

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

“The Digital Home”

Third Report: Performance

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1. Overview of the Results Presentation 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. In the Japanese version, audience members will experience a virtual tour of the fictional “Aozora” facility for the elderly. The elderly people in the production are played by skilled actors from Saitama Gold Theatre, giving the audience a glimpse into the real world of aging and caregiving, despite the fact that it is a video production.

The Virtual Facility Tour website was available from September 26 through December 31, 2021. (<https://www.thedigitalhome.org/>)

(2) Credits are as follows (titles omitted)

- Original idea and general direction: Christopher GREEN
- Japanese version written, directed, and performed by: SUGAWARA Naoki (OiBokkeShi)
- Cast (online version): ABE Hikaru, SUZUKI Shinnosuke, SATO Kei, TAKE-DA Arifumi
ISHIKAWA Kayo, OGUSHI Miwako, OBUCHI Mitsuyo, TAKIZAWA Tae, TAMURA Ritsuko, HAYASHIDA Keiko, HYAKUMOTO Natsue, KASSAI Hiromu, KITAZAWA Gasho, TAKAHASHI Kiyoshi, TAKEI Masatake, TOYAMA Yoichi, MORISHITA Ryuichi
(The above are Saitama Gold Theater members.)
MORISHITA Tamiko (narration), TAKEDA Ikuno
ITO Asa, SON Daisuke
- Video director: TOYAMA Shoji
- Filming and editing: KATO Shinsuke
- Digital platform production: Marmelo Digital
- Planning and production: Saitama Arts Theater
- Organized by: The Japan Foundation, Saitama Arts Theater
- Co-production: The Japan Foundation, The Albany (U.K.), Entelechy Arts, and Christopher Green, Saitama Arts Theater

2. Findings

Japan has become the world’s fastest and largest super-aging society. This comes with many issues that cannot be easily resolved. Against this backdrop, it is hoped that through a virtual tour of the fictional “Aozora” facility for the elderly, viewers will be able to grasp an image of their own and their families’ lives and caregiving in old age.

Just like a real facility for the elderly, the fictional “Aozora” also has a variety of spaces. Through the experience of visiting each of these spaces (clicking through them like playing a game), audience members can deepen their understanding of the current state and reality of nursing care in Japan.

Incidentally, the website has a rather confusing structure. I presume

that the structure was intentionally made difficult to understand in order to reproduce in the virtual world the sensation of visiting and walking through the facility. On the other hand, in contrast to the immersive original work, which required visitors to spend a full 48 hours to experience the real facility, many people may have experienced this work at home or in their spare time while out and about. Considering this, it would have been nice to have a “Quick Guide” or “Recommended Course” menu, for example.

On the other hand, compared to realistic theater productions, it is set up such that the characters often speak directly to the audience. It can be pointed out that this feature allows audience members to immerse themselves in this fictional world as if they were talking to those people.

As stated at the beginning in the “Welcome Message,” the assumption within the framework of the long-term care insurance system in Japan is that “plans will be carried out as planned.” As a result, many senior care facilities are (excessively) concerned about the health of their residents/users, while their cultural life is not given much attention. However, it would not be sufficient to simply provide a list of things such as meals, bathing, and exercise in a senior citizen facility. By themselves, meals would be little more than nutritional supplementation and bathing reduced to body washing. I believe that it is important for the elderly to feel that their lives are worth living and that they are leading rich and fulfilling lives. Therefore, I believe that cultural experiences and the provision of support options will become increasingly important in the future.

In “Meet our resident Ms. Tamura,” resident Tamura says that she moved into this facility because she “didn’t want my family to get all messed up.” This is a real problem. For example, according to a survey conducted by the website “minnanokaigo” (Care for Everyone), more than 90% (91.5%) of the respondents have experienced family (sibling) problems over caring for a parent.¹ Given this reality, it is expected that more and more people will move into senior care facilities if the financial issues can be resolved.

In “Meet our resident Mr. Kobayashi,” a scene is depicted in which the resident, Kobayashi, pees himself. This makes him feel angry with himself, ashamed, and inferior, and he takes it out on his caregivers, finally begging them to “kill me.” As depicted, *aging* is a process in which people gradually lose the ability to do things that they used to be able to do normally. The video made me realize that it is necessary to accept such a reality in order to grow old. Conversely, such a video makes us think that our ordinary, everyday lives are very important.

In “Watch a workshop,” it was impressive to see the close communication between residents and caregivers. It would be nice if such workshops were conducted in real-life senior citizen facilities, and if the residents’ opinions were listened to carefully. The workshop also depicted a scene in which local residents were helping the facility residents in their daily lives. In the real world, there may be barriers such as liability issues, but I felt that the creation of such a connection with the local community is wonderful in itself.

The work also depicted how the lives of the facility’s elderly residents have been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Because of the pandemic, physical visits with family members are restricted. In “Watch and online visit,” a daughter tries to tell the father (a resident) via remote video-phone that her mother (wife for the father) died yesterday, but the father, who is suffering from advanced dementia, is unable to recognize that it is his daughter with whom he is having a conversation. This is a very poignant scene. I assume that these situations occur frequently in real-life elderly care facilities. Dementia may have progressed rapidly in many of the elderly residents who were restricted from seeing their fami-

lies because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Perhaps this reality will become apparent when the pandemic subsides and families are reunited with elderly residents for the first time in a long time.

On the other hand, I also notice that these communication barriers actually occur on a daily basis in communication between healthy people. Specifically, such communication failures may well occur when interacting with others who have different values. Aging may be a process of magnifying these real-life issues. This point is also the theme of a separately recorded lecture on “dialogue” by Dr. TORIYAMA Daijiro. The play included the phrase “what actually happens in the field is mutual learning between teachers and students,” and ideally, it would be wonderful if such “mutual learning” could be realized in senior citizen facilities.

The British version, on the other hand, has a very different taste from the Japanese version. The premise of the British version of *The Home* is that a large corporation operates 32 facilities in the U.K., and it deals with problems that arise in nursing care settings in a very corporate-like manner. The British version is also more straightforward in dealing with real-life issues, such as the shortage of nursing care workers and their low remuneration. Through these videos, the work provides an opportunity for the audience to reconsider the relationship between caregiving and capitalism.

In addition, it seems that viewing both the Japanese and British versions made differences in lifestyle practices and attitudes toward aging between Japan and the U.K. apparent. For example, the Japanese version has a generally darker tone in terms of the image of life in old age, while the British version is basically more upbeat. In the U.K., there seems to be an underlying idea of *anti-aging*, or resistance to aging, as symbolized by the active encouragement of exercise in senior citizen facilities. In Japan, on the other hand, the culture seems to be one of acceptance of aging as it is.

Furthermore, the Japanese version had a dedicated (elderly) driver at the senior citizen facility, whereas in the U.K., Uber was used. This foreshadows the future spread of Uber in the real Japanese society as well. Similarly, although this work is fiction, a care robot was introduced in the British version. In general, it seems that in Japan, care provided by humans is regarded as the way it should be, but the introduction of nursing care robots is likely to become a topic of discussion in Japan’s elderly care facilities in the future. Or perhaps, as depicted in this work, “one elderly person caring for another,” in which healthy elderly people take care of elderly residents, will become more common in senior citizen facilities.

Finally, although the project name “*The Digital Home Virtual Facility Tour*” was indeed listed as “Performance Information” on the website of the Saitama Arts Theatre, at first glance it does not seem clear what it is. I wonder if there were many people who, upon seeing the title, did not think that this was a new type of theatrical work, and simply passed it by.

1 minnanokaigo <https://www.minnanokaigo.com/enquete/no6/>



From the videos