

BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (US) “Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty” First Report: Launch of Project MORITA Kazuyo

This production is an international collaborative project between BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI, a theater company based in Tottori that carries out creative activities together with people with disabilities through their project JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB), an off-Broadway theater company in the United States.

In Japan, with the promulgation and enforcement in June 2018 of the Act on the Promotion of Cultural and Artistic Activities by Persons with Disabilities, which I was involved in as a member of the expert panel, and the hosting of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, the idea that everyone, regardless of disability, has an equal right to enjoy arts and culture has been increasingly shared throughout society, with growing attention on creative activities involving people with diverse bodies and backgrounds.

First, let's look at the origin of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre. In 2014, BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI collaborated with people with various disabilities to create theater productions for the 14th National Arts and Culture Festival for Persons with Disabilities held in Tottori Prefecture. They staged CHEKHOV's *Three Sisters*, which led to the birth of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre as a project produced by BIRD Theatre Company. It is quite rare and valuable for a project like this to come out of the National Arts and Culture Festival for Persons with Disabilities, which is a national initiative, and remain ongoing.

At the time of this performance, I interviewed the director, NAKASHIMA Makoto, who is also the artistic director of BIRD Theatre Company, about the purpose of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre. Nakashima points out that people with disabilities are often first noticed for their disabilities or limitations, and it is less common for others to recognize their humanity beyond those challenges. This is especially true in culture and the arts, where the presence of a disability can often be overemphasized in the evaluation of a person's creative work. Simply because someone has a disability, their abilities tend to be underestimated.

The goal of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre is to create a space for people with disabilities to perform. While people with disabilities may be provided with the bare minimum environment for survival within the framework of social welfare, it is not necessarily a “free” (the meaning of JIYU) environment for them. Nakashima wants both participants and audience members to feel a sense of “freedom,” which is one of the most important aspects of being human, through the medium of theater.

Nakashima also notes that for humans, freedom of choice only becomes meaningful when there is freedom in both objects and actions, and this reflects the fundamental difference in the purpose of welfare and artistic activities.

Relationship with TBTB

TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre (BIRD Theatre Company) have been nurturing a relationship since 2014. Nakashima says that he chose TBTB because, “At that time, I could hardly find any theater groups in

Japan involving people with disabilities, so I searched on the web and found TBTB.” Approaches to disability differ between countries, and TBTB creates conversation plays that make disability a theme, sometimes using humor. These plays have been well-received by general audiences. JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre has also staged performances with actors in wheelchairs playing Shakespearean characters, which I presume was influenced by TBTB. This goes beyond the framework of disability, inspiring new possibilities in acting.

TBTB was invited to perform at the BIRD Theatre Festival TOTTORI in 2014, 2017, and 2018. In 2014, they performed a collection of short plays; in 2017, *The Other Plays: Theater + Dance = Inclusion*; and in 2018, *The Fourth Wall*. Since 2014, JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre's activities have mainly revolved around annual performances at the BIRD Theatre Festival. Inviting TBTB to the festival initiated the exchange between the two groups.

Originally, a joint production was planned for 2020 in the lead-up to the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, but it was postponed due to the spread of COVID-19. In 2021, amid the pandemic, they produced two video works using Zoom: *CTRL L*, based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *THE CASTING PARTY*.



From the online work *CTRL L*



From the online work *THE CASTING PARTY*

About the Production

For the new production of *A Difference of Beauty*, written by TBTB's Tatiana RIVERA, the playwright asked American and Japanese actors the following two questions and built the script around their answers:

“What do you think is beautiful?”

“When I say you are beautiful, what do you think?”

Additionally, she asked in detail, “Why do you think that is beautiful?” and “Which aspects do you find beautiful?” The second question in particular seemed to puzzle the actors, so she conducted detailed interviews about “what they think is beautiful” and asked again, “I still think you're beautiful. What do you think about that?”

Nakashima commented, “Tatiana is a Mexican-American and a minority living in the United States with a strong sense of fairness. What's interesting is that instead of preaching about it, she has sublimated it into literature in her text.”

As a dancer and actor with a disability myself, I can say that people with disabilities in particular tend to have difficulty finding beauty in their own bodies. Documentary theater techniques like this are sometimes used in creating theater with diverse cultures and people, and they are effective in bringing out the depths of the actors.

Nakashima points out that the word “beautiful” holds many meanings. While “beautiful” is subjective, at times the definition of beauty has been used as a mainstream value along with political power. He argues that it is meaningful to turn the table and create a work that questions “what is considered beautiful” from a universal viewpoint, not only the perspective of disability.

The performance of *CTRL L* in this production is an actual staging of a piece that was created remotely in 2021.

(Interview conducted on August 9, 2022)

* Reference materials

CTRL L, a Japan-U.S. co-produced video by JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6gP...ICE2w>

THE CASTING PARTY

A Japan-U.S. co-produced video by JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dADg6JgBfk>



“BIRD Theatre Festival TOTTORI 15” poster