

Japanese *Otaku* Culture Gains Global Attention

In fall 2004, the Japan Foundation presented a unique view of urban development at the Venice Biennale's Ninth International Architecture Exhibition. Entitled "*Otaku: Persona = Space = City*," this popular exhibit revealed how contemporary Japanese culture is shaping urban space and structure in Tokyo's Akihabara technology district.

Otaku—a traditional Japanese word for "house" or "family"—has become a colloquial term for young Japanese "geeks" obsessed with *manga* (cartoons), *anime* (animations), and video games. For many Japanese, *otaku* evokes an image of a tiny room cluttered with thick comic books, stacks of CDs, and *anime* character dolls. In recent years, Akihabara has become a popular meeting place for Japanese

otaku people, as well as a *manga* marketplace. To show how this self-absorbed and sexually oriented youth culture is becoming globalized, the Venice Biennale exhibit displayed a miniature *otaku* room littered with typical geek goods, as well as *anime* figures and video game posters. In addition, a miniature landscape garden demonstrated how Japan's *otaku* culture is expanding beyond national borders, with connections to Web sites in Korea.

This unorthodox show—different from traditional architectural displays at Venice Biennale—showed the universal relevance of contemporary Japanese culture. The exhibit was enthusiastically received by a large international audience at Venice, as well as many visitors in Japan.



Commissioner Morikawa and visitors beside Akihabara models



Japanese Pavilion entrance



Visitors mesmerized by *Otaku* possessions

Contemporary Iraqi Events and Visits Foster Understanding of Iraqi-Arab Culture

In October the Japan Foundation sponsored a theatrical tour by the Al-Murwass Group of Baghdad, followed in November by a concert series featuring Naseer Shamma, an Iraqi master of the *oud*, or traditional Arab lute.

A symposium was held in conjunction with the Al-Murwass Group tour. Both events attracted considerable attention and media coverage, not least of all because they embodied the hope for peace and stability in Iraq.

The Al-Murwass Group staged a total of 15 performances in Tokyo, Nagoya, and Osaka from October 6 to 24. Together with the symposium in Tokyo, these performances attracted an overall audience of 1,343 spectators. This was the first tour of Japan for the 19-member troupe, and we take pride in having successfully arranged it despite numerous challenges along the way — among them the impossibility of carrying out any preliminary survey work in Baghdad. Between November 26 and December 3, a group of performers led by Naseer Shamma gave a series of concerts in Japan at the Foundation's invitation. Though currently residing in Cairo, Naseer Shamma is considered one of Iraq's

leading performers on the *oud*. The series drew an overall audience of 1,415 spectators, who were entranced by the unfamiliar sounds of this wonderful instrument.

At Naseer Shamma's own urging, the group staged a concert in both cities shattered by the atomic bomb, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It also presented two more performances at the Japan Foundation Forum, appeared at a seminar in Tokyo, and gave one further performance at a press conference.

Naseer Shamma's brilliant musicianship won fervent praise everywhere he performed. Audiences were truly impressed, as indicated by the excited response to the questionnaires handed out at each venue.

In addition, a group of 10 social studies teachers and four educational administrators from Iraq's Samawa region also came to Japan, where they paid visits to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education, and the Saitama Prefectural Board of Education. In addition, they met with students and teachers at primary and junior high schools in the prefecture.



Al-Murwass Group on stage



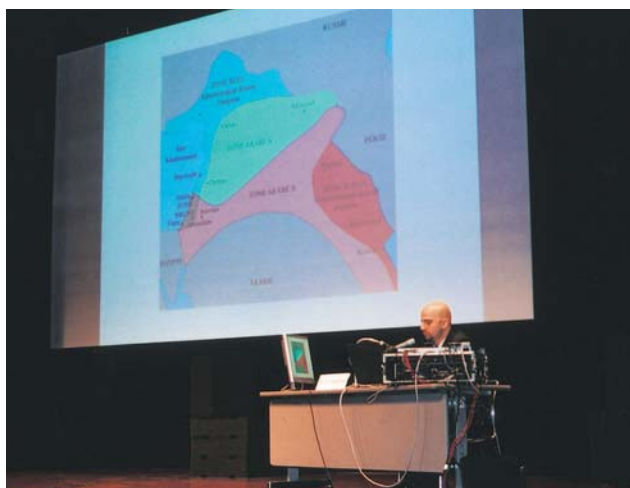
Naseer Shamma in performance

Film Festival Screenings and Lectures Help Japanese Audiences Better Understand Middle Eastern and Asian Cinema

The Japan Foundation Screening & Lecture Series 2004-2: Arab Film Festival Pre-Event (September 2004) and 2005-1: Arab Film Festival Pre-Event 2 (February 2005) featured screenings of Arabic movies previously viewed in Japan, along with lectures by experts on media coverage of Iraq and the history of Lebanese cinema. At Pre-Event 2, large crowds also flocked to see the four-and-a-half-hour documentary *Route 181: Fragments of a Journey in Palestine-Israel*, jointly directed by Palestinian Michel Kleifi and Israeli Eyal Sivan. The series culminated in the Arab Film Festival 2005, which took place in April 2005.

The Japan Foundation Screening & Lecture Series 2004-1: “Zionism in the Movies” (August) presented a survey of the history of Israeli cinema from its origins to the present, complete with much valuable footage. The highlight was a talk by Meiji Gakuin University Professor Inuhiko Yomota, who was just back from Israel after serving there as the Special Advisor for Cultural Exchange at the Agency for Cultural Affairs. This event was designed to foster better understanding of Israeli cinema, which is largely unknown to Japanese audiences.

In the field of Asian cinema, the Foundation and the Fukuoka City Public Library cosponsored a series called “The Golden Age of Hong Kong Cinema II: The Legend of Cameraman Tadashi Nishimoto, the Man Who Filmed Bruce Lee” (November-December). This series traced the career of Tadashi Nishimoto (1921-97) from when he was first scouted by the Hong Kong movie industry during its heyday in the 1960s until, having earned Bruce Lee’s trust, he was handpicked to shoot the legendary star’s movies including *The Way of the Dragon* and *Game of Death*. The series presented seven movies in all, including *The Ghost of Yotsuya* and *The Way of the Dragon*, and featured discussions and lectures by guest speakers Professor Sadao Yamane of Tokai University and Tadashi Nishimoto’s wife, Teruko. In conjunction with the screenings, publisher Chikuma Shobo released a book, *The Road to Hong Kong: From Nakagawa Nobuo to Bruce Lee*, by Tadashi Nishimoto, Koichi Yamada, and Sadao Yamane.



Najib El-Khash discussing “Iraq in the World Media, Iraq in the Middle Eastern Media” during the Japan Foundation Screening & Lecture Series 2005-1



Film festival fliers

Amon Miyamoto's Production of *Pacific Overtures* Plays on Broadway, Celebrating 150 Years of Japan-U.S. Relations

Under the direction of Amon Miyamoto, the Stephen Sondheim musical *Pacific Overtures* was revived on Broadway with the special support of the Japan Foundation. The work is set in the days when Japan first opened its doors to the outside world.

First performed in 1976, *Pacific Overtures* depicts Japan's rapid modernization in the wake of the arrival of the "Black Ships" in 1853. It portrays how Japanese in different walks of life were involved in the opening of their country and their reactions at the time. Miyamoto had already successfully staged the show in New York with a Japanese cast, in 2002; this time he used an American cast, and garnered considerable attention in the process.

As a prelude to the show's opening on December 2, a public symposium, "MIT Meets Broadway," was held at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts on September 22. There, Miyamoto discussed the roots of the Japan – U.S. relationship with Professor John W. Dower, one of America's leading historians.

In a talk delivered at the Japan Foundation headquarters the following March 2, Miyamoto summarized what he was trying to convey through the work: "History is created by the

people living in a particular time and place. Thus the many different people who experienced the era when Japan opened up to the world all helped to make history."

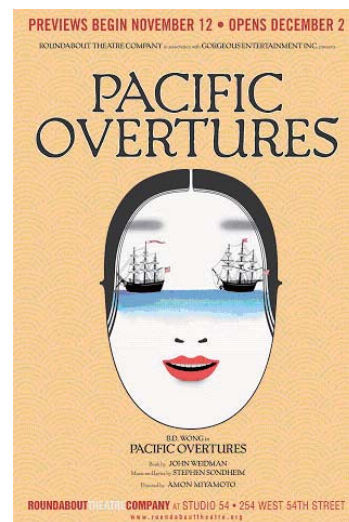
With two New York shows behind him, Miyamoto can now claim to be a veteran director. Still, looking back he confesses, "I wish I could say the rehearsals went off without a hitch, but in reality that's not the case."

For Miyamoto, the most educational aspect of the experience involved creation of a work of art in partnership with colleagues of different backgrounds and experience. Staging this version of *Pacific Overtures* required special efforts to surmount cultural challenges that did not arise with the Japanese cast.

The show created quite a sensation, attracting an audience of 70,000 spectators during its December 2 to January 31 run.



Announcing the production at Japan Foundation headquarters (July 2004)



Pacific Overtures poster

Performances Bring Japanese Culture, Spiritual Solace to Timorese Children

The Japan Foundation organized a touring show for the children of the West Timor region of Indonesia and the new nation of East Timor. The project sought to help local children find new enjoyment and exercise their aesthetic sensibilities as the island continues to rebuild.

The Kazenoko theatrical troupe, which stages plays for children, presented performances and workshops in two Indonesian cities where many former refugees now live. Children of different ages packed the theater for each performance, and their gleeful reactions were unforgettable as they followed every move of the three actors on stage.

Between performances, the Kazenoko members visited the camps and East Timorese beaches where the former refugees live. There, too, as the troupe demonstrated games that involved using the hands and the whole body,

they were greeted by the rapturous faces of children utterly absorbed in the fun. But the tour was not only designed to bring spiritual solace through theatrical performances; it also sought to ensure that children would continue to enjoy such opportunities to refine their aesthetic awareness. To that end, workshops were held for local educators on ways in which banana leaves, newspapers, and other everyday objects could be put to creative use in the classroom.



Children delighted at the sight of Kazenoko on stage



Kazenoko members on a visit to a camp

Rock Band MIYAZAWA Tours Europe to Great Acclaim

In the field of performing arts, the Japan Foundation arranged overseas tours for a total of 35 groups encompassing every genre from traditional Japanese music and theater to drama, jazz, and pop. Particularly acclaimed was a four-nation European tour by the rock band MIYAZAWA, led by singer Kazufumi Miyazawa.



Performing live in Europe

SOI Music Festival

From September 10 to 15, the SOI Music Festival was held to showcase Japanese and Thai “indie” music. The event, which took place in Bangkok, was cosponsored by the Japan Foundation there and local supporters. In October, the event was repeated in Tokyo with assistance from Japan Foundation headquarters.



Concert in Bangkok