

**BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and
Theater Breaking Through Barriers (US)**
“Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty”
Third Report: Performances and Summary
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This time, I would like to report on the presentation of results and summarize the entire project.

The performances took place on September 24 and 25, 2022. The order was *A Difference of Beauty 1*, *Ctrl L*, *A Difference of Beauty 2*, and *Epilogue*. As *A Difference of Beauty 1 and 2* are conversation plays with connected monologues, the insertion between them of *Ctrl L*, which has comedic elements, kept the tempo progressing at a good pace and captured the audience’s attention.

Epilogue featured all eight performers from *A Difference of Beauty* expressing their own emotional changes. The focus shifted away from individual episodes that had dominated until then, creating a circle of unity like a warm breeze. The eight actors looked at each other and seemed to connect heart to heart beyond words, illustrating the strong message embodied in the entire production.

Ctrl L was a piece originally created online and now performed on stage. It depicted discrepancies in love that occurred during rehearsals as American and Japanese actors attempted to perform SHAKESPEARE’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Lighting was used to divide the stage into left (America) and right (Japan), with the producer character (played by SAITO Yoriaki) at the center, traversing both worlds freely. As it was originally produced using Zoom, the producer’s face was projected onto the background through a camera, emphasizing the online nature of the piece. The content humorously portrayed interactions between the two countries, with the intermediary Saito’s facial expressions and movements being particularly comical and eliciting laughter from the audience. At one point, actors not appearing in *Ctrl L* played musical instruments as sound effects, creating a sense of unity as a single group that transcended the program.

Now, I would like to provide a more detailed description of the performance of the new work, *A Difference of Beauty*.

A Difference of Beauty begins with eight actors on stage being asked the questions “What do you think is beautiful?” and “When I say you are beautiful, what do you think?” Four actors then remain on stage, and *A Difference of Beauty 1* begins. In the background, Japanese translations of lines spoken by Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB) actors and English translations of lines spoken by JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors are displayed as subtitles.

In *A Difference of Beauty*, the actors express their thoughts on being called “beautiful” and the confusion it causes. They explore what associations the word “beautiful” brings to mind, and through overlapping episodes, they share stories about their appearances, families, and past events. The four monologues stand alone, yet occasionally intersect in a mysterious way, creating a space where the emotional changes arising from the connection of their words are depicted. The script, created through interviews with the actors by the playwright, is sometimes spoken in poetic language. The words of the Japanese actors were translated and then expanded into lines by the American playwright. The episodes discussed here do not solely focus on aspects of disability; they also

include elements such as the acceptance of disability, including physical appearance, and the desire to be seen as a mature individual. Many universal issues were present, despite their different environments and communities.

The differences in language and living environments, as well as the fact that the TBTB actors had physical disabilities and the JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors had mental or intellectual disabilities, understandably made the performance of intersecting monologues extremely challenging for both countries’ actors. Particularly in the final days of rehearsals, efforts focused on increasing the level of completion and substance of the performance. However, some actors struggled with the sudden changes and speed, and physical considerations forced the cancellation of the planned talk event “The Three-Year Trajectory of the Collaboration between TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre” on the opening day, to be replaced with a final rehearsal (the event took place on the second day).

I attended the first day’s performance. There was one striking scene during the show. In *A Difference of Beauty 2*, actor ISHII Yuumi would stop talking, as if she had trouble remembering her lines. Silence filled the air, and tension spread through the audience. She repeatedly went back to her previous lines, searching for the words within herself, and finally continued speaking as if tying the found lines together. This happened two or three times during the performance I saw, and it was clear that she appeared confused. According to director NAKASHIMA Makoto, she has a cognitive disability due to a memory loss she suffered in middle school. I had seen this happen several times during rehearsals as well. While it’s purely speculative on my part, perhaps she encounters situations like this in her daily life. I felt as though I had caught a glimpse of her everyday life by sharing this moment. There were also times when the other actors’ bodies, too, not just Ishii’s, clearly appeared to have gone beyond their roles.

Watching this scene made me question, “What abilities are required of actors?” As actors, it is ideal to speak lines smoothly and we tend to strive for strength and certainty. However, is that all there is? Of course, this is not to say that delivering lines haltingly is the correct approach, and I do not want to focus solely on disability. It is dangerous to become trapped by disability traits. The individuals on stage exist as actors, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. However, I was greatly moved by Ishii’s performance, as if it had given me a new standard of value for “acting” from the way she sincerely confronted her physical and mental situation on stage. There might be a kind of richness that we miss if judgments are based solely on normative values.

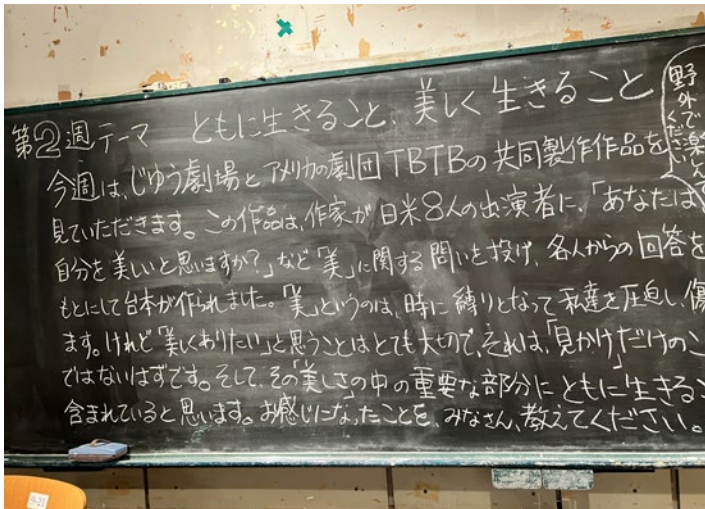
This collaborative performance also gave me food for thought about the possibilities of theater. In a chat during rehearsals, I was a bit struck when Nicholas VISELLI, the director of TBTB, said, “What’s the problem with an actor in a wheelchair playing Macbeth?” Although both TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre have staged Shakespeare several times in the past, theater companies that embark on such adventures are few and far between, especially in Japan. What Viselli might have been referring to, I believe, is the potential of theater. Theater is not about reproducing reality as it is. Through direction, actors’ imaginations, and modes of expression, realistic characters can be created regardless of physical characteristics. For example, the presence of a wheelchair can make a situation more realistically depicted and allow the audience’s imagination to be expanded. It’s not just about “whether in a wheelchair or not” or

limiting and pitiable phrases like “despite having a disability,” but daring to engage with the wheelchair as a positive element, creating an entirely new kind of expression.

Unfortunately, there are not many performances in Japan that take this perspective and put it into practice. As an audience member, the experience of seeing actors in wheelchairs performing on stage is still rare. One reason for this is the lack of attention to the development of diverse actors, including those with disabilities.

In Japan, the distinction of the profession of an actor is ambiguous, regardless of whether or not one has a disability. According to Viselli, there is also ambiguity in the United States, but one guideline is whether or not an actor can join an actors’ union. Although the hurdle is high, once registered, actors can obtain work with a guaranteed fee. Furthermore, at TBTB, training opportunities are provided to nurture and evaluate aspiring actors with little experience. In addition to actors, there is also a movement to create opportunities, specifically for people with disabilities, for nurturing playwrights and directors. As an actor with a disability myself, I cannot help but hope that the theatrical activities of diverse people, including those with disabilities, will become more vibrant in Japan.

During their stay, TBTB released several videos on social media as vlogs (video blogs). In these videos, actors from both JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB were seen interacting through music. Although the language barrier was present during this collaborative performance, the actors were able to bridge the gap, both in what they could and could



not express through words, by playing musical instruments, singing, and spending time rehearsing together.

ITANI Yuuta, an actor at JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, said after the performance, “I felt connected in a way beyond language. Through this project, I learned experientially the importance of the power to sense what the other person is trying to say, including non-verbal aspects, and the communication born from actual interaction.” There are lines in “Epilogue” that embody the whole project:

No matter how different we appear, underneath it all, whether we think it…
 Feel it.
 Sense it.
 Know it.
 We’re all the same.
 Human beings with the same wants and needs.
 Needs that play out differently through the architecture of our bodies.
 Transcending Language, Thought and Culture.
 We all desire to love…
 (Omitted)
 We all recognize in others that which we have in ourselves.
 Whether it’s understood by words.
 Whether it’s experienceable through music.
 Whether it’s noticeable in the body.
 Whether it’s felt through the soul.
 No matter how different we are… We are all connected by Love.

The performance concludes with these words.

This collaborative performance was made possible through the steady exchange between JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB since 2014. Amid pandemic travel restrictions, last year’s online creative work led to the creation of *Ctrl L*. Furthermore, a play like *A Difference of Beauty*, where actors reveal their inner selves, could not have been created without mutual trust. The decision to create and perform this work is commendable. It is the fruit that came from the two theater companies overcoming challenges by connecting with love while accepting differences in nationality, language, and bodies. There are still very few examples of such international initiatives, especially by theater companies that include people with disabilities. I look forward to further efforts in this direction.