

Saitama Arts Theater and Christopher GREEN (U.K.)

“The Digital Home”

First Report: Project Launch

Author: OSHITA Yoshiyuki

1. Overview of the Start-up Phase

(1) Overview of the Work

The Home is an immersive theater piece by Christopher GREEN in which 30 audience members spend 48 hours over a weekend in a fictional, but real as a building, home for the elderly. It was performed twice in the U.K. in the fall of 2019. This project aims to produce an online version of *The Home* in Japan and the U.K.

(2) The Main Parties Involved in the Start-up Phase (Titles Omitted)

U.K.

- Original idea and general direction (general director of the work): Christopher GREEN
- Producer: Linda BLOOMFIELD
- Co-production partners
The Albany Chief Executive and Artistic Director: Gavin BARLOW
Entelechy Arts Artistic Director: Maddy MILLS

Japan

- Written, directed, and performed (Japanese version) by: SUGAWARA Naoki (OiBokkeShi)
- Producer: UKEGAWA Sachiko (Saitama Arts Theater)
- Production: TANAKA Miki, MAEDA Takako (Saitama Arts Theater)
- IT advisor: HAYASHI Sayaka (Saitama Arts Theater)
- Video production: TAKEDA Tomoya (bench)

(3) Meeting Results (2021)

- March 2: Japan/U.K. Kickoff meeting, confirmation of general plan, etc.
- March 11: Japan side only. Discussion on how to respond to the U.K.'s proposals, etc.
- March 30: Japan/U.K. Discussion of specifications for outsourced web designer, etc.
- May 3: Japan/U.K. Comments on the text prepared by Sugawara, etc.
- May 17: Japan/U.K. Confirmation of future schedule, etc.
- May 31: Japan/U.K. Demonstration of *The Home*, etc.

2. Findings

Given the recent need to prevent the global spread of COVID-19, remote meetings using tools such as Zoom and Webex have rapidly spread throughout the world. This has made it relatively easy to set up multiple meetings with multiple stakeholders across multiple countries and regions, sharing materials, in international co-productions, including this project.

This is one of the few positive social effects brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, because we are able to increase the frequency of communication in this way, the difficulties (i.e., barriers) of international co-productions have become more apparent than before. Below is an overview of four barriers that emerged between translation and creation in the context of the project *The Home*.

The first is the barrier of understanding the existing work. When a work produced overseas is to be reproduced in Japan, or a work produced in Japan is to be reproduced overseas, it is of course essential to have an understanding of the existing work. In the case of a new work being produced in more than one country or region, an understanding of the artist's previous work is also necessary.

In the production of the Japanese version of *The Home*, an understanding of the original performance was essential. However, only the producer of Saitama Arts Theater had actually seen and experienced the original performance. In particular, as the original version of *The Home* was a play characterized by an *immersive* experience in which audience members independently walked around the facility and experienced it for themselves, it was difficult to gain a deeper understanding of the play just with performance footage and materials.

This issue was resolved when Sugawara Naoki, the director of the Japanese version of *The Home*, experienced a remote demonstration on May 31. The demonstration helped Sugawara understand *The Home* much better, and he seemed to finally get it (of course, the same was true for the reviewer, who felt that his uncertainty since the kickoff meeting on March 2 had been cleared).

This is merely hindsight, but if this demonstration had been conducted at the beginning of the meetings, Sugawara Naoki and others involved in Japan would have come to understand *The Home* as a work much more quickly. In the future, the Japan Foundation could be involved in an increasing number of projects to produce Japanese versions of original works, and in those cases, this experience will be very instructive.

The second barrier, which is a present-day theme, is the creation of an online version of the work. The initial assumption, given the recent COVID-19 pandemic, was to create an online version in lieu of an in-person version, but as the discussions between the collaborators in Japan and the U.K. progressed, the work was transformed into one in which the online version is the main focus. As a result, we are now in a situation where it is assumed that the new collaborative work, while in fact using the original version as a starting point, will be a new work, quite different from the original.

As mentioned earlier, the original version was an immersive play, but it is extremely difficult to reproduce this “immersive” feeling remotely. In the original version, the difference between the audience and the actors was, in fact, not clear, which was part of the charm of the piece, but in the online version, it is clear who the actors are. Also, although hopping around in the Web is possible, the scope of the trick is naturally limited. The relationship between the audience and the work is decidedly different between the original version and the online version.

In other words, this project is facing the difficulty of having to make an international co-production in the tricky situation where there is yet isn't an original work. As a reviewer, I think it would be clearer to put aside the original version of *The Home* as an immersive theater production and shift focus to the idea that a completely new online play is going to be created.

The third barrier is the issue of how to express the creativity and originality of the artist, Sugawara, in the Japanese version of a work for which an original version exists. In general, there is a concern that placing too much emphasis on the ideas and taste of the original may limit the artistic ideas and originality of the Japanese version.

In particular, with regard to *The Digital Home* of this project, Christopher Green, the director of the original version, is looking to enhance the reality of the details. Specifically, he has a notion that the creation of a Japanese version of the logo for the fictional senior citizens' home where

The Home is set, as well as the props (employee uniforms, posters, pens, knick-knacks, etc.) with the logo affixed to them, is an extremely high priority. I suppose this to be due to the fact that the worldview of the work is already complete in his mind, so he is more particular about the details.

Green is also unique in that he has a strong and distinctive taste, for example, not to allow the audience to be satisfied within the work itself. There is no right answer to the question of how to deal with such differences in taste among artists and how to harmonize them, so this will likely be an issue for future consideration. Similar issues have surely arisen in other international co-productions.

Finally, the fourth barrier, although it goes without saying, concerns cultural differences between Japan and the U.K. For example, in the process of considering the web design for the online version of *The Home*, there was a discussion about introducing an online game version of the play. While Green and others in the U.K. readily discussed the introduction of a game version, it would be extremely difficult to produce a game of a satisfactory level for viewers in Japan, where game literacy is high.

Also, there seemed to be a difference in awareness between the Japanese and the British teams regarding how to proceed with the project. For example, the British team was the same as the team that had executed the original version of *The Home* and had developed a common understanding of the project structure, including the staff, and took an aggressive and forward-thinking approach, wanting to set a schedule as if it were a job. By contrast, the Japanese team was cautious in its approach to the work, wanting to carefully share an understanding of the fundamentals of the piece.

Furthermore, there were cultural differences in the manner in which professionals work with each other. For example, in creating the videos for the online version, Green only set the artistic goals and left the rest to the filmmakers. He did not even write a script. In Japan, however, it is not possible to produce a video without writing a detailed script before commissioning it. In this way, I felt that there were considerable differences in the way professionals work with each other.

These differences in cultural mannerisms will require both sides to understand the other and respect their respective ways of doing things. Of course, if there are questions about the other side's way of working, it is necessary to clearly communicate the questions (to ask why). At this time, explaining the Japanese side's thinking in a logical manner would help to get the desired answer. In other words, I think that the *ability to ask questions* such that they clarify "which part of your opinion I feel skeptical about" will be tested in the production process.

Saitama Arts Theater and Christopher GREEN (U.K.)

“The Digital Home”

Second Report: Production Process

Author: OSHITA Yoshiyuki

1. Overview of the Rehearsal Phase

(1) Overview of the Work

The original version of *The Home* was an immersive theater piece by Christopher GREEN in which 30 audience members spent 48 hours over a weekend in a fictional, but real as a building, home for the elderly. It was performed twice in the U.K. in the fall of 2019. This project aims to produce an online version of *The Home* (video viewing and app experience) in the U.K. and Japan.

(2) The main parties involved are as follows (titles omitted). Since the start-up phase, there are eight new participants, six in the U.K. and two in Japan (TOYAMA and KATO).

U.K.

- Original idea and general direction (general director of the work): Christopher GREEN
- Producer: Caggy KERLOGUE (replacing Linda BLOOMFIELD)
- Assistant producer: Alfie HEFFER
- Digital platform production manager: Luke ALEXANDER (Marmelo Digital)
- Digital production: Abhinav BAJPAI (Marmelo Digital)
- Creative director: Kerry JOYCE (Marmelo Digital)
- Creative technologist: Tatiana DISU (Marmelo Digital)
- Co-production partners
The Albany Chief Executive and Artistic Director: Gavin BARLOW
Entelechy Arts Artistic Director: Maddy MILLS

Japan

- Written, directed, and performed (Japanese version) by: SUGAWARA Naoki (OiBokkeShi)
- Producer: UKEGAWA Sachiko (Saitama Arts Theater)
- Production: TANAKA Miki, MAEDA Takako (Saitama Arts Theater)
- IT advisor: HAYASHI Sayaka (Saitama Arts Theater)
- Video director: TOYAMA Shoji
- Filming and editing: KATO Shinsuke
- Video production: TAKEDA Tomoya (bench)

(3) Meeting Results (in which I, Oshita, participated)

- June 18: Japan/U.K. Kickoff meeting with the digital platform production team also attending. Confirmation of two types of work to be done: a website with video viewing capability and a game application. Confirmation and selection of three potential illustrators.
- July 8: Japan/U.K. Caggy Kerlogue replaced Linda as the producer on the U.K. side. Discussion of specifications for commissioning a web designer, etc.
- July 18: Japan team only. Filming of several videos at Saitama Arts Theater and Forest Park.
- July 26: Japan/U.K. Recording of the Friendship Room.
- August 5: Japan/U.K. Confirmation of various rooms in the game app.
- August 13th: Japan/U.K. Exchange of opinions about the game app.

- After that, exchanged emails entirely about translation (English to Japanese, Japanese to English).

2. Findings

Even after moving from the start-up phase (mostly from March to May) to the rehearsal phase, the Japanese production team for *The Home* continued to have worries.

Specifically, the following six points can be mentioned.

First, there is a communication gap due to the time lag between Japan and the U.K. The original production of *The Home* was performed in the U.K., and the online version is being created based on the original version. Therefore, the production of the British version inevitably came first, and it is now being used as a reference for the production of the Japanese version. Against this background, while translating the old version produced in the U.K. and producing the Japanese version, the British version was upgraded and the Japanese side was not informed of this change, resulting in a discrepancy between the Japanese and British versions. Of course, this kind of communication gap can also occur during productions in Japan. However, such discrepancies are more likely to occur in international co-productions.

Second, while the original intention of this project was to bring a production staged in the U.K. to Japan, this was changed to production of online versions in both Japan and the U.K. due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, an entirely new production was to be produced simultaneously in both Japan and the U.K. Naturally, no one, including Green, the writer of the original version, was able to grasp the whole picture of the finished work. The production of the parts proceeded in parallel in Japan and the U.K., referring to the work of the original version. Of course, once a rough whole concept has been determined, parts can be produced. However, whether or not the whole will be optimal when these parts are compiled together is another matter. If time and budget were available, the process would be a back-and-forth one, but in reality, there is no such leeway. In this sense, the entire production proceeded by groping its way forward.

The third point is that the question of whether or not to adjust the taste between the videos produced simultaneously in the U.K. and Japan became a point of contention. The conclusion was that there would be no adjustment of taste between Japan and the U.K. However, even in this case, the issue remained as to what common elements should be used as components to make it the same work, *The Home*. In this regard, Green, the British director, seemed to think that adherence to the basic concept of “not letting the audience become onlookers” and thorough attention to details such as logos and props would ensure a sense of unity and reality in both the Japanese and British productions. We will have to wait until we see and compare the finished works to find out more about this point.

Furthermore, as a fourth point, I can mention the difficulty that this project includes the production of a game app as a major part of it. The other major part, the videos, can be understood as an extension of theater. However, game apps are completely different from theater and video. And while Japanese are familiar with games from childhood, I do not feel that game literacy on the British side is very high. This is a concern. I am looking forward to seeing what kind of game app will be created, and at the same time, I am worried.

As a fifth, albeit minor point, regarding the style chosen by the designer who was eventually selected, no one on the Japanese side seemed to feel that it was good, but it was adopted due to Green’s strong insistence that he wanted a “stateless, retro-futuristic” look. Perhaps if the work had

been produced only in Japan, a different direction would have been possible.

Sixth, the final phase of this stage was to put translations on both the Japanese and English content. This did not proceed according to the time schedule. The issue was on the British side. On the other hand, it is often said that the concept of “deadline” is generally different between Japan and other countries. It seems that other countries consider Japanese people to be “punctual.” For example, when one looks at train accidents caused by speeding in an attempt to be on time, or the overcrowded schedules of the Shinkansen bullet trains, one might think that this may indeed be the case. In international co-productions, it may be better to work on the assumption that people overseas have a different sense of time than Japanese people.

In addition, I felt once again that the role of interpreters is extremely important in an international co-production. In this project, the same person handled the interpretation at most of the meetings. This made it possible for the interpreter to provide background information on each person’s comments, which I believe greatly improved communication between the

British and Japanese sides.

It should also be noted that at this stage the producer on the British side was replaced. As this change was due to the original producer’s own circumstances, I consider this in itself to have been an unavoidable situation. On the other hand, if the work were being produced only in Japan, this situation would probably not have arisen. To put it bluntly, if I am to say without being afraid of being misunderstood, in general, when working in Japan, one’s family situation does not often take precedence over one’s work. By contrast, it seemed to me that in the U.K., diverse work styles are taken as a given. This social environment makes it relatively easy to replace someone with a new person when the first person’s own circumstances get in the way. On the other hand, the reviewer believes that the producer’s work is a very creative job that requires a high level of professionalism. However, the fact that a job is easily replaceable makes it like a commodity in economics: an economic value or service that can be replaced. I also think the fact that the work is always replaceable by someone else rather takes away some of the dignity and pride that an individual would have in his or her work. Hence, I cannot help but feel

Making of videos (Japanese version)



Making of videos (British version)



uncomfortable in praising “diverse work styles” indiscriminately. Perhaps, if the members around her could have made a commitment in the face of this dramatic replacement, it would have been for all of them to think about how they could work so as to ensure that she could continue to produce. In any case, this situation was one that, through the cultural differences between Japan and the U.K., made me think about the nature of work.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, because of it, the piece was created through a series of remote dialogues between Japanese and British artists and producers without ever meeting in person. In this sense, this project can be seen as a work unique to and symbolic of the COVID-19 era.

This sequence of coordination and progress may be likened to “trying to somehow solve simultaneous equations with a large number of variables.” This is probably one of the most difficult projects among the Japan Foundation’s co-production projects this time. Since it is such a difficult project, I am really looking forward to the presentation of the work.