concentrates on the thought, the collision becomes a real incident, creating a new focal point for concentration. In essence, “neutrality” is not just “a given posture or mere relaxation” (XXIII, 412), but the very control of degrees and directions for concentration. Furthermore, “if an actor *exists* through physiological concentration while also *existing* through words” (XXIV, 175), what is essential for the actor is “not *oratory* but the *art of existence*” (ibid., 147), where words too are spun through physiological concentration. This in particular is the acting technique Abe envisioned and the primary reason for his interest in theater. For Abe Kobo the novelist, theater became something that is neither a dramatization nor an adaptation of his novels.

In a play, dialogue is both behavior and action. When words show behaviors but not actions, I can adequately express them in novels, so there is no need to perform them on stage. ... After stripping away all that is not indispensable for the stage, the only thing remaining is the actors’ bodies. (XXVI, 406)

Abe’s desire to discover this uniqueness of theater materialized into works with the help of his wife, Abe Machi, who continued to support him to the end as a stage set designer and art director, and the young actors who shared his views on theater.

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\*Notation for quotes from Abe Kobo generally refer to the 29-volume *Complete Works of Abe Kobo* (1997–2000, Shinchosha). All quotations from that collection are given in parentheses at the end of the quotation, indicating only the volume number (in Roman numerals) and page number (in Arabic numerals).

#### Editor's notes

- (1) *Nise-geppo* is a four-page pamphlet accompanying each volume of *The Complete Works of Abe Kobo*, featuring interviews with people associated with Abe.
- (2) Abe Kobo disliked the *shingeki* (“new theater”) acting style of the time, which emphasized a psychological approach. He referred to it as “sentimental acting,” which he described as “stereotyped acting in which the actor performs the act of acting” (XXIV, 381).
- (3) Tsutsumi Seiji (1927–2013) was the second son of Tsutsumi Yasujirō, the founder of Seibu Railway. Tsutsumi led the Saison Group, which was centered on its affiliated Seibu Department Store. He was also a novelist under the pen name Tsujii Takashi, and he worked to introduce contemporary art by opening art museums and theaters in the department stores through a series of corporate activities that he referred to as “Saison Culture.”

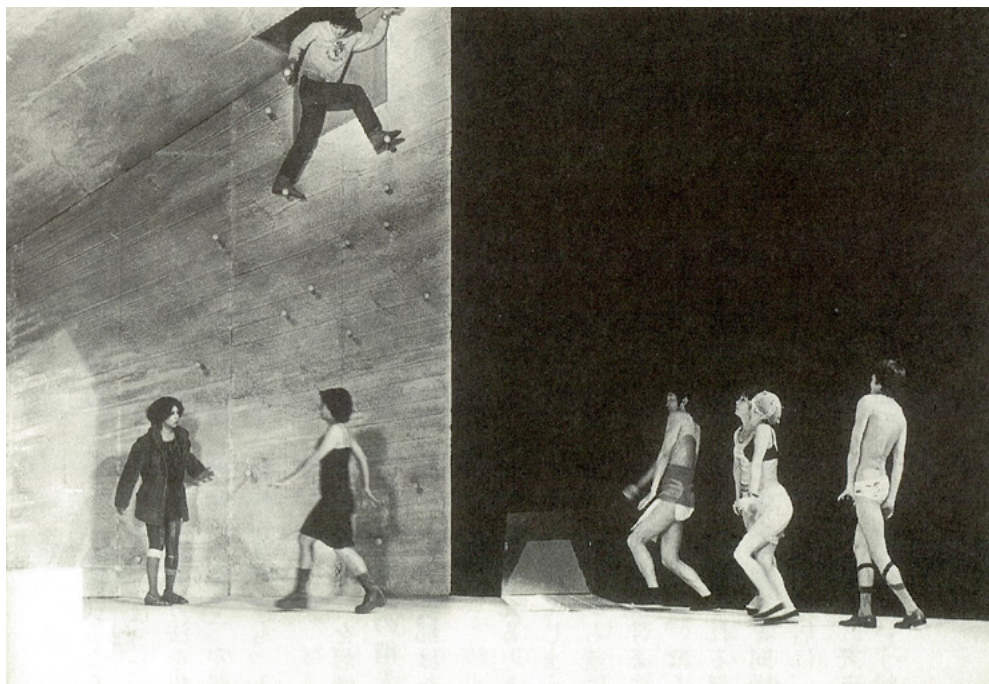
#### **Takahashi, Nobuyoshi**

Takahashi Nobuyoshi is a professor at Chiba University, specializing in comparative theater. Born in Hiroshima in 1962, he completed the doctoral program at Chuo University. He also completed the *Diplôme d'Études Approfondies* in theater studies at the University of Paris III. His publications include *The Theater of Abe Kobo* (2004, Suseisha), his co-authored works include *What is "Belgium"?* (2013, Shoraisha) and *Abe Kobo: Transcending Genres* (2013, Shinwasha), and his translations include Alain Viala's *Histoire du théâtre* (2008, Hakusuisha), and Éric Smadja's *Le rire* (2011, Hakusuisha).

(Translation: Tony Gonzalez)

# The Abe Kobo Studio and Its Western Contemporaries

Gianluca Coci



Abe Kobo Studio, *The Guides (Annainin)* (1976, Seibu Theater [now the PARCO Theater]) Photo: Yamada Makoto

The Abe Kobo Studio left the plays of the past behind in its search for a path to an entirely new theatre. Theatre movements that arose in the US and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s under names like “avant-garde theatre,” “experimental theatre,” and “research theatre” did the same. The Western avant-garde being vast, I have intentionally limited the scope of this essay to the most non-conformist and distinctive troupes. My aim herein is to examine not renowned and innovative individuals like Peter Brook but representative ensembles similar to the Abe Kobo Studio. My three main examples are the Living Theater, based in the US; Polish director Jerzy Grotowski’s Teatr Laboratorium, which performed across Europe; and the Odin Teatret, led by Eugenio Barba, an Italian-born director based in

Denmark with deep connections to Grotowski.

### **1. Society and Politics: The Abe Kobo Studio and the Living Theater**

The Abe Kobo Studio and the Living Theater differed in both worldview and approach to performance. This was due to their different contexts: not only were they situated in the dissimilar societies of Japan and the West, respectively, but they were also active during periods that, although chronologically close, were starkly different politically and socially. The Living Theater and its founders Julian Beck and Judith Malina were active during the sixties, a decade in which youth actively pursued revolution. The Abe Kobo Studio was founded in the seventies, fundamentally a time of movements based on pacifism—even if this would later bring violence and despair.

Notwithstanding these differences, and setting aside other obvious differences in structure and method, there was a subtle connection, like a transparent thread, between these two theatrical worlds. This connection was a shared commitment to breaking decisively with previous theatrical traditions, working to revive the actor, and making the audience a key part of the drama. Both troupes aroused up the curiosity of audiences who had previously sunk into unresponsiveness, actively involving them in the performance. Abe, Beck, and Malina alike aimed to draw out the cathartic power of theatre and let the curtain fall on the age in which audiences only watched.

However, while the Living Theater adopted the role of leaders aiming to involve their audience in politics, Abe did not directly offer political slogans or other messages, instead seeking a cultural and intellectual reaction from its audience. In that respect, the Living Theater were like the figureheads of a revolutionary movement, while Abe was like a Zen monk assigning koans to his disciples. These differing attitudes arose not only from subjective differences but also, as noted above, from the fact that the Abe Kobo Studio and the Living Theater existed within different social and cultural environments.

In 1962, Abe joined other writers like Mishima Yukio, Oe Kenzaburo, and Kawabata Yasunari in signing a protest letter demanding rights for authors and artists in China. He was expelled from the Japanese Communist Party that year



as a result, along with figures like Hanada Kiyoteru. Thus began the period during the sixties in which Abe produced his finest work. Without neglecting to write essays on various social issues and criticize the capitalist system, Abe concentrated on his artistic activities.

When the Abe Kobo Studio was founded in 1973, Abe was at the apogee of his renown as an author, with his energies directed chiefly toward artistic challenges. The situation was very different for Beck and Malina in 1947, the year they founded the Living Theater. They were young and penniless New Yorkers at the time, with nothing to their name but a powerful admiration for the theatre. By contrast with the acclaimed individualist Abe of 1973, Beck and Malina wanted to change the world, and they saw performing a new kind of theatre as a way to achieve that.

Abe Kobo Studio actors such as Tanaka Kunie, Nakadai Tatsuya, and Igawa Hisashi had the skill and experience to mentor younger colleagues. By contrast, the actors of the Living Theater were young and inexperienced. They had only recently begun to tread the boards, but they were willing to do anything in order to act, even if there was no compensation involved. And while the Abe Kobo Studio had training and rehearsal rooms and access to splendid theatres, the Living Theater was constantly on the move from one dilapidated space to another.

What I wish to stress here is that although both groups aimed to create a new theatre that would actively involve the audience, differences in their subjective and objective situations at the time resulted in different dramatic methods and goals. The particular age when the Living Theater was founded and existed had a decisive influence on the troupe, which reacted to its external circumstances and developed accordingly. The external circumstances of the Abe Kobo Studio, by contrast, were characterized by social and political stability and so did not influence its development. The leaders and members of the Living Theater, anarchists and pacifists by nature, were in Europe just before the revolutionary movements of 1968 began, and actively connected their work to those movements.

The Living Theater involved the audience in a direct and political way. The Abe Kobo Studio, however, did not adopt a political approach similar to the leaders of a movement, preferring to involve the audience indirectly by making

them think. The studio offered absolutely no guidance or resolutions, arousing the audience's will to contemplation. They admonished and provoked, but absolutely never described what should be done. This is because if the audience members had not thought for themselves and arrived at some kind of resolution by themselves, they would not have profited from the exercise at all.

Unlike Abe, Beck and Malina made the audience act directly. For example, in *Antigone*, the audience stands in for the Argives who massacred the Thebans. The actors playing the Thebans killed in the final act look at the audience in horror and back away wordlessly. The responsibility for the massacre is thus placed directly on the audience, making them feel the guilt of killers. In *Paradise Now*, Beck, who wanted to guide the audience to social revolution, appears onstage alone and shouts slogans like an actual leader.

The Living Theater, *Antigone* (1969, Maison de La Culture de Grenoble). Photo: Marie-Jésus Diaz



The Living Theater, *Paradise Now* (1968, Politecnico di Milano). Photographer: Francesco Radino

Halfway through the sixties, with revolution in the air, the Living Theater's utopian objective became clear. That objective was to guide people to revolution with plays—or, to be more precise, *while performing* plays. Beck and his troupe felt bound to lay bare the cruelest aspects of reality and nudge the audience to react. They saw no need for plays that offered an escape from the tragedy of reality, or seduced them with skillful language.

On this point, relationship to politics notwithstanding, the Abe Kobo Studio's objectives were similar. Abe also felt the need to show the audience things they had never seen before. The Living

Theater offered reality laid bare, but the Abe Kobo Studio took the audience to a dreamworld. However, the reason Abe did not avoid showing reality as it was simply to comfort or distract; rather, he thought that showing people the things they experienced every day would be boring. Abe populated the stage with dreams, ghosts, and the dead, all in an attempt to make the audience think. When someone wakes up in the morning still remembering their dreams of the night before, they wonder what those dreams meant, and why they had them. In the same way, Abe showed bizarre dreams to the audience and then made them wonder what those dreams meant and why they had been shown them.

The Living Theater's tendency to involve the audience grew stronger, reaching its peak with *Paradise Now*. The Abe Kobo Studio's work traced a similar progression, and the studio's most experimental work in its later years featured lively audience participation. *The Guides (Annainin)* had a staircase going from the front of the stage down into the audience. This staircase emphasized the unity of audience seating and stage, and the actors frequently ran down into the audience. The idea of unity between audience seating and stage appeared in the highly interesting form of the character "H24" sitting among the audience. When that seat number was called from the stage, H24 had to immediately stand up and go onstage to perform. This act transforms the audience from an external presence into an element in the on-stage world.

In a work called *Kidnapping (Hitosarai)*, the intention of involving the audience was made clear before performances even began. Everyone in the audience was given a small mask as they entered and asked to wear it. Then, as soon as the actors appeared on-stage, they began drawing on each other's masked faces in various colors. This emphasized unity and obliterated the wall between stage and audience in an instant.

*Kidnapping* was part of the series "An Exhibition of Images," comprising the studio's final three works. This series exposed the audience to images and sounds they had never seen or heard before. A large white cloth that could be called a symbol of the studio's experimentalism appeared onstage and moved and breathed as if alive. Psychedelic sounds created on a synthesizer by Abe himself helped create an atmosphere like a mystical ritual. Like the Living Theater's



Abe Kobo Studio, *The Guides (Annainin)* (1976, Seibu Theater)  
Photo: Yamada Makoto



Abe Kobo Studio,  
*Kidnapping (Hitosarai)*  
(1978, Seibu Museum of Art)

*Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* and *Paradise Now*, the audience felt as if they were participating in a ritual. Abe's psychedelic music resembled the Indian raga played in *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* as the actors take up incense and walk through the center of the audience seating, and the human pyramid formed by the actors in *Paradise Now* resembled the training methods like so-called coordinated group gymnastics performed by the actors of the Abe Kobo Studio.

As goes without saying, the theatre of both the Living Theater and the Abe Kobo Studio was theatre for the audience—which is to say, for us.

## 2. The Actor: The Abe Kobo Studio and Grotowski

Abe had a visceral approach to acting technique, emphasizing the importance of the actor's physical body for conveying emotion to the audience. Whether by coincidence or not, this could be viewed as similar to the approach to acting that was popular in Western avant-garde theatre in the sixties and seventies. The Abe Kobo Studio's young members knew of Peter Brook and Antonin Artaud and read the essays Grotowski wrote on "experimental theatre." Even Abe himself, though never a student of Grotowski's system, knew his work well and concurred with the Polish director on the importance of the physical body in acting. Among the many interviews Abe did for newspapers and magazines and comments he made during the studio's hugely successful US tour in 1979, he voiced his respect

for Brook and Grotowski as towering innovators of contemporary theatre:

Every publication's theatre critics praised our originality as the first success in several years not of Japanese theatre but of contemporary theatre. It seems fair to say we imparted a shock as decisive as the earlier ones imparted by Peter Brook and Grotowski.<sup>1</sup>

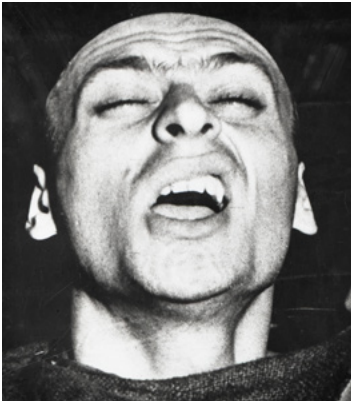
One important commonality between Abe and Grotowski is their shared objective of restoring the prestige of theatre. Japan's "new theatre (*shingeki*)" was rendered boring by an excess of revivals, and orthodox theatre around the world became commercial and stagnant. Aiming to revitalize theatre, Abe secluded himself in a Shibuya studio and began experimenting. Grotowski did the same in theatres in Opole and Wrocław. In both cases, the subject of these experiments was identical: the actor. For both Abe and Grotowski, the actor was the absolute protagonist of theatre, and any revival of theatre would have to begin by reviving the actor.

At the root of Abe and Grotowski's philosophies of theatre, and their conception of the actor as more than just a performing messenger, was a view of theatre as something entirely different from other methods of artistic expression. Both of them saw theatre as something special that could not be compared to other arts.

Theatre, unlike movies and television, must show the audience something they have never seen before, and its actors must be special presences. Actors must convey all their emotions to the audience using their eyes, their faces, their hands—in short, their physical bodies. As Abe and Grotowski saw it, instead of



Teatr Laboratorium, *The Constant Prince (Książę Niezłomny)* (1965, Wrocław, Poland). ©Teatr Laboratorium/Archiwum Instytutu Grotowskiego



Actors of the Teatr Laboratorium train their face muscles by forming "masks" (from *Akropolis*, 1962). ©Teatr Laboratorium/Archiwum Instytutu Grotowskiego

renowned prima donnas, actors should be so anonymous that audiences cannot even tell them apart. In other words, a skilled actor should feel to the audience as if they are wearing a mask, even if they are not. Both Abe and Grotowski felt that hiding their individuality from the audience while on-stage was the mark of a good actor. This is because actors who take hedonistic pleasure in themselves, like movie stars and famous sportsmen, end up playing themselves as roles.

Abe and Grotowski needed actors of a very different kind—special actors who seemed barely to exist. They had no choice but to forge a new type of actor from nothing. The key to this was a strict regimen of daily training. Their methods and the nature of this training differed, but the starting points for both systems were Stanislavski and Meyerhold.

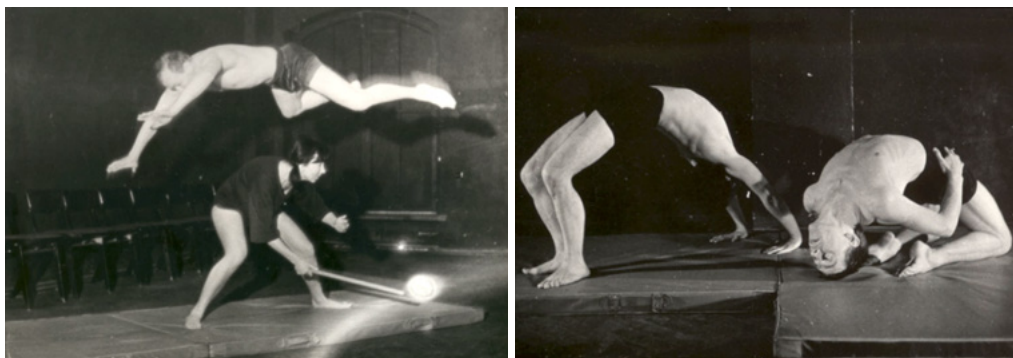
Grotowski, who was based in Poland and active across Europe, had actual contact with members of the Russian and European avant-garde schools like Peter Brook and Eugenio Barba. Abe, on the other hand, had only indirect contact with that avant-garde, reading about it in books. Collaborating with Senda Koreya, a personal friend and director of several of Abe's plays, had great meaning to Abe. This is because it was Senda who first introduced the acting techniques of Stanislavski and Meyerhold to Japan. Abe

attended rehearsals of Senda-directed plays like *Slave Hunting (Dorei-gari)* and *The Ghost Is Here (Yurei wa koko ni iru)* almost daily, presumably learning the inner mysteries of the theatre. However, a few years later, he began to feel dissatisfied with Senda's Stanislavskian psychological approach. This was when he decided to found his own studio and move toward a more physiological approach.

Actors are central to the theatre of both Abe and Grotowski, and both imposed highly demanding daily training regimens. The initial calisthenics and acrobatic drills were the same, but after that, Abe had his actors play so-called "rubber-man games," while Grotowski put them through a variety of physical drills, including yoga poses.

"Rubber-man games" were played in pairs, with one actor "attacking" and another "defending." The attacking actor flexed their muscles and stretched their body to grow larger, while the other had to shrink to a corresponding degree. The important thing was that the movements of the actors had to sum to a constant:  $A + B = K$ . These games were not psychological but physiological. Abe's actors were to become machines for conveying the entire range of emotions to the audience in a Meyerholdian way.

Unlike the actors of the Abe Kobo Studio, the actors of Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium usually practiced yoga poses and other bodily movements alone. This training also had a psychological component. For example, in the poses "Smile" and "Sneer," the actor not only learned the technical matter of which



Early group of Teatr Laboratorium actors performing a physical training exercise (1964). (Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology: The Secret Art of the Performer*, Routledge, 1991)

Abe Kobo Studio actors performing a physical training exercise  
 (Abe Kobo Studio, *Theatre of Abe Kobo*, Sorinsha Publishing, 1979)



facial muscles to move, they also had to be conscious of the psychology involved: *why* they were smiling or sneering. In short, Grotowski's system differed from Abe's in its inclusion of psychology alongside the body and the voice. Stanislavskian reenactment of reality and the Meyerholdian body were equally necessary to the theatre of this Polish director.

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The next thing to emphasize is that the works that Grotowski and Abe staged were completely different, and that each director used a different type of actor. Grotowski staged works that, though free interpretations of their originals, were still based on words and dialogue. To perform them properly, as noted above, balance between mind and body was required. On the other hand, the experimental works of Abe's last years with the studio, the peak of his theatrical research, were based not on words but on imagery, sound, and light. The studio's actors were suited to these backgrounds, because they could make visceral use of their bodies to become perfect protagonists for the remarkable dreamworlds that existed on-stage.

The fact that Abe's actors had to become protagonists of the audience's dreams was another foundational element of the studio's actor training. Actors had to have the same "fluidity" as the world of dreams. Their movements and behavior had to be light and wavelike, not powerful, fixed poses. The very term "rubber-man games" symbolizes the degree of flexibility their bodies had to attain. Unlike Grotowski's actors, who struck poses and performed powerful



movements and gestures, the Abe Kobo Studio's actor training aimed to create physical bodies that supported fluidity. Put another way, the muscles of the studio's actors were not for displays of power but for displays of what looked like swimming in the air.

Abe customarily created the texts for his experimental works with the actors. His process involved writing the play based on ideas from the actors' improvisations. It is true that the "Exhibition of Images" and "Guidebook" series had scripts, but they were unlike those of normal works in their brevity and relative unimportance. Actors took hints from the scripts, but their performances were largely improvised. One might call this a liberation from the play along the lines of Grotowski.

The actors of Grotowski's Teatr Laboratorium delivered more lines and engaged in more dialogue than those of the Abe Kobo Studio, but they did not use scripts in the traditional way. In Grotowski's theatre, the actor had to use the play like a trampoline. Like Abe's actors, they had to take hints from the play and improvise a performance. However, Grotowski's idea of improvisation was not as free as Abe's. Naturalness was important to Grotowski, but so was discipline. The importance of discipline to the experimental



Teatr Laboratorium, *Akropolis* (1962, Opole, Poland).  
©Teatr Laboratorium/Archiwum Instytutu Grotowskiego



Abe Kobo Studio, *An Exhibition of Images (Imeeji no tenrankai)* (1977, Seibu Museum of Art) Photo: Yamada Makoto

theatre could be viewed as a borrowing from Japanese Noh and other Eastern theatrical traditions. Grotowski, who was also influenced by traditional Eastern theatre, must have been particularly pleased by the absence of directors in these traditions, and the strictness of their training.

### 3. Troupe as Community:

#### The Abe Kobo Studio and Barba's Odin Teatret

In the Abe Kobo Studio's last year, the Odin Teatret visited Japan just once, performing four works: *Johann Sebastian Bach*, *The Book of Dances (Dansenes Bog)*, *Anabasis*, and *The Million (Millionen)*. According to Yokota Keiko, the actor who interpreted for the Odin Teatret during their Japanese tour, performances took place not only in metropolitan theatres but also in streets and public spaces, just as they had in Europe and Latin America, startling the local residents.<sup>2</sup>

The Odin Teatret performed commanding productions that transcended normal theatre, not only building direct relationships with the audience but also demanding an exchange of experience and performance. The objectives of Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret were to use the methods of barter to exchange dances and plays with local people. This symbolized their philosophy of fighting discrimination and creating unrestricted, free human relationships;

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Odin Teatret, *The Book of Dances (Dansenes bog)* (1979, Tokyo, Japan). Provided by Yokota Keiko. ©Odin Teatret



Odin Teatret, *The Million (Millionen)* (1979, Tokyo, Japan). Provided by Yokota Keiko. ©Odin Teatret

put simply, it was about free outdoor performance. Barter has made the following comment about barter:

We began with extremely simple situations. The actors of the Odin sang Scandinavian folk songs, and the local participants responded with folk songs of their region. When we next added dance to these folk songs, they began to perform their own dances. Finally, when we improvised a short scene, some of them came out of the crowd and began to perform. [. . .] This is our method of barter, which we have carried out in various countries around the world. After a time, the people we had become close to were able to casually approach us and ask if we would perform something for them. We agreed to this request, and in exchange had them sing or dance for us. It was chiefly farmers and artisans who participated in this kind of barter. The aim of our performances was to attract people. In this way, we were able to revive the culture of the masses and bind people together.<sup>3</sup>

In *Anabasis*, for example, Odin “invades” a village or town. Actors in terrifying masks slip into peoples’ houses and appear at windows and on balconies. Figures in skull masks and dark suits stride streets and plazas to the sound of drums. *The Book of Dances* is centered around music and dance. Through the method of “raiding” a village, the actors show local residents fierce, popular dances and urge them to respond. For Barba, dance is the essence of theatre.

As mentioned in the quotation above, Barba’s aim in these performances is to highlight the social function of theatre. The Odin’s artistic “attacks” on towns and villages were an



Odin Teatret, *Anabasis* (1982, Peru). ©Odin Teatret

attempt to revive the communal sensibility of the past. Such experiments could be called anthropological research through theatre.

This communal sensibility, which the Odin Teatret sought to spread through its performances around the world, was the troupe's essential distinguishing characteristic. The Odin Teatret was established in the sixties, when the hippie dream of a free society was at its most popular. Like the Living Theater in the US, it had dreams of freedom and community in opposition to capitalism that it held to like a creed. In the seventies, the Odin Teatret was a splendid example of the theatre troupe as community, with all its members living together, working together, and creating together. The method of barter derives precisely from the philosophy of that community, which the troupe's members had actually experienced. However, when the eighties arrived, the hippie dream ended, and the majority of the world's countries came to be dominated by the capitalist system, the Odin Teatret wisely modernized and renewed its conception of community. When the funding it received from Denmark's Ministry of Culture proved



Odin Teatret, *The Book of Dances (Dansenes bog)* (1978, Peru). ©Odin Teatret

insufficient, it published books and magazines and held workshops attended by youths from all over the world to raise funds, becoming the laboratory-like cultural organization still vigorously active today in Holstebro.

The Abe Kobo Studio and its members shared that view of community, if not to the same degree as the Odin Teatret. True, Abe was the group's leader, but all proposals were adopted democratically, and all decisions were the result of thinking by all the studio's members. Abe even suggested that the studio's actors would soon become able to create works on their own. Unfortunately, the studio did not reach that stage during its brief life, but its late experimental works were the result of communal creation.

Furthermore, unlike most Japanese theatrical troupes at the time, the Abe Kobo Studio gave its young actors opportunities to play important roles, even when seasoned performers were also available. In the studio's early period, the experience of veteran actors like Igawa Hisashi, Tanaka Kunie, and Nakadai Tatsuya combined with the passion of young members who had graduated from the Toho Gakuen College of Drama and Music, where Abe taught theatre, to create a highly energetic atmosphere. No doubt this environment was similar to the one that held between veteran and young actors in the Odin Teatret. The important thing is that these relationships were not one-way but based on true exchange.

For Abe, the theatrical creative process reached its zenith in the studio. That zenith was a process in which Abe created works together with actors. Abe said many times that by the time a completed work was performed on-stage, it was already dead. To him, the stage was a "cemetery for theatre."

Eugenio Barba shared this opinion. Taking Grotowski as his model, Barba eliminated the traditional stage in order to tear down the walls that separated stage from audience. Then he left the "cemetery," which is to say the theatre, and went to meet the people directly in streets and plazas. Abe, on the other hand, never left the standard theatre. And apart from *Kidnapping (Hitosarai)*, which the actors performed in several locations simultaneously, he always used the traditional stage—although he did transform it greatly using the enormous sheet of white cloth that has since passed into legend. The white cloth became a



Set using a large sheet of white fabric created by Abe Kobo's wife Machi, *The Underwater City (Suichu toshi)* (1977, Seibu Theater)

living extension of the stage, expanding the original space. The dreamlike atmosphere created by the actors, the sounds, the lighting, and the white cloth enswathed the audience and hurled them into a new dimension. Abe's

theatre, though performed on a theatrical stage, appeared to be performed in another dimension. You might say that the Odin Teatret escaped the theatre physically, while the Abe Kobo Studio escaped it conceptually.

In all probability, Abe was able to perfectly convey to the actors his ideas about the importance of daily drills and the group. Despite the ferocious strictness of the drills, all members devoted themselves to fully carrying out the studio's plans. Veteran actors resigned from famous troupes to devote themselves to the studio's activities.

This was likely the case for Barba's troupe, too, particularly during the period when it moved from communal to individual drills. In Barba's system, as in Grotowski's exercises, communal drills restricted individual freedom, blocking actors from finding the most appropriate methods for them. Accordingly, both Grotowski and Barba bestowed freedom on the individual through drills. Each actor had to find the practice method that suited them best and establish a training method for themselves. Incidentally, the difference between Grotowski and Barba on this point is that drills were a way to uncover wisdom and the self for the former, and simple work for the latter.

In this regard, Abe more closely resembles Barba than Grotowski. We see again that both the Abe Kobo Studio and the Odin Teatret were communities based on individuality and freedom.



Abe Kobo and actors rehearsing at the Abe Kobo Studio in Shibuya, Tokyo. Photo: Photography Department of Shinchosha Publishing Co.,Ltd.

1. “Abe Kobo Studio Member’s Bulletin” (*Abe Kobo Sutajio kaiin tsushin*) No. 8, in *The Collected Works of Abe Kobo (Abe Kobo Zenshu)*, Vol 26.
2. The Odin Teatret was invited to the International Children’s Theatre Festival (sponsors: United Nations Association of Japan, Britannica Japan) held from August 1–31, 1979 (the International Year of the Child), and toured Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Fukuoka. Other troupes participating in the festival were from the United Kingdom, Belgium, Poland, and Indonesia, and Terayama Shuji’s troupe Tenjo Sajiki (Ceiling Gallery) participated as well, performing *Child-Hunting (Kodomo-gari)*.  
  
According to Yokota Keiko, who interpreted during this tour, as well as the officially scheduled performances, the Odin Teatret also performed in the street and made direct contact with local communities along the way.
3. S.K. Barfoed, “Intervista con Eugenio Barba.” *Biblioteca Teatrale*, 1974. 10–11.

### Coci, Gianluca

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(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)



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## Developments in Japan and Overseas

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# Mokuami and the West

## On the 130th anniversary of Kawatake Mokuami's death

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Yanai Kenji

Kawatake Mokuami (1816–1893) became chief playwright at Edo's Kōwarazaki-za theatre in 1843, holding overall responsibility for kabuki script production at the theatre. Twenty-five years later, in 1868, came a year of radical change in Japan: A new government would replace the Tokugawa military regime; a new era called Meiji would begin; and the city of Edo would be renamed Tokyo. This meant that since first creating a name for himself, Mokuami's career as a playwright had



straddled two eras, the first half in the Edo period and the second in the Meiji. He managed to survive this major period of transition and maintained a flourishing creative career right up to the end of his life.

Unlike today, when the primary mission of Japanese traditional performing arts lies in its preservation, 19th century kabuki still eagerly sought out the new and the unusual, using them to fan the curiosity of its audiences. For a popular and commercial theatre, which kabuki still was, this was an obvious strategy. In the Meiji period, with its popular slogan of “civilization and enlightenment,” Japan saw a dizzying influx of Western culture and information. The theatre too inevitably began to adopt elements from the West, in spite of our preconception that kabuki exists at a distance from anything Western.



### **Mokuami's First Western Play, *Kokusenya Sugata no Utsushie***

*Kokusenya Sugata no Utsushie* (*Coxinga's Magic Lantern*), staged in January 1872,



*Kokusenya Sugata no Utsushie* (*Coxinga's Magic Lantern*) Murayama-za, January 1872  
Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Waseda University 101-4342·4343·4344 (triptych)

is an early example of a Mokuami play that directly represented the West on the kabuki stage. In this play, the famous *Romon (Watchtower)* scene from Chikamatsu Monzaemon's classic puppet theatre play *Kokusenya Kassen (The Battles of Coxinga, 1715)* is relocated from China to London. In the story, the geisha Kokin was rescued from a shipwreck seven years earlier by the Englishman Kankiss. She has given birth to her husband's (Hikoso) child in London, and she now lives with Kankiss as his mistress under the name Kinshojo. Hikoso has been searching for her, and he eventually tracks her down in London. However, Kokin feels indebted to Kankiss for having saved her life, and she is devoted to his sick mother, so she decides to remain in London with her child. She and Hikoso exchange a tearful farewell. Of course, the interest in a play like this lay in the relocation of its action to a Western city. However, this was the very slightest of twists, and the plot itself was nothing new. The West in the play represents little more than an unknown and distant location.

In the same year, two dramatizations of Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help*, which had been translated into Japanese by Nakamura Masanao, were performed in Kyoto under the titles *Sono Irodori Toki no Koeki (Coloring of the Ceramics Trade)* and *Kutsunaoshi Warabe no Oshie (Teachings of the Child Cobbler)*. This use of Western source materials to create new plays was underpinned by a feverish interest in the places and things of the Western world, which had existed since the arrival of Commodore Perry in 1853. In publishing, for example, there were many popular books that introduced Western culture or developed plots in which Japanese characters travelled the world. Works that stirred readers' interest in the West included Kanagaki Robun's illustrated history of the founding of the United States, *Osanae Etoki Bankokubanashi (A Children's Picture Book about Foreign Lands, 1861–62)*, Fukuzawa Yukichi's introduction to Western society, *Seiyo Jijo (Conditions in the West, 1866)*, and *Bankoku Kokai Seiyo Dochu Hizakurige (Shank's Mare to the Western Seas, 1870–76)* by Kanagaki Robun and Fuso Kan, where the grandsons of the fictional Tokugawa travelers Yaji and Kita make their way to the International Exhibition in London. Kabuki gradually began to treat the West as a contiguous dramatic space, and while we may sometimes question the accuracy, what is undeniable is that the West began to be con-

structed and represented on stage.

### ***Hyoryu Kidan Seiyō Kabuki: A Theatrical Disaster with Operetta***

One excellent example of Mokuami's engagement with the West in his dramaturgy is the play *Hyoryu Kidan Seiyō Kabuki* (*Castaway Tales: A Western Kabuki*). The play opened in September 1879 at the Shintomi-za, with Ichikawa Danjuro IX in the role of Shimizu no Mihozo, Nakamura Nakazo III as his father Gozaemon, and Nakamura Sojuro as Akitsu Takeshi. The boatman Mihozo and his companions are shipwrecked following a storm at sea. Mihozo is rescued by an American ship, but his father Gozaemon is swept away. Mihozo is sent to the Japanese consulate in San Francisco, where he ends up accompanying the sister-in-law of the consul Akitsu Takeshi to New York. However, as they cross the continent, their train is attacked by Native Americans. Mihozo is saved by a Frenchman and becomes his servant. They travel to Paris, where the play reaches a happy ending as he is reunited with his father who had in fact been rescued by a British ship.

The *Engeki Hyakka Daijiten* (*Encyclopaedia of Theatre*, 1960) provides a concise summary of the play's original production and the substantial commercial failure for which it became noted: "Great pride was taken in its novelty,



*Hyoryu Kidan Seiyō Kabuki* (*Castaway Tales: A Western Kabuki*), Shintomi-za, September 1879  
Japan Arts Council NA120480



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The American Railroad scene from *Hyoryu Kidan Seijo Kabuki* (*Castaway Tales: A Western Kabuki*), Shintomi-za, September 1879  
Japan Arts Council NA080270

including a shift to foreign locations like London and Paris, a scene where Danjuro and Sojuro appear in Western dress in front of an oil-painted backdrop, and even a Japan's first play-within-a-play featuring foreign actors. But audiences were bored by it; reviews were bad; ticket sales were sluggish; and it closed as a failure."

The Shintomi-za had just opened the previous June. Its owner and manager, Morita Kan'ya XII, adopted a unique commercial strategy of radical Westernization, and his theatre quickly gained the image of being the most fashionable in Japan. *Castaway Tales* had another unusual feature for the time in that it was presented as an evening performance. Part of the sets made use of oil-painted backdrops illuminated by gas lighting, and these realistic effects were the talk of the town. But the most striking feature of the production was the play-within-a-play in the fourth act, which featured a troupe of Western performers. This innovation was specially advertised in the playbills: "You will witness props, costumes and music exactly as they would be overseas." The Western performers were the Royal English Opera Company, who mainly presented operettas in the foreign concession in Yokohama, and their scene in Mokuami's play functioned as a review with operatic singing and dancing. A pamphlet with a Japanese summary and translation of the scene was distributed to the audience. On the opening night, troupe head Danjuro, in formal dress, delivered a special on-stage announcement to introduce the play-within-a-play. From this, we can understand that the Western actors were not being treated as some novel sideshow but rather as valued performers at the heart of the production.

## Rejection of Western Voices

But how did Japanese audiences respond to the scene? The magazine *Kabuki Shinpo* (*Kabuki News*) reports that the Western actors were “seemingly deeply afflicted since the meager audiences reflected directly upon their own honor.” Tamura Nariyoshi comments on the seriousness of the play’s commercial failure, “poor reviews circulated which led to small audiences and a larger than expected failure” (*Zokuzoku Kabuki Nendaiki*, 1922). The play’s failure must also have resonated heavily with Mokuami because in the *Chosaku Taigai* (*Memoires*) text he wrote in his later years he adds the note: “very bad reviews for the Western play, which led to extremely poor audiences.” The theatre had planned the run for six weeks, but it ended up closing after just 25 days, with Kan’ya recording a loss of around 20,000 yen—a massive sum for the time.

The majority of the criticisms of the play related to the fourth act’s play-within-a-play and in particular expressed strongly negative views about the voices of the Western performers. One article in the *Yomiuri Shimbun* newspaper describes the audience’s perplexity and the ensuing uproar: “As for the play by the Westerners, this was bizarre and entirely incomprehensible”; “the actors’ delivery resembled simply high register screeching. The singing of the female actor in particular was extremely grating, like the yapping of a Western dog or someone whining and crying”; “most of the audience understood nothing from start to finish and howled with laughter. The greater the passion the foreign actors poured in, increasing the volume of their voices even further, the more the audience laughed.” Here we can see that it was entirely the voices of the Western performers that were the focus of the negative responses, with audiences’ inability to understand provoking howls of laughter.

A similar report was provided by Basil Hall Chamberlain, who was employed as an advisor by the Japanese government at the time:

*But oh! the effect upon the Japanese audience! When once they had recovered from the first shock of surprise, they were seized with a wild fit of hilarity at the high notes of the prima donna, who was really was not at all bad. The people laughed at the absurdities of European singing till their*

*sides shook, and the tears rolled down their cheeks; and they stuffed their sleeves into their mouths, as we might our pocket-handkerchiefs, in the vain endeavor to contain themselves.* (Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese*, 1890).

We can see from these accounts just how strange the styles of operetta vocalization, especially the extremely high-pitched register used by the soprano, must have seemed to Japanese audiences at the time. These audiences would only ever have heard kabuki-style vocalization and the types of music that existed in early modern Japan, so Western music would only have felt like shocking noise. Their response to their first direct encounter with Western voices was to laugh. But rather than this being a contemptuous or derisive form of laughter, perhaps it is better understood as a physiological response, an instinctive form of sharing and release of the discomfort and tension felt when directly experiencing something beyond human comprehension. This pitiless reaction was beyond the imagining of a renowned impresario like Morita Kan'ya and beyond even the power of an accomplished playwright like Mokuami. In this way, audiences mercilessly rejected Kan'ya's haughty drive to succeed in introducing Western theatre to Meiji-period Tokyo.

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Kawatake Toshio has argued that “in terms of kabuki's Westernization, *Castaway Tales* can be said to exist at the trend's apex,” and “in terms of inclination towards the West, this was a moment never witnessed before or since in traditional theatre's history” (“*Hyoryu Kidan Seiyo Kabuki*” *Ko – Kabuki Kindaishi no Tenkaiten* [*Some Thoughts on Castaway Tales: A Western Kabuki – A Turning Point in the Modern History of Kabuki*], *Engekigaku Ronshu*, issue 37, September 1999). The intensity of the engagement with the West in this play is certainly head and shoulders above that in any other kabuki play. Setting aside its success as a piece of drama, bringing these kinds of authentic Western landscapes and performers on to the kabuki stage created an epochal moment in kabuki's history.

### **The West through Kabuki Physicality**

We should not forget that some of Mokuami's other Western-inspired plays

enjoyed notable success. One example is *Narhibiku Charine no Kyokuba* (*The Famous Chiarini Circus*, November 1886) which recreated the performing elephants, horses, and comical clowns of a touring Italian circus troupe on the kabuki stage. *Fusenori Uwasa no Takadono* (*The Rumored Towering Heavens of the Balloonist*, January 1891) brought the acrobatic feats of the English balloonist Percival Spencer into the Kabuki-za and included a speech in English by the actor who played Spencer. Both plays were dance pieces that combined traditional *yoruri* narration with modern Western music as they faithfully duplicated the entirety of actual popular entertainments on the kabuki stage. We can see Mokuami's skill and ability as a playwright in the ways that he made this material fit perfectly within the kabuki idiom. Both plays starred Onoe Kikugoro V (1844–1903), and audiences were seduced by the assiduous efforts he put into recreating the costumes and gestures of these Western entertainers so precisely. So while audiences may have turned away from the performance of Western plays by Western actors, they had no such trouble in accepting a *yoruri*-style “West,” even including elephant feet, performed by Japanese kabuki actors. There is an interesting parallel between the ways that contemporary audiences observed the West through the bodies of kabuki actors and the ways that Meiji translations of Western writing existed in a unique linguistic sphere of adaptations and auda-



*Narhibiku Charine no Kyokuba* (*The Famous Chiarini Circus*), Chitose-za, 1886  
 Tsubouchi Memorial Theatre Museum, Waseda University 101-7354 • 7355 • 7356 (triptych)



*Spensaa no fusennori (Spencer in the balloon),*  
in *Fusennori Uwasa no Takadono*  
(*The Rumored Towering Heavens of the*  
*Balloonist*), Kabuki-za, January 1891  
Japan Arts Council NA060690

ciously liberal translations.

Surprisingly, many kabuki plays featured new Western fashions and culture. In its continual search for novelty, spectacle remained an essential element of kabuki. This demand for novelty was also a key part of the Meiji era. Kabuki attempted to ingest the West at an accelerated pace, and while this occasionally caused a serious case of indigestion, in rapid order the theatre was able to absorb this material and transform it into something nutritious. Another image that occurs to me is how the Japanese *furoshiki* wrapping cloth, as if by magic, is able to transform all kinds of irregularly shaped contents into a well-wrapped bundle. The Meiji-period academic and playwright Tsubouchi Shoyo praised Mokuami as the “great wholesaler of Edo theatre,” and he was truly a peerless magician with *furoshiki*.

Parts of this text have been adapted from the article *Kabuki to “Seiyo” to no Sesshoku: “Hyoryu Kidan Seiyo Kabuki” no Daishippai (Contact between Kabuki and the “West”: The Great Failure of “Castaway Tales: A Western Kabuki”)*, *Minzoku Geijutsu (Ethno-Arts)*, volume 31, March 2015.



### **Yanai, Kenji**

Following a period at the National Theatre, he currently teaches at Meiji University. He holds a doctorate in literature and specializes in the history of Japanese performing arts, with a focus on kabuki. His books include *Meiji kiwamono kabuki: Sora tobu godaime Kikugoro* (*Sensational Meiji-period Kabuki: Kikugoro V Flying Through the Air*, Haksuisha Publishing), and *Chabudaigaeshi no kabuki nyumon* (*An Introduction to Kabuki Shocking Enough to Overturn the Dinner Table*, Shinchosha Publishing). He regularly reviews kabuki for the *Tokyo Shimbun* newspaper.

(Translation: Alan Cummings)





Here at this place  
**YITZHAK RABIN**  
 Prime Minister & Minister of Defence  
 was murdered  
 in the struggle for peace  
 4.11.95

في هذا المكان تم اغتيال  
**اسحاق رابين**  
 رئيس الوزراء ووزير الدفاع  
 في التماسل من أجل التسلاام  
 ٩٥/١١/٤



במקום זה  
 נרצח  
**יצחק רבין**  
 ראש הממשלה ושר הביטחון  
 במאבק  
 על השלום  
 4 בנובמבר 1995

**SPECIAL FEATURE "Theatre Born in Conflict Zones 15"**

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## Special Feature

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# Theatre Born in Conflict Zones

## *The Murder of Isaac in October 2023*

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Murai Hanayo (translator and dramaturg for the *Murder of Isaac*)

### 1.

Everyone knows what happened after the Islamic militant movement Hamas attacked Israeli territory on October 7, 2023. In the attack, approximately 1,200 citizens were killed, and about 230 hostages were taken to Gaza. The Israeli government immediately retaliated by bombing the Gaza Strip. They cut off the supply of water and electricity to Gaza, and finally, the Israeli military entered the city to start a ground war. Innocent citizens, including women, children, and older people, became victims along with Hamas soldiers. The whole city became a mass grave; within a month, the death toll in Gaza surpassed 10,000.



On October 13, a week after the Hamas attack, the stage reading of Motti Lerner's *The Murder of Isaac* opened at Theater Fuusikaden in Tokyo. The play was produced as a replay of the stage reading first presented in December 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, at Atelier West Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre. Behind that initial production was the International Theatre Institute Japanese Centre, which staged the reading as part of Theatre Born in Conflict Zones 15, translated by Murai Hanayo and directed by Kobayashi Nanao. There were twelve actors in the cast; five original songs were composed by Suwa So. Kobayashi's energetic direction, incorporating substantial physical movement, made the production look more like a rehearsal for a full-scale musical play than a stage reading. What was different from the first performance was that, now, the artists involved were taken aback in the face of a war that was actually occurring in real time. It seemed as if the dramatic reality within the play had poured out into lived reality. The play depicts a wounded Israel, one that had cut off the path to peace, and employs a play-within-a-play construct. The characters performing the play-within-the-play start their show as they hear news about a war that has just begun.

## 2.

*The Murder of Isaac* is set in a state-run PTSD rehabilitation center for victims of trauma resulting from war and terrorism.

One evening in 1998, the patients present a play they created to an audience of their families and staff members. The work is about the 1995 assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who signed the Oslo Accords in 1993. Binder (played by Fujii Bin), a war veteran who has been a



patient in the center for fifty years since the war of 1948, is the playwright and director of the play-within-the play and also portrays the Prime Minister, the leading role. Most of the characters in the play, including Binder, cannot cope with life outside the institution.

One character lives in constant fear that someone might murder him. Another believes that he is a messenger chosen by God. Yet another believes that someday, God will purify the Holy Land contaminated by modern civilization. A character who had been tortured for nine months as a prisoner of war doesn't care about a nation or the Holy Land; he only cares about exacting vengeance on his enemies.

In the play-within-the-play, the Leader of the Opposition, the Settlers, and the Rabbis are all disgusted with the peace agreement that the Prime Minister signed. They all want him dead. Why does this nation keep refusing to choose peace?

According to author Motti Lerner (born in 1949), *The Murder of Isaac* is “a play about the collective unconscious of the Israelis.” He began writing it in the immediate aftermath of Rabin's assassination. The play, completed in 1998, has been revised multiple times through productions in Germany and the US since 1999. As of today, the play has never received a professional theatre production in Israel, Lerner's homeland. Does any other play expose the suppressed depths of a nation as sincerely as this much-avoided work?

Hamas's sudden attack on Israel on October 7 occurred four days after we started rehearsing. The three-day performance came amid swirling, heated condemnation of the Israel's “genocide” against Palestine. The actors were all in shock, but the production itself was full of energy, and it received a passionate response from the audience.

In the play-within-the-play, one of the patients asks before their show, “Who would want to hear our story on a day like this, when an actual war is taking place?” Binder answers that the ones who would want to listen are “people who don't want any more days like this.”

It was a line that emboldened our production team.

### 3.

Let us face the grotesque reality.

In October 1995, a month before Rabin's assassination, a massive gathering protesting the Oslo Accords and demanding Rabin's death took place in Jerusalem. The person who initiated this gathering was the current Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu, the then Likud leader, forty-six years of age at the time. In *The Murder of Isaac*, Netanyahu appears in the play-within-the-play as "the Leader of the Opposition."

Among the protesters was Itamar Ben-Gvir, who became the National Security Minister of Netanyahu's sixth cabinet twenty-seven years later. There is footage of the nineteen-year-old Itamar showing a hood ornament he stole from Rabin's car, holding it proudly in front of the cameras. It is also well known that Ben-Gvir was a passionate follower of Baruch Goldstein, who massacred twenty-nine Palestinian worshippers in Hebron in the West Bank in 1994 and whose photo Ben-Gvir has on the wall in his room.

The original play features a song, regrettably omitted in the Japanese production due to a lack of time, about a girl who worshipped Goldstein. The song goes, "Night after night after prayers / I take his picture from under my bed / Then I'm kissing the face of that great man who knows / That an Arab is better

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off dead.” In this scandalous comic song, the girl masturbates while she imagines the dead bodies of Arabs, one by one. She orgasms as she counts the twenty-ninth body.

When I began studying Israeli theatre in 2012, the

Hebron massacre felt like part of the past. But everything that has happened since I started my studies has been a flash—from 2013, when the minister of finance in the third Netanyahu cabinet, Naftali Bennett (prime minister from 2021 to 2022), stated that there was no place for another state in Israel, to the end of 2022, when several far-right ministers, including National Security Minister Ben-Gvir, surrounded by settlement-supporters shouting “death to Arabs,” took power in the sixth Netanyahu cabinet.

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In 2017, under the fourth Netanyahu cabinet, which has explicitly shifted to the right, a semi-documentary play criticizing the occupation of Palestine was banned from a theatre festival. The play, titled *Prisoners of the Occupation* and originally written and directed by Einat Weizman, was presented in Tokyo in February 2023 (directed by Ikuta Miyuki, translated by Watanabe Maho, and produced by Theatre Office Natori). In 2018, the Nation-State Bill, officially declaring Israel to be the nation-state of the Jewish people, passed. After Netanyahu was prosecuted for bribery and other offenses, Israel entered a chaotic period where it had five general elections in the span of three and a half years starting in 2019. Finally, in late 2022, the current government—the most dangerous so far—was born.

As a result, violent attacks by settlers on Palestinians in the West Bank have been left uncontrolled. The number of Palestinian deaths in the first seven months of 2023 was equivalent to the death toll of 2022 as a whole. August 20, 2023, marked the thirtieth anniversary of the Oslo Accords, but the situation at the time offered no space for reflection. Israeli citizens have not simply sat by, however. From the beginning of the year, hundreds of thousands took to the



streets every week to protest the judicial reforms benefiting Netanyahu and call for democracy. However, the protests' primary targets were Netanyahu and his government; only a tiny fraction of the protesters criticized the occupation and demanded a two-state solution.

Then came the attack on October 7. In the play-within-the-play of *The Murder of Isaac*, the Leader of the Opposition talks to the families of the terrorists' victims. His speech is almost indistinguishable from that of the current, real prime minister.

*"I have come to assure you that your pain is ours too, and we'll do what this pain commands us to do until all his murderers are murdered. In every house, in every cellar, in every cave. We'll pursue them and annihilate them. Them and their families. Them and those who send them out. Them and those who assist them. All of them."*

People fueled by fear and grief continue to rely on military power that will "annihilate the murderers." But who could ever believe that this might lead to peace?

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#### 4.

In late September 2023, Motti Lerner sent a message to the Japanese production team. He grieved that far-right politicians occupied a dominant position in Israel and wrote, "It is hard to describe my fears about the future of my country." The future that manifested a fortnight later was absolutely devastating. In his statement, he went on to say, "Warmongers are in power in many parts of the world," and "Israel is not an exception."

*"As you will soon see, the play tries to expose their dangerous ideas and create a public discourse that will struggle against them and may even defeat them. Peace is very necessary for every human being on this planet. It allows humans to remain hopeful and sane....That is why plays like this are so necessary."*



Even Japan, which has not been at war even once since 1945 under its postwar Constitution, which renounces military power, is no exception to the global trends, either.

When we presented the play for the first time in Japan in 2020, *The Murder of Isaac* was still a story of a foreign, faraway land for the actors, so they often voiced their difficulty understanding the work.

When the Israeli government bombarded the Gaza Strip in May 2021, however, Japan's deputy defense minister clearly stated that "our hearts stand with Israel" on social media. And when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, many Japanese citizens began to think that expanding their country's military capacity was an option they might have to consider. In July 2022, our former prime minister, who proposed amending the Constitution to boost military power, was assassinated. The killer was a man whose life was destroyed by a religious group that the family of the former prime minister was closely involved with. In striking contrast, Rabin, who had proposed a peaceful coexistence with "the enemy," was murdered by a religious fundamentalist who rejected the idea of coexistence. At the end of 2022, the Japanese government passed revisions to

three key documents: the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and “Defense Buildup Program.” Lawmakers have been working



to enhance Japan’s “defensive” capabilities in the Nansei Islands in Okinawa at an unprecedented pace. Like Israel, Japan is expanding its military under the pretext of “deterrence” and “strengthening defensive capabilities,” fueled by fear.

Lerner, who once fought on the battlefield, has Binder speak as the Prime Minister in his play-within-the-play: “Whoever thinks that by amassing power we’ll prevent war is mistaken....If we amass power, our enemies will too. If you want to prevent war, you should abolish the reasons for war.”

Will we keep giving wrong answers to problems we already know the final answers to? For the playwright, that question is “why plays like this are so necessary.” I think the revival of *The Murder of Isaac* in October 2023 must have come about to convince us of that vital fact.

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\* The quotations from *The Murder of Isaac* are from the English version of February 2013, translated by Anthony Berris, on the Israeli Dramatists Website: <https://dramaisrael.org/en/play/the-murder-of-isaac/> (Retrieved January 7, 2024).

### **Murai, Hanayo**

A professor at Kyoritsu Women’s University Faculty of Arts & Letters, Murai Hanayo researches the history and theories of Western theatre on a scope that crosses national borders. In 2012, she began her research on Israeli theatre. She has also undertaken social educational projects through theatre and music. She is the originator of KALECO (2015–2017), a project for students to create theatre, which involved 100 students per year on average. In addition, Murai also began to produce live events for musicians from Okinawa since 2023. She recently wrote about Israeli theatre in “The Border of Co-existence: Akko Fringe Theatre Festival 2017” (*Bulletin of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Science and Culture, Kyoritsu Women’s University & Kyoritsu Women’s Junior College* 24, 2018), and as a theatre critic, she wrote about the regulation of speech in high school theatre in her article “Analyzing the Issues Arising from the Play *Hanako of Tomorrow*” (*Theatre Arts* 67, 2023).

(Translation: Murai Hanayo)

### About the “Theatre Born in Conflict Zones” series

The International Theatre Institute sponsors a worldwide project titled “Theatre Born in Conflict Zones” as an effort to promote peace through theatre. In 2009, the Japan Centre started its “Theatre Born in Conflict Zones” series as part of a survey and research project for the *International Theatre Yearbook*. Through activities including translations, readings, lectures by writers and experts, and exhibitions over the past thirteen years, this series has introduced 28 outstanding plays previously unknown in Japan. Since the third year, we have also published collections of plays. If you would like to order the latest edition or back issues containing translations of *The Murder of Isaac*, please contact the Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute.

—The Editor

**This year’s performances were unfortunately canceled, but the following is a record of the reading performances that could not be presented:**

### Theatre Born in Conflict Zones 15

Reading performance of *The Murder of Isaac*

13–15 October 2023

Location: Theater Fuusikaden

Archive distribution: 1 November 2023 (10:00 a.m.) through 31 January 2024 (11:59 p.m.)

Playwright: Motti Lerner

Translator: Murai Hanayo

Director: Kobayashi Nanao (Ryuzanji Company)

Music: Suwa So

Producer: Hayashi Hideki

Performers: Fujii Bin (Wonderpro), Inoue Kanako (Aru Company), Ueda Kazuhiro (Ryuzanji Company), Tsuji Kyota (Infini), Kimura Yumi (MeiMei), Nishijo Yoshimasa (Modern Swimmers), Araki Rie (Ryuzanji Company), Yamashita Naoya (Ryuzanji Company), Kambara Hiroyuki (Gekidan 1980), Katsumata Minoru, Konno Kenta (Theatre Moments)

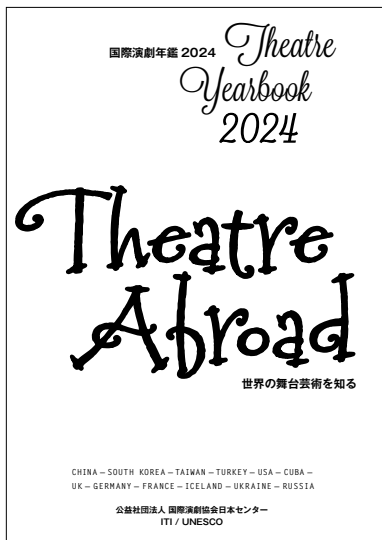


We also publish *Collected Plays*, which contains a Japanese translation of *The Murder of Isaac* with commentary by the translator. Please contact the Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute if you would like a copy.

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(As of March 27, 2024)



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## Theatre in Europe

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**France** Ceaseless Battles and the Deteriorating State of Public Theatres' Finances ————— Fujii Shintaro

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**Ukraine** Ukrainian Theatre in Search of Meanings ————— Marina Kotelenets

**Russia** For Whom is Russia a Good Place to Live? ————— Shinozaki Naoya

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Toward the Creation of a New Culture –  
The Lineage and Current Shape of African-American Theatre ————— Tonooka Naomi

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# ITI Japanese Centre's *Theatre Yearbook*

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International Theatre Institute (ITI) is an NGO under the umbrella of UNESCO and has some ninety branch centres around the world.

ITI Japanese Centre, which was founded in 1951, has been commissioned by the Agency for Cultural Affairs to edit and publish the *Theatre Yearbook* every March since 1972.

The *Theatre Yearbook*, which consists of two volumes, is globally distributed free of charge to various performing arts organizations, university libraries, cultural departments of embassies and so on.

One volume, titled “Theatre abroad” (in Japanese), targets Japanese reader and features articles by experts on various countries, explaining each country's performing arts-related affairs over a span of one year.

The other volume, which targets international readers, is titled “Theatre in Japan” (in English) and discusses ten genres of performing arts-related affairs of Japan, from traditional to contemporary performing arts, plus television dramas.

If you have any comments or requests regarding *Theatre Yearbook*, please contact our centre and give us your feedback.

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The web version of  
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“Theatre Born in Conflict Zones 12” – A Staged Reading Performed Full Out

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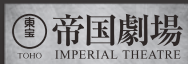
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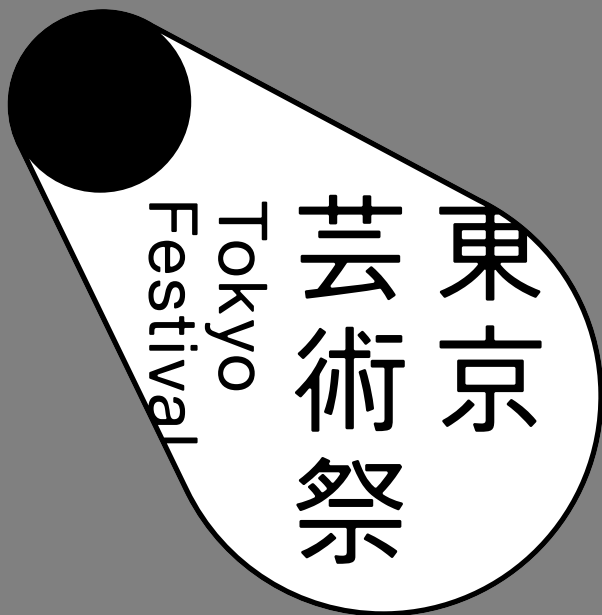
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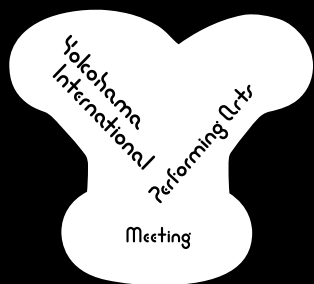
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### **HEAVEN CREATES A MAN NEITHER ABOVE NOR UNDER A MAN**

said an ancient opinion leader Yukichi FUKUZAWA. TOMIN GEKIJO has succeeded in keeping this principal by establishing an audience system which consists in distributing booked seats by a rotation system.

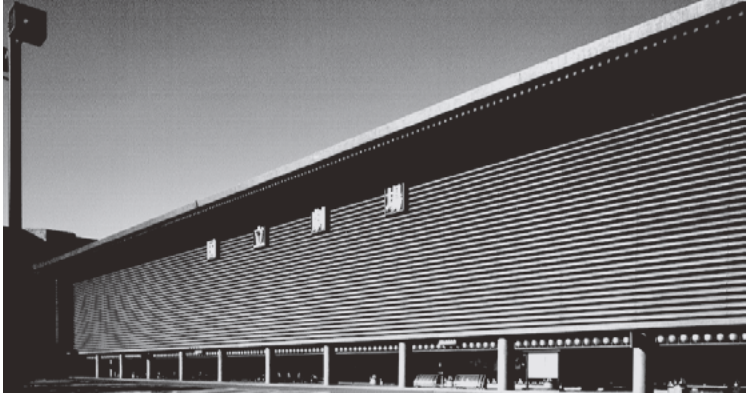
### **WHAT DOES TOMIN GEKIJO MEAN?**

TOMIN means a citizen of Tokyo and GEKIJO a theater. Under the generous support of the Tokyo Government and the Japan Theater Promoters Guild, it also makes possible "Theater going at half-price" for Tokyoites.

TOMIN GEKIJO, a new audience organization, aims at an open theater and actively seeks contacts with foreign theaters.

**TOMIN GEKIJO:** 5-1-7 Ginza Chuo-ku Tokyo 104-8077 Japan Phone : 03-3572-4311





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After closing, organised performances will be held at various theatres.

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