

## SPAC-Shizuoka Performing Arts Center and T2G-Théâtre de Gennevilliers-Centre Dramatique National (France)

### “The Cherry Orchard”

#### First Report: Launch of Project

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#### T2G Théâtre de Gennevilliers:

#### A Hub of Theatrical Exchange between Japan and France

SPAC-Shizuoka Performing Arts Center has invited director Daniel JEANNETEAU, a central figure in French public theater circles who has been serving as the director of T2G Théâtre de Gennevilliers in the Parisian suburbs since January 2017, to work on an international coproduction of *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton CHEKHOV. While this is the fourth time Jeanneteau has taken up residence at SPAC, following *Blasted* (2009), *The Glass Menagerie* (2011), and *The Blind* (2015), it is the first time that actors and staff from both Japan and France will participate, generating huge anticipation for the resultant work.

Needless to say, this is a continual exchange between public theaters in Japan and France on an unparalleled scale. However, I should perhaps emphasize at the outset that it cannot all necessarily be reduced to the activities of SPAC. T2G has become a hub of theatrical exchange between Japan and France in recent years thanks to the personal relationship of trust between its previous director Pascal RAMBERT (in office from 2007 to 2017) and Japanese playwright HIRATA Oriza (Reference: FUJII Shintaro, “Pascal Rambert and T2G Théâtre de Gennevilliers: Driving Forces behind Theatrical Exchange between Japan and France”).

T2G Théâtre de Gennevilliers is currently one of the venues hosting artists from Japan as part of Festival d'Automne à Paris (a performing arts festival held every year from around September to December at theaters in Paris and its suburbs). In 2021, two works are scheduled to be performed: *Fortress of Smiles* by Niwa Gekidan Penino and *Eraser Mountain* by chelfitsch and KANEUJI Teppei. Fujii ends his previously cited report by stating, “The new director of T2G who took over from Rambert is Daniel Jeanneteau, a leading expert on Japan in French theatrical circles, who has forged deep connections with Japan. This must be more than just a coincidence and raises hopes that the heritage of cultural exchanges built by Rambert will be passed on to the next generation in a different format.” In this sense, the *Cherry Orchard* project could be called the second chapter of international exchange between T2G and Japan. The fact that it was a coproduction with SPAC, which had already established a trusting relationship with Jeanneteau, might even be called inevitable.

#### Challenges for an International Coproduction amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ahead of the performances from November to December 2021, SPAC, which would host the French actors, divided rehearsal into two phases (first: August 6 to 31; second: October 11 to November 11). However, the future of the project was clouded by uncertainty amid fears that COVID-19 infections would rise due to the Tokyo Olympics (July 23 to August 8) and Paralympics (August 24 to September 5) being held despite insufficient progress in vaccinations.

As of July 2021, visas were not actually being issued for travel from France to Japan, and it would not ordinarily have been possible for the actors to enter the country. However, they were able to receive visas on

July 19 thanks to an exemption for “exceptional circumstances.” They departed Paris (Charles de Gaulle Airport) on July 21 and arrived at Haneda Airport the next day, traveling from there straight to the SPAC dormitory in Shizuoka. Rehearsal started after they had finished their 14-day period of isolation. Although the number of infections, which had been on the rise since early July, peaked on August 26 (at about 25,000 new infections), the fact that the creative environment of SPAC was isolated from urban areas ended up being the most positive factor in terms of carrying out international exchange amid a health crisis. Most importantly of all, at this time of emergency posing a risk of cultural atrophy, the flexible response and cooperation for artistic creation from both Japan and France contributed to major achievements on the production side.

The first phase of rehearsal started with a read-through of the script. In order to make effective use of the actors’ government-mandated isolation periods, this was begun in late July using a videoconferencing tool (Zoom), but it was far from ideal. The actors did not all have the same script on the first day, there was frequent noise such as the sound of shuffling papers and email notifications, and network connection and microphone issues occurred repeatedly. Under these challenging conditions, director Jeanneteau first and foremost emphasized carefully sharing the characteristics and ambience he had envisioned for each act of *The Cherry Orchard* with not only the actors but also the partial participation of music and wardrobe staff. The importance of interpreting to such an international project was also affirmed again and again.



Zoom orientation prior to travel to Japan

#### Progress of Rehearsal (Phase I)

What was interesting in the read-through was that Jeanneteau frequently encouraged both the Japanese and French actors to “read slowly and carefully rather than at natural speed.” In other words, at this stage, he was trying to minimize the incorporation of characterization or interpretation in the acting in order to pursue the various possibilities of the script. Although Jeanneteau can communicate with basic greetings, he cannot perfectly understand Japanese. However, he gave the actors fairly precise instructions by comparing their lines (acting) with the bilingual Japanese and French script. The relationships of trust he had already built with them played a large role.

In the latter half of the first phase of rehearsal (starting in mid-August), rehearsal began in the theater on a stage with minimal props. The actors varied their speed of delivery, inflection, and pauses as well as bodily

movements. (At this point, they still wore masks.) In addition to directing the actors, what became important at this stage was the musical work for Act III (music is a critical element in this act, which is set in a drawing room where music played by a Jewish band can be heard). In this production, the lighting design was assigned to the French side and the costume design to the Japanese side (lighting: Juliette BESANÇON; costumes: KOMAI Yumiko), while the sound design was assigned to the French side and the music to the Japanese side (sound: Isabelle SUREL; music: TANAKAWA Hiroko). Thus, the image of the work was gradually shared among the actors and staff. Despite concerns and difficulties related to travel restrictions caused by the pandemic, it can be concluded that the first phase of rehearsal went along without any major disturbances.

### The Significance of Staging *The Cherry Orchard*

It was SPAC (General Artistic Director MIYAGI Satoshi) that had selected Chekhov as the playwright for this coproduction. However, I was shocked to learn that Jeanneteau had never before in his 30-year career staged a work by Chekhov (either as a director or a scenographer). Chekhov's works are, of course, frequently performed in France; for example, it was *The Cherry Orchard* (directed by Tiago RODRIGUES) that opened the 2021 Festival d'Avignon in the courtyard of the Papal Palace. Nonetheless, it was for this very reason that a work by Chekhov would require a brand-new style of staging and reading from a French director, setting a high bar.

Of course, this may hold true in Japan to a certain extent as well. Just looking at recent productions of *The Cherry Orchard*, it was staged by

New National Theatre, Tokyo, during the 2015–2016 season (directed by UYAMA Hitoshi) and by director GONOHE Marie of the Bungakuza theater company at Kawasaki Art Center and other venues in 2020. In terms of commercial theater, it was staged by PARCO Theater in 2012 (directed by MITANI Koki), and a production was planned by SIS Company in 2020 (directed by Keralino SANDOROVICH). The Dainanagekijo, which has staged all of Chekhov's four major plays, also staged *The Cherry Orchard* in October 2021, during SPAC's preparatory period (composition, directing, art, and translation: NARUMI Kohei). Narumi is close friends with SPAC's General Artistic Director Miyagi Satoshi, and MISHIMA Keita joined the cast from SPAC. That being said, in Japan, where scenography and reading of the play constitute a relatively lower proportion of directing, the work may not be considered to set such a "high bar."

In this context, although the production was based on the most recently published translation of *The Cherry Orchard* by ADACHI Noriko (Mirai-sha Publishers, 2020), Jeanneteau proposed using the translation by André MARKOWICZ, which reconstructs the first version of Chekhov's manuscript. This was because most of the translations currently in circulation are based on the revised version requested of Chekhov by director Konstantin STANISLAVSKI. In particular, there is supposedly an interesting exchange between Firs and Charlotta at the end of Act II. (In the popular version, the act ends with the dialogue between Anya and Trofimov.) This act had to be newly translated in order to correct the differences from the Adachi translation.

As a sidenote, Markowicz (born in Czechoslovakia) is a poet as well as a translator who has collaborated with Jeanneteau on stage productions before. In 1990, he began publishing the complete works of Fyodor DOSTOEVSKY. In the performing arts field, he has translated works by Maxim GORKY, Nikolai GOGOL, and William SHAKESPEARE. Together with his partner Françoise MORVAN, he has also published the complete works of Chekhov through Actes Sud, which has published numerous plays, finishing in 2014 with *Platonov*. Since 2006, he has engaged in sessions he calls "open improvised translations."

How the lines of the play envisioned by the director as a poetic text are to be developed through teamwork by both the Japanese and French actors will surely become clear during the second phase of rehearsal.



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### Dialogue with Director Daniel Jeanneteau

— Over the course of your career, have you ever staged a work by Chekhov before?

**Jeanneteau:** In my thirty-year career, I've never staged a work by Chekhov before, either as a director or a scenographer. This is my first time.

— That means this will be a big challenge for you, doesn't it?

**Jeanneteau:** I've actually wanted to stage Chekhov for a long time. He's a great playwright. But his works are staged all the time and everywhere in France, so I'd need to discover something new in them. Instead, I've always staged more contemporary works, but then I received the proposal from Japan. In France, I'd probably never have staged Chekhov. It was Japan that brought me closer to him when Miyagi Satoshi invited me to stage Chekhov at SPAC, which I think is sort of interesting. After agonizing about all kinds of things, I eventually decided to stage *The Cherry Orchard*.

— Previously in Japan, you've staged works by Sarah KANE, Tennessee WILLIAMS, and Maurice MAETERLINCK, focusing on the "contemporary" rather than the "classical." Given this, why did you choose *The Cherry Orchard*?

**Jeanneteau:** I was torn between *Uncle Vanya* and *The Cherry Orchard*, but I thought that *The Cherry Orchard* might be a more wide-open work with a larger capacity. It's also more complex. No major happenings occur in the work. It's just a chain of trivial events. There's a lightness to it, like chatting or gossip. It's not dramatic like *Uncle Vanya* or *Ivanov*, and that's what I like about it. In other words, even though it's a work without a single serious element, it has an aspect of showing the state of the world. It's a profoundly tragic work, and more broadly speaking, it's a work that depicts people in an era of extremely dramatic social change.

— Chekhov died only a few months after the play opened in 1904. The Russian Revolution beginning with the "Bloody Sunday" incident occurred in the next year, 1905, leading to the February Revolution of 1917. It was a turbulent era, wasn't it?

**Jeanneteau:** *The Cherry Orchard* has been interpreted in various ways, but for me, I think it really resembles the current times.

— What, specifically, do you mean by "the current times"?

**Jeanneteau:** I mean the times in which we're living now. The era of *The Cherry Orchard* is the turn of the 20th century, so to speak, just before major events like the Russian Revolution and World War I. I think people in those days more or less sensed that something was brewing. I think they realized that the ways of doing things in the previous century would no longer be viable. As industrialization progressed, and the speed of production increased, new forms of business developed. At the same time, a huge gap emerged. I think Chekhov must have realized this—that things could no longer continue on the same path. Although, as he died shortly thereafter, he never saw the revolution or the war.

— So, you sense this sort of "discontinuity" in the times?

**Jeanneteau:** Yes, but it's all intuitive. It might seem superficial, but I feel like we're now at the end of an era, and how we live will change tremendously. I feel like even the theme of (viral) mutation itself is relevant to this play by Chekhov. That's what makes it interesting to me. *The Cherry Orchard* doesn't depict any frenzied scenes. No single character is right; instead, they're all correct in their own ways. But no one can go back to the old days. I feel like the essence of this situation is very similar to the one we're currently in.



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— In other words, although it may seem at first glance like a work composed of silly little conversations, your view is that it's more in line with the times than Chekhov's other three major plays.

**Jeanneteau:** I think global crises like the pandemic and climate change have dramatically changed my reading of *The Cherry Orchard*. Of course, my readings in previous projects have also been influenced by the current state of the world. For example, I staged *The Glass Menagerie* in Shizuoka in 2011, which is when the big earthquake and resultant Fukushima nuclear accident occurred. Sharing a lot of time with the Japanese actors, whose sensibilities were shaken by the catastrophe, led to various discoveries. Curiously enough, the fact is that whenever I do work with Japan, I can't help but think about how it aligns with the times. Due to the current health crisis, there was a period of isolation, and we have to wear masks even during rehearsal. However, instead of mere external obstacles to the project, it's almost like these restrictions are driving it from within.