

First Report / Takako Takeya

A Creative Path Linking Japan and Scotland:

The Trajectory of the Collaboration TOWA MURA

竹谷多賀子 第1回



Showing (work-in-progress performance) ©Ian Biggar

Background to the Project: A Story Born from Dying Villages

The collaboration between BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI (Tottori City), led by artistic and stage director Makoto Nakashima, and their collaborators on the Scottish side, the poet Tom Pow and the musical group The Galloway Agreement (Dumfries and Galloway), is a story of inevitability born from chance encounters.

The origins of the collaboration date back to 2007. With funding from Creative Scotland, an agency that supports the Scottish cultural sector, Tom visited "dying villages" across Europe and compiled the voices of villagers, scenery, and sounds he encountered there into poetry, stories, a photo book, and an audio album that depicted the realities of living side by side with decline and renewal. Tom had worked with Wendy Stewart and Ruth Morris on the word and music performance, *Nine Nests*. After an appearance at a harp festival, Wendy asked Tom whether he had any material suitable for The Galloway Agreement, which had recently formed. Drawing on his work on dying villages, Tom produced the text of *The Village and The Road*. In 2022,

the work was selected for the Edinburgh Fringe "Made in Scotland" Showcase, where it met with high acclaim. It also drew the attention of Sachiko Nishio (arts knot), the Japanese producer of *TOWA MURA*. Following her introduction and Nakashima's decision, the Scottish artists were invited to perform at BIRD Theatre Company's international theater festival, "BIRD Theatre Festival." This encounter became the launching point for the Japanese-Scottish collaboration.

The first commonality that linked the two sides is the theme of "depopulation."

Peter Renwick, who is the creative director of CatStrand, a small theater that served as the creative hub for *TOWA MURA*, as well as the work's coproducer, explained as follows.

"New Galloway is found within the Glenkens, a region consisting of nine small rural communities in southwestern Scotland with a population of about 3,000 people. It has a rich natural environment, and there's a strong spirit of community rooted in the region. On the other hand, depopulation is progressing due to factors like rural poverty, poor transportation access, deteriorated houses, and limited em-

ployment opportunities.”

This situation in Scotland echoes the one in rural Japan.

Nakashima explained as follows.

“The region in which we’re based also faces population decline, so Tom’s work strongly resonated with us.”

Visiting Japanese “Villages”:

Fieldwork in Tottori and the Building of Trust

As described, Tom and The Galloway Agreement were invited to perform at BIRD Theatre Festival in 2023.

On his first visit to Japan, Tom expressed an interest in “fieldwork in depopulated Japanese villages.” With assistance from BIRD Theatre Company, he visited several villages in Tottori Prefecture accompanied by an interpreter and coordinator and met with local people, carefully interviewing them about their lifestyles and memories. This first year of research had a deep impact on his creative vision, and at Nakashima’s suggestion, a new version of *The Village and The Road* was staged, incorporating scenery and memories from Japan in the following year (2024). He also published the book of poetry *Ghosts at Play: Poems from Rural Japan* (with translations by Nao Miyauchi) based on his experiences conducting fieldwork in Tottori. This continuing interaction led to the building of trust between Tom and The Galloway Agreement and BIRD Theatre Company, and they began to share the “little histories” of their respective regions. With a fresh proposal from Nakashima, the concept for a new theatrical work partly inspired by Tom’s book of poetry emerged and eventually lead to the collaboration TOWA MURA.

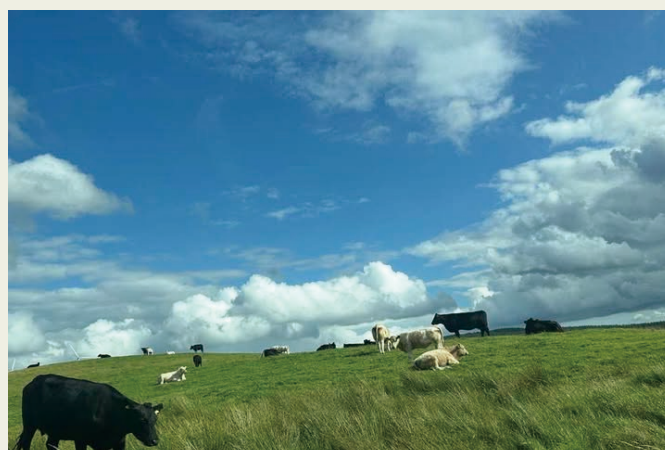
The concept of the work was influenced by a Japanese news report that Tom had stumbled upon, about a village under pressure to relocate for the development of a landfill. The villagers were debating whether to preserve the village or abandon it. In this story, Tom saw the universal structure of human conflict and choice also shared by “dying villages” across Europe. Tom reminisced that the work would not have come about without his travel in Europe, his research in Japan, or the support of BIRD Theatre Company. His sensitivity as a poet and constructive ability as a creator came together to shape a story that is both locally rooted and universal.

“Extinction” and “Resilience”: The Significance of the Work’s Themes

“Depopulation” is a theme that Tom has continuously pursued. However, the stories he tells are not merely ones of decline. “The people I met in dying villages actually had a strong zest for life with a sense of humor and acceptance of the present situation.” He tells stories of “resilience”—eulogies filled with human dignity and hope in the midst of loss.



The town of New Galloway, which is facing depopulation (photo by the author)



The town is surrounded by sprawling pastures (photo by the author).



Exterior of CatStrand, the work’s creative setting (photo by the author)



Inside CatStrand, which functions as a hub of exchange for the local community (photo by the author)

Tom maintained this stance during his fieldwork in Tottori as well. The villagers' memories and voices are alive throughout the work. Memories of playing in a river as a child and the phrase "I remember" that came up in audience questionnaires are reframed as stories. Many of the anecdotes depicted in the work are based on "documentary-level reality" at the intersection of local residents' memories and the poet's imagination.

Questioning Audiences with a Blend of Poetry and Drama

At the core of *TOWA MURA* is a choice: to preserve the village or leave it behind. The story ends right at the decisive moment, and the answer is left up to the audience. Tom referred to this structure as "Brechtian¹," explaining: "The work's conclusion lies within the audience. What they talk about after watching it is an extension of the work." During rehearsals, Nakashima asked the actors, "If you were one of the villagers, what would you decide?" This "unfinished question" provokes thought from the audience and creates opportunities for dialogue.

For Tom, poetry is the "act of searching for one's inner voice," and drama is the "art of engaging in dialogue with others."

"Poems are instantaneous creations, while drama needs time to build. But both are acts of passion and discovery that seek to understand the world through words."

By applying the structured thinking of poetry to dramatic scriptwriting, his work achieves a unique rhythm and density.

The Creative Process: Dialogue Between Bodies in Three Languages

The creative process took the form of poetry, music, and physical expressions intersecting in an equal manner. The actors transferred the words of the poems to their voices and bodies, while the musicians studied the script and converted the scenes and emotions into sound. The music, all of which

is original, functions as "another storyteller" rather than mere accompaniment. The three languages used are Japanese, English, and music. By sharing rhythms and breathing, the artists have built bridges with the common language of their bodies.

Nakashima emphasized the importance of mutual understanding and empathy in the collaboration. "We worked by gauging each other's feelings and sharing an overall flow."

Actor Maya Yasuda explained, "We sensed more with our bodies than with words, which led to new discoveries." Scottish actor Stephen McCole stated, "Grasping the entire script, not just our own lines, deepened our mutual understanding." Rena Nakagawa described "an environment that allowed us to be responsive to changes in each other and exchange views candidly with mutual trust." Hiroshi Kosuge reflected, "Differences in gestures and physical expressions extended the range of expression."

The members of the music team also found their collaboration with the actors to be highly effective.

Stuart Macpherson (double bass) explained, "Movement is a key element of the work, and the actors are incredibly expressive. Many of our cues come from their movements." Wendy Stewart (harp and vocals) also noted, "The actors are precisely aware of the cues they give to the music and are very adaptable."

This accumulation of interactions gives *TOWA MURA* a unique vitality, realizing true co-creation by both the Japanese and Scottish artists.

Production and Local Operational Perspectives

Producer Nishio pointed out the necessity of adequate time and mature relationships in enhancing the creative quality of international collaboration. "In this project, solid trust and equal partnerships had already been built through a process that included the invitation of *The Village and The Road* and the research in Tottori in 2023, as well as the second invitation with the addition of a Japanese scene and



Welcome party on the first day of rehearsals ©Ian Biggar



Director Makoto Nakashima and poet/playwright Tom Pow (photo by the author)

the publication of the poetry book in 2024. But even with these favorable conditions, the current situation in Japan is that only one year of funding is assumed, so it wasn't easy to secure funding and simultaneously set the plan in motion on both the Japanese and Scottish sides. Creative Scotland considers that it is appropriate for a project for which the creative process was funded to apply for a tour grant the following year. This means projects can be planned over multiple years with ongoing support in mind. That's why being able to apply to the Japan Foundation's International Creations in Performing Arts program with a two-year plan was a major factor in turning the project into reality.

The Galloway Agreement's Ruth Morris (nyckelharpa²) has worked with Peter as a coproducer at the center of production since *The Village and The Road*. The work was initially conceived as poetry recitation with musical accompaniment, but after director Matthew Zajac joined, it evolved into a theatrical work. Ruth explained, "Music is the actual 'voices' of the characters rather than the background to the story." Incorporating Japanese elements such as the rhythm of the Japanese language and festival calls, cultural overlap reverberated as sound in *TOWA MURA*. The spirit of the traditional Scottish social gathering *ceilidh*³ was also alive, with spontaneous interactions through music and dance beginning on the first day of rehearsals (photo at the bottom left of the previous page).

Ruth expressed anticipation regarding the two parties' ongoing collaboration. "I was very inspired by the sincerity and sensitivity of the Japanese team. I hope to further develop our relationship while sharing videos and audio going forward."

First Showing (Presentation of Creative Outcomes): Responses Generated in Scotland

A work-in-progress showing of *TOWA MURA* was held at CatStrand on August 6, 2025. The performance, which followed eight days of joint rehearsals, was attended by an

audience of about seventy people (a full house). Post-performance interviews provided feedback regarding the work's cultural and social significance from diverse perspectives. The following views were especially salient.

○The freshness of cultural exchange

Numerous audience members responded that "being able to see Japanese theater in New Galloway was a valuable opportunity in and of itself" and that "people from different backgrounds shared a 'common experiences' on stage." One person commented, "Issues I'd been aware of in daily life were manifested as larger, worldwide problems. I witnessed them unfurl from local to global."

○Understanding of regional issues and deepening of empathy

Other feedback included that "problems that are difficult to appreciate from a single perspective become 'personally relevant' when encountered as stories" and that the problems could be understood as "connected to our own daily lives, rather than events in far-away regions." An audience member originally from a small village in Germany stated that their own village was "on the same path," attesting to the work's ability to generate empathy across borders.

○Economic affluence and the fragility of communities

Responses pointed out that "villages disappear not only due to aging and population drain but also because of how economic affluence weakens ties between people." The paradoxical isolation of affluence is an insight into the "less obvious depopulation" that exists in modern society, demonstrating the depth of the universal questions posed by the work.

○Perspectives on memory and nature

Many audience members indicated that "the symbolic role of the tree in the opening" made them "reconsider



The final day of creative work (photo credit: arts knot)



Feedback after the showing ©Ian Biggar

the relationship between humans and nature" and that "the key phrase 'I remember' resonated strongly." This was a sharing of the insight that a path to the future can be built by connecting not only vast memories like Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also small, every-day memories.

○A performance structure in which music "tells a story"

There was a flurry of praise for "the stunning blend of different cultures and languages" and "the music that existed as a 'storyteller,' with the musicians naturally becoming part of the stage." Although most of the audience members did not understand Japanese, feedback that "the realm of poetry was strongly felt" and that "the emotional flow was conveyed through sound and bodies" affirmed the power of expression to transcend the language barrier.

These reactions demonstrate that TOWA MURA went beyond a mere theatrical performance to function as a venue for audience members to re-examine their own daily lives and local communities.

Toward the Future: The Great Hope Born from Tiny Villages

Both BIRD Theatre and CatStrand are cultural hubs that were created by reusing former school buildings and explore "the meaning of art in small communities."

Nakashima explained as follows.

"While urban theater is an amusement or product, regional theater is a 'venue for thinking about existence.' The reverberation of social topics and aesthetic expression through the fusion of Tom's powerful words and The Galloway Agreement's music enhances the work's depth."

Peter stated as follows.

"What TOWA MURA depicts is really the very nature of rural communities. Why do people stay or leave? That's the question underlying the work."



Getting to know each other better at a party hosted by Tom Pow at his home (photo credit: arts knot)



The book of poems by Tom Pow (with translations by Nao Miyauchi) that served as the creative starting point for TOWA MURA (photo by the author)

Both BIRD Theatre and CatStrand are theaters based in regions with declining populations that continue to explore the role of art in their local communities. They share a commitment to creating new value and hope by facing the realities of local inhabitants.

Nakashima further described the intentions underlying his creative work as follows.

"I was strongly affected by Tom's statement that 'what keeps people going is memory,' but at the same time, I sensed the question of 'whether memories alone are enough.' Through creative work, we seek to take back our 'ability to talk about the future.' "

Through the universal themes of depopulation, memory,

and choice, *TOWA MURA* is a work that asks its audiences “how to live in the here and now.” In doing so, it presents a beacon of hope for local inhabitants to rediscover their own stories and share them with others.

Going forward, performances and tours are planned in both Japan and the UK, and a “sister-theater” affiliation between BIRD Theatre Company and CatStrand is also in the works. This exchange has gone beyond a mere cultural program to demonstrate a new form of solidarity in which regions learn from and support each other.

A circle of creativity and interregional solidarity through drama has quietly budded and is steadily spreading.

(November 2025)

*1 Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956): German playwright, director, and poet. He brought innovation to twentieth-century drama with his advocacy of epic theater utilizing the “defamiliarization effect” (*Verfremdungseffekt*) to keep audiences at a critical distance. His major works include *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*.

*2 Nyckelharpa: A keyed string instrument primarily originating from Sweden. It is played with a bow while changing the pitch with the keys. Characterized by a soft, deep resonance, it is widely used not only in traditional Scandinavian music but also in contemporary music and the performing arts.

*3 *Ceilidh*: Derived from a Gaelic word meaning “gathering” or “visit,” this term refers to a traditional social gathering where people enjoy dancing and music together. It is widely popular in Scotland and Ireland, where it is positioned as a cultural practice that facilitates community ties and a shared cultural identity.