

Seinendan Theater Company and Pascal RAMBERT (France) “KOTATSU” First Report: Launch of Project

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Pascal RAMBERT is a playwright and director who was born in France in 1962. From 2007 to 2017, he served as the artistic director of the Théâtre de Gennevilliers, a national dramatic center located in the suburbs of Paris. While there, he worked on several projects, including the first French-language performance of *Sables & Soldats*¹ with the Seinendan Theater Company led by HIRATA Oriza, who is the same age as Rambert. During this time, Rambert also worked together with the Festival d'Automne à Paris on a two-piece performance of Hirata's *Citizens of Seoul* and *Citizens of Seoul 1919*.² Rambert held performances in Japan of *The Beginning of Love* at the Komaba Agora Theater in 2007,³ and *A (Micro) History of World Economics, Danced* in Fujimi, Shizuoka, and Miyazaki in 2010.⁴ In 2013, Rambert held performances of *The End of Love*, one of his most acclaimed works, in Shizuoka, Osaka, and Yokohama.⁵ (Additional performances were held at the Komaba Agora Theater and Shikoku Gakuin University's Notos Studio from 2016 to 2017.) In 2018, he held performances of *GHOSTs* at the Komaba Agora Theater.

For *KOTATSU*, Seinendan's 2021 international project, five actors will appear who have worked with Rambert before. They are OGINO Yuri, who appeared in *The Beginning of Love*; HYODO Kumi and OTA Hiroshi, who appeared in *The End of Love*; and MORI Issei and NAGOYA Megumi, who appeared in *GHOSTs*. In addition, five actors who have never worked with Rambert before will be appearing. They are YAMAUCHI Kenji, CHINEN Mima, SHIN Suhkye, SATO Shigeru, and ASAMURA Kamilla. In total, ten Seinendan actors will be appearing in *KOTATSU*. All of Rambert's works that have been performed in Japan were first performed in other countries before being translated into Japanese. *KOTATSU*, however, is a new work that was written specifically for the actors of Seinendan to perform. For this first report, I interviewed Pascal Rambert in May 2021 as a record at the time of the project's launch. At this time, the rough translation of the play into Japanese had been completed and discussions with Japanese staff had moved forward considerably. Over about 40 years, Rambert has engaged in international projects in about 30 countries and in over 30 languages. Based on this experience, I asked Rambert about his basic stance toward international productions, and the events leading up to this project's launch.

—The *KOTATSU* project is an international collaboration between you and Seinendan. Please tell me what points you focus on when engaging in an international production.

Rambert: I worked on international productions for 10 years at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers. Even after I became an independent director, I continued to engage in international collaborations. In either situation, however, what I have believed is the most important thing in international productions is that they are based on relationships of friendship. I think that friendships between artists are particularly important. This project is also based in the 20-year-long friendship between Hirata Oriza and me. Under the name of international collaboration, one-time projects have been conducted all over the place in order to stand out. For me, however, it is important to work together with people I personally strongly trust. A moment ago, you told me that you studied abroad in Germany. I get work offers from Germany around two to three times a month, but I refuse

them all. I'm not interested in doing projects for fame or money. I think that it is important for artists to recognize each other, for artists who understand each other and who respect each other from the bottom of their hearts to work together, exactly like we have with this project. It is also extremely important for friendship to connect everyone who is involved in a production. I have worked with Production Coordinator NISHIO Sachiko for years.

—You and Seinendan have worked together for a long time. Please tell me about the events leading up to your current project, *KOTATSU*.

Rambert: When we staged *The End of Love*, there were expressions in my play that were difficult to translate into Japanese. There was a phrase in French that, translated literally, meant “Life is not a basket of strawberries.” There was a discussion about how best to translate this into Japanese. After consulting Japanese Language Supervisor Hirata Oriza and Translator HIRANO Akihito, we changed the Japanese line to “Life is not eating tangerines around the *kotatsu* (a low table covered by a blanket, with a built-in heater; in winter, families typically sit around it on the floor with their legs under the blanket).” I tell this story all the time when I talk about translating works in countries such as Russia, Italy, and the United States. The word “*kotatsu*” left a deep impression on me then. The result was the play *KOTATSU*. *KOTATSU*'s central theme is the *kotatsu*, a piece of furniture that means comfort and relaxation to Japanese people. *KOTATSU* also incorporates Japanese feelings about shame; and the relationship between social media and New Year's, a time that is supposed to be quiet and peaceful.

—In other words, it was your long-term relationships that made this project possible.

Rambert: To date, I have produced or staged five or six works in Japan. Including touring works, the total number of productions in Japan I have been involved in is around 10 over about 20 years. I believe that I understand perhaps a little about Japan, and I love Japan. And because I love Japan, I want to look at it in a way that is a little teasing. I also know that Japanese people love France and sometimes laugh at France as well. Because we love each other, we tease each other. I think that's natural. This project has been in my head for a long time. I wanted to make a new production with the actors of Seinendan who I have worked together with before. For example, I worked with Ogino Yuri on *The Beginning of Love*, Ota Hiroshi and Hyodo Kumi on *The End of Love*, and Mori Issei and Nagoya Megumi on *GHOSTs*. Recently, I created a work for the Festival d'Avignon.⁶ This work featured actors with whom I have worked with over the past 10 years. In part because of this, I wanted to gather together other actors with whom I had worked. I also wanted to create a work for the actors of Seinendan. With *KOTATSU*, I was finally able to achieve this.

—I read a rough translation of the script, and noticed the names of the characters are the same as the first names of the actors. What was the relationship between your script writing and the casting?

Rambert: We held auditions to decide on the cast first. I meet face-to-face with many actors before I start my work. Last year, I wrote a work in Mexico,⁷ and I met with all the theater's actors then as well. When I make a new work, I like to start creating after I've met people instead of bringing a completed project. With *KOTATSU*, too, I started working on it after I met with Seinendan's actors in Tokyo and Toyooka. *KOTATSU* would not

be the work it is now if, for example, I hadn't met Asamura Kamilla, who is from Uzbekistan; or Shin Suhkye, who has Korean roots. I also remember an incident with Ota Hiroshi when we worked together on *The End of Love*. His character had a huge number of lines. After the first rehearsal (to read through the script) on the fifth floor of the Komaba Agora Theater, Ota said to me, "Why does this character talk so much?" So I proposed that in my next work, I would give him a role that doesn't talk at all, which he agreed to. That was a major starting point for *KOTATSU*. My works are a result of my relationships with people. When I look at cast photos, they tell me everything. Like a shaman, I can feel the energy coming out of those photos. I put words to the various energies and create the script based on the energies that emerge between people.

—When was the last time you were in Japan?

Rambert: I don't remember exactly, but I think it was 2019.

—I believe that you met with the actors then and established the main outline of the project. In the script however, "November 2020" and "January 2021" are written above the cast, as well as several city names between them.⁸ I imagine that COVID-19 affected your work in various ways, but does this mean you wrote the script as you traveled to these different cities?

Rambert: COVID-19 didn't change the rhythm of my work. Two productions scheduled for Hong Kong and New York were delayed half a year, but other than that, I have been able to stage all of my works. It is my rule to write works outside of Paris. When I'm in Paris, I value my time with my family, so I write in the morning when I'm staying in other cities.

—When you stage productions outside of French-speaking places, of course you hand the plays you have written over to translators, but what sort of work is involved in delivering your words to local audiences?

Rambert: For me, I solely focus on directing. Very simply, all I think about is the production, as a playwright, and as a director. I don't really think about what to do for the audience, or what I should do to get the audience to like it, or, conversely, what I should do if the audience doesn't like it. When I work, my ethic is to create a piece of art. As far as I remember it, Japanese audiences don't express their opinion very much after opening day. This is different from France. After opening day, French audiences feel the need to talk for hours, and that is difficult for me (laughs). In part because there's this difference, I'm curious how Japanese people will react after seeing this work. When I stage a production, I want to make it direct and real. This work is like a movie, and I think perhaps could even be filmed like a feature film. I was deeply influenced by director OZU Yasujiro's depiction of the lives of people. It is said that Ozu filmed from the perspective of someone kneeling on a tatami mat floor, and I feel that this work was similarly written from a tatami mat perspective.

—At this point in time, I assume that you've begun talking with planners. Are the staff you are working with on this project people you have worked with before?

Rambert: Almost all of them. For example, I've worked with technical director NISHIMOTO Aya for about 20 years. Our relationship is at a point where she knows what I want without me saying almost anything at all. I have very clear images of what I want to do with stage design and

costumes, and there are also descriptions in the script. I think that this makes these relatively easy to work on. I'm looking forward to meeting up with everyone in Tokyo in July.

—The first round of rehearsals will be in Tokyo over a two-week period in late July. The second round of rehearsals will be held in Toyooka from late August. However, has COVID-19 caused any changes in your original schedule?

Rambert: No, at least at this point there have been no changes. I am hoping that I will be able to fly to Japan as scheduled in July. At that time, about one month will have passed since I finished getting vaccinated. To date, when working in other countries I have been getting tested every three days, but so far I haven't gotten sick, so I'm hoping we will be able to do this. That being said, there's also the Olympics, so I don't know what effect that will have on the situation going forward. Right now, I hope things settle down and go well.

—Will you be staying in Japan the entire time between the first and second round of rehearsals?

Rambert: No, there's a part of me that's kind of Japanese in that I never take a vacation. At the end of July I will leave Japan and return to Paris, and then I will immediately start rehearsals on another project. This project will be staged immediately following the first performance of *KOTATSU* in Toyooka. Once that is finished, I'm planning on taking a two-week break.

—A moment ago, you said that you don't participate in one-shot-style international projects. Please share if you have any plans to stage this project other than in Toyooka.

Rambert: With regard to that, I would ask you to talk to Nishio Sachiko and Hirata Oriza. I don't talk about such things in advance, so I leave such production matters in the hands of Seinendan and the staff of the Komaba Agora Theater. I would like to concentrate on writing and staging.

Interview and Text: Yokobori Masahiko

Interpreter: ISHIKAWA Hiromi

Note: This interview was conducted over Zoom from 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. on May 10, 2021 (Japan Standard Time).

1 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2010/09/2309>

2 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2016/11/5312>

3 http://www.komaba-agera.com/line_up/2007_06/debut.html

4 https://spac.or.jp/10_autumn/dansee.html

5 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2013/09/2460>

6 <https://festival-avignon.com/fr/edition-2019/programmation/architecture-2870>

7 <http://www.teatronam.com.mx/index.php/component/sppagebuilder/209-desaparecer>

8 novembre 2020 / Tallin / Genève / Paris / Rouchut / Paris / Milan / Séville / janvier 2021