

Seinendan Theater Company and Pascal RAMBERT (France) “KOTATSU” Second Report: Rehearsals

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The first round of rehearsals for the Seinendan Theater Company and Pascal RAMBERT's 2021 international project *KOTATSU* were held at the Komaba Agora Theater from July 16 to 30.¹ Originally, it was planned for Pascal Rambert to come to Japan to participate in the rehearsals. However, due to entry restrictions, Rambert ended up participating from Europe via Zoom. Rehearsals were held daily from 5:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. (10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. in Europe). Several cameras were placed in the Komaba Agora Theater, enabling Rambert to watch the actors' performances from a variety of angles.

Ordinarily, on the first day of rehearsals, a “read-through” is conducted in which the entire script is read from beginning to end. Rambert, however, asked the actors to “be like French actors and not be afraid to ask questions.” Accordingly, the scenes were read through one at a time, and, if there were any questions, a thorough discussion was held. On the first day of rehearsals, scenes one through nine were read through in order. On the second day, after reading through from the beginning to scene nine (about 20 minutes; about one sixth of the entire work), they moved on to scene 10 and after. Perhaps because Seinendan is an already-established company, actors and staff proactively asked questions even for scenes they were not involved in. Rambert answered all of their questions earnestly, and I was impressed by his sincere explanations of things such as each character's role. Translator HIRANO Akihito was in the rehearsal space almost every day, and Co-director and Japanese Language Supervisor HIRATA Oriza also came around two times. Together, they carefully adjusted the Japanese dialogue. The latter half of rehearsals was conducted while actually moving on a temporary stage. In the first round of rehearsals, only basic blocking was added. It was decided to add more detailed blocking during the second round of rehearsals to be held in Ebara late the following month.

This second report is a record of the project at the time of the end of the first round of rehearsals. I interviewed three actors from the Seinendan who will be appearing in *KOTATSU*: OTA Hiroshi, CHINEN Mima, and MORI Issei.

—The characters in *KOTATSU* have the same names as the actual actors. Please tell me about the events leading up you being chosen to appear in

this project.

Ota: We've held auditions in the company for French works before. Similarly, we held auditions for Pascal's project, with interested company members auditioning either in Tokyo or Ebara.

—What did the auditions involve?

Ota: This time, Pascal's auditions were very unique. I didn't read lines from a script or anything. Instead, Pascal and an interpreter interviewed me for about 10 or 15 minutes and then it was just like “Okay” and it was over.

—Mori Issei, you worked with Pascal before on *GHOSTS*, is that right?

Mori: Yes. I didn't so much audition as I went to go see Pascal for the first time in a long time. All we really did was chitchat and talk about how we had been doing lately. And then at the end it was just “Okay, see you later.”

—Chinen Mima, this is your first time working with Pascal.

Chinen: In *The End of Love*, which Ota appeared in, there was a chorus group of mothers who appeared for a moment to sing before leaving again, and I was a member of that group, so I had a very small amount of contact with Pascal through that. Also, when Pascal worked as artistic director at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers national dramatic center, several French actors and two Japanese actors appeared in Hirata Oriza's production of Seinendan's *Sables & Soldats*.² I took part in that production, so I passed by Pascal several times in the theater.

—I assume that *Sables & Soldats* was performed in French?

Chinen: It was originally a work performed by Japanese actors. When it was performed in France, only the two enemy soldiers were performed by Japanese actors. The two Japanese actors talked to each other in Japanese, but in a scene where they suddenly meet the French actors, they spoke in French. When I was chosen to appear, I didn't speak any French. I was taught French for about a month, but nowadays I don't understand it at all and can only pick up a few words here and there. In my case, because of having and raising a child, I hadn't acted in about eight years. My interview with Pascal took place just after my move to Ebara, the hub



Rehearsals at the Komaba Agora Theater (left: the 2nd floor theater; right: the 5th floor rehearsal studio)

of our company's activities, was decided. Pascal asked me what I did over the past eight years. I told him that I was moving to Ebara soon to restart my acting career. He then asked me why I wanted to return to acting so much. I told him that the plays of Hirata Oriza were very pertinent to me. Also, there is an actress named Audrey BONNET who has worked with Pascal. I appeared with her in *Sables & Soldats* and she is a very charming actress who I like a lot. I asked Pascal how she had been doing recently. Like Mori, my interview ended after some chitchat and talk about recent events in my life.

—I've been watching the rehearsals, and it seems Ota can understand what Pascal is saying in French.

Ota: Seinendan's first international project involving France was *Chants d'Adieu (Songs of Farewell)* in 2007, which I appeared in.³ The text was written by Hirata Oriza. French actor Laurent GUTMANN appeared in the project. In addition to three Japanese actors, five French actors were in the project, and all of our conversations with them were in French. That was the first time I went to France. After that work's success in France, it toured 17 cities in 2009, so I ultimately stayed in France for about seven months in total.

—And how was your French before that?

Ota: I couldn't speak it at all. I couldn't even read the alphabet. Like with our current project, auditions were held a year in advance. I was told that I would be fine if I went to a French language school during the year before the start of rehearsals, but by the time I went to France, I could barely say my name and read the alphabet. When rehearsals started, I got an unbelievable number of lines. For our first performance, I had a French person record the lines for me. I listened to the recording and ultimately learned the pronunciation.

—Chinen, this is your first project with Pascal; now that you've actually worked with him in rehearsals, what do you think?

Chinen: When I first read the script, I was surprised by how many lines I had. Normally one person doesn't talk so long continuously. I was very confused. I wondered if it would work, if it would be interesting to the audience. However, now that I've learned my lines and have begun saying them, they feel much better than when I was just reading them silently. I have worked with Translator HIRANO Akihito before on another project, so I think that this may be because he translated the French into Japanese with an understanding of who I am. Also, the way Seinendan does rehearsals and the way Pascal does rehearsals are completely different. It's been fresh and surprising.

—The other day when I was talking with Hirano, he also said that Oriza and Pascal's rehearsals are completely different. Could you tell me how they are different?

Chinen: The director talking this much about the script, or about the background behind the creation of the work, or about what they were thinking when they created a scene doesn't generally happen during Oriza's rehearsals. I was very surprised to have the entire journey of the work be so carefully shared with everyone before starting walk-throughs. In Japan, we use the phrase "*damedashi*," which means "fault-finding." I'm used to the director generally skipping over the good things and com-

menting only about things they didn't like. Pascal, however, also takes the time to praise things and tell us something was well done. At first, this was surprising to me, but now I think that it's very good. If it's connected to the work, Pascal often also talks about himself, and he will even personally demonstrate the kind of acting he wants. This kind of relationship between the director and the actors is completely different from rehearsals with Oriza.

—Mori, while creating this work with Pascal, did you feel anything was different compared with other directors?

Mori: A lot of time is spent on discussion. Pascal takes a lot of time to expand the actors' understanding, talking about all kinds of things concerning the work's background and context. The first project I worked on with Pascal was *GHOSTS*. Before that, I didn't know that he was such a physical person. I thought that he was more of a stereotypical creator type, or a playwright similar to Oriza. Actually working with him, however, I found that he was very interested in the actors' bodies, which was kind of novel or interesting to me. In this project, as well, there are scenes with things like enigmatic dancing, and I'm looking forward to seeing how much Pascal gets involved in the actor's physical aspects.

—Ota, you worked with Pascal on *The End of Love* for a long time, and this project is the first time you've worked with Pascal in a long time. How does it feel?

Ota: Like, that's totally Pascal, is my impression (laughs). The most striking thing is that Pascal will say something like "That's it!" or "Yes!" when I'm in the middle of saying a line. Hirata would never say something like that. I don't know if it's because he's an unusual type even for a French director, but the fact that he gets excited along with us is something that characterizes Pascal.

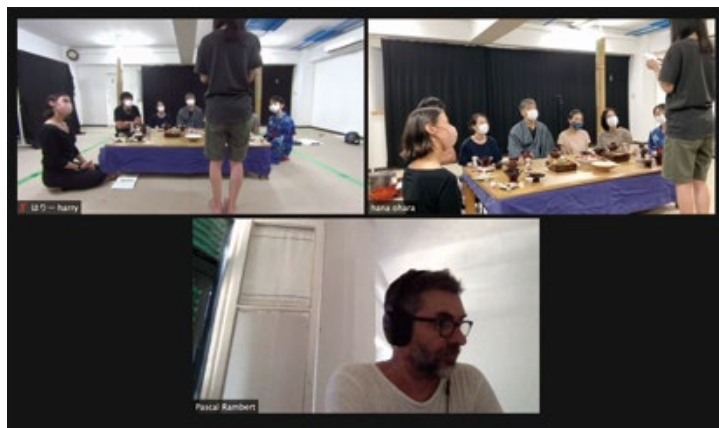
—For this project, your character, Ota, stays on stage the whole time, but says almost nothing.

Ota: I don't think I've ever played a role with so little speaking. I'm really enjoying it. Even now I still feel like I'm constantly searching for what I can do to add to my character. Pascal has said that he was excited to write this work. Like him, I expect that I will continue to struggle right up until the end as to how to bring my character to life on stage.

—Chinen, you play the role of Ota's wife. Having finished the recent two-week round of rehearsals, what are your feelings on the project?

Chinen: The past two weeks it's been all I can do to say my lines. When we started adding blocking at the end, I finally really felt like there were other people around me even when I was making these long speeches. As a result, right now I'm returning to the starting point and rereading the script again. Some scenes involve lots of other characters, and some scenes are just Ota and myself. When I was reading the script alone, I couldn't completely visualize the other characters my character interacts with, but now I can. Right now I still haven't fully taken that in, so I'm a bit nervous as to whether I'll be ready in time for the rehearsals in Ebara.

—Mori, you play the role of their son. It's an important position in the work. How do you feel about the past two weeks?



Rehearsals over Zoom

Mori: The more I read the script, or rather, the more we rehearsed, the more I feel that this is a very strange family (laughs). For example, the father never speaks even though he's there with everyone. It's not Luc BESSON, but I hope that it doesn't end up being the bad kind of image foreigners have when they see Japan. From the start, this project has had an unusual atmosphere, and the unusualness when reading the script and the unusualness when actually enveloped in it have only built on each other in a very interesting way, so I'm looking forward to seeing the end result.

—Recently, there have been all kinds of collaborative international projects, but I believe that most have cast various actors as needed. This project is a collaborative, international work between Seinendan and Pascal. You could say that the general manner of performing is shared between all of the actors; I feel that there is this kind of relationship there and that it is being very well utilized in the creation of the work. For all of you, in this project or a past one, how has working with a French director inspired you, and what discoveries have you made?

Ota: The French people I have met generally graduated from the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse de Paris and have been working in the forefront of the field. They are all very intellectual, and most of the actors I've appeared with are selected individuals who have graduated from one of the mere four national drama schools in the country. I've worked with true frontrunners of the industry; when I watch a Luc Besson film, people I know suddenly pop up on the screen. It results in an environment that makes me constantly think about what we can do, and I find it very stimulating.

Mori: When I did *In the Heart of a Forest*, I didn't work with a French director but rather French actors.⁴ During that project, we discussed things such as Hirata Oriza's reception, particularly in Europe, and the state of modern theater in France. It was an opportunity for intellectual and cultural exchange, and I found it very interesting.

Chinen: I've only worked with a non-Japanese director once before, in 2011 for Seinendan's international exchange project *L'Echange*.⁵ *KOTATSU* is my second time. For me, the biggest thing about participating in a project by another director is that the types of roles that are cast are completely different from those of Seinendan. I find it very interesting and novel. I have an eight-year gap in my career. Even I don't know what my future will be with Seinendan. However, in the time I worked with Oriza, from when I entered Seinendan at around the age of 20 until around the

age of 35, I feel like the roles I was cast in and the roles I got through auditions were similar, or rather that they have common features. I feel like I would never have been given the kind of role I have in *KOTATSU*. So when I first read the script, all I felt was worry about whether I would be able to do the role. I wondered what I had said in my audition, what Pascal saw in me. Being able to take on a role that I never would have thought of is something that characterizes a director not from Seinendan and who is not Hirata Oriza, and it's very interesting.

—I heard that Hirata Oriza came to rehearsals on a day I didn't. What were the rehearsals like then?

Mori: When Oriza came, Pascal wasn't there. Oriza and the actors mainly worked on the Japanese lines—things like whether this word was okay, or adjusting things that didn't feel right to the actors. Oriza also had us try adding in some very rough blocking.

Ota: Because we are members of Seinendan, Hirata Oriza knows us very well. Oriza did all kinds of things to retain the taste of the work while changing lines to make them feel less theatrical and translatese. Things like changing words with difficult-to-understand sounds to words that were easier to hear, making the relationships between things clearer, and generally cleaning up lines.

—Your current, international project is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally, Pascal was also scheduled to be here physically for the rehearsals in July. Ultimately, however, he participated via Zoom. In closing, please reflect on the rehearsals you did over the past two weeks with Pascal over Zoom.

Ota: This was my first time really doing rehearsals over Zoom. Pascal has a really good ear, and I think that helped in part to make the rehearsals a success. Pascal could understand the nuances we put into the lines, could hear small and subtle changes, so I could tell that the parts we did matched what he wanted. Ultimately, however, this is a play. You need to have everything, including things like seeing a person's body and facial expressions, in order to fully create a character in three dimensions. It made me look forward even more to meeting and performing in front of Pascal next month.

Mori: I had done rehearsals over Zoom since the start of COVID-19. That was things like simple read-throughs, however. This was the first time I ever tried to really work out a play like this over Zoom. Like you would expect, it's kind of strange. We would be rehearsing, but because of the Internet, suddenly Pascal would disappear. It made me wonder if anyone was watching us rehearse at times. It made me realize that it's important for rehearsals to feel the presence of the director. For the director to actually physically be there to watch the rehearsal and just drink something or eat a mint or move around. Also, it was very difficult for Pascal to perceive our reactions. Time and again, we had to make big circles with our arms to say "okay," or make very exaggerated "I understand" expressions. Of course, many very talented staff created this environment for us and made things possible in the first place.

Chinen: I've never done rehearsals with Pascal except over Zoom. I don't know what would have happened if we didn't have Zoom. Also, it's normal now to do rehearsals with a mask on, but this was my first time rehearsing like this with a mask on and using Zoom. It was incredibly frustrating

and difficult.

—It seems that rehearsals in Ebara will also be done with masks on.

Chinen: Yes. Right up until we perform for real, we will be rehearsing with masks and face shields, and we'll also only be taking them off right before a performance starts. I've never done anything like this before, so I'm very nervous. I worry that suddenly taking my mask off will feel like being naked and will mess up my acting senses (laughs). In spite of this, this project requires very subtle emotions from all of the characters. I think that it will make adjusting right before a performance difficult.

—I have watched at the rehearsal spaces as this project has taken shape, and I think that it will be able to overcome the obstacles of the COVID-19 pandemic. I'm looking forward to opening day.



The actors being interviewed

Interview and Text: Yokobori Masahiko

Note: This interview was conducted over Zoom from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. on August 3, 2021.

- 1 The reporter attended rehearsals at the Komaba Agora Theater's 2nd floor theater on the first day of July 16 as well as July 17; and at the Komaba Agora Theater's 5th floor rehearsal studio on July 22. In order to prevent unnecessary close contact in the rehearsal space, the reporter observed rehearsals online on July 28 and 29.
- 2 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2009/03/2252>
Scenes of rehearsals at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers can be seen in the film *Theater 2* (directed by SODA Kazuhiro).
- 3 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2009/01/2255>
Three members of Seinendan participated: YAMAUCHI Kenji, KAKUDATE Reina, and OTA Hiroshi.
- 4 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2019/07/6895>
- 5 <http://www.seinendan.org/play/2011/04/6354>