

Setagaya Public Theatre and Raphaëlle BOITEL (France)

“Fierce 5” Third Report: Performance

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Director Raphaëlle BOITEL happened to find a Japanese idiom in a book—“*nana korobi ya oki*” (“falling seven times and getting up eight times”). This became the starting inspiration for *Fierce 5*. Day after day, circus artists train, and no matter how many times they slip and fall, they always get up to try again. For them, tools such as the tightwire, hoops, straps, and balls are both objects to pour their passion into and, at the same time, sources of suffering. Therein lies an ultimate love-hate relationship. As they support the other artists who they perform with, they face their own tools, overcome difficulties, and at last achieve success together.

Fierce 5 is an homage to this world of the circus and, at the same time, is a metaphor for life. In the circus, the impossible is made possible with perseverance, courage, and cooperation. The values the circus personifies are a universal message of hope for those who watch its performances.

In this report, I will report on *Fierce 5*'s performance, which was conducted from October 9 through October 11. In total, three performances were held. I attended the first day's performance (held at 3:00 p.m. on October 9) and the third day's performance (held on October 11 at 7:00 p.m.).

The Performance

On each morning of the performances, the team started by reviewing the previous day. Everyone, including staff members, gathered on stage. Director Raphaëlle Boitel gave comments to everyone and went over everything that needed to be checked. They then went over several scenes while performing the actual movements on stage. They went over the “spider” scene, which required all of the cast members to work very closely together, all the way through. Then, having checked everyone's condition, they moved on to individual work.

45 minutes before the performance, the artists and staff checked the preset. 15 minutes before the performance, everyone gathered backstage and formed a circle to affirm their solidarity. Finally, the curtain rose.

The first's day's performance was held on a Saturday afternoon, and because of this, many of the audience members brought their children with them. Accordingly, every action and move on stage had a direct response in the audience. The orderly prologue followed by a silent scene with comical interactions immediately resulted in laughs. The middle group scenes, which focus more on acting, became a little scattered. Toward the end, however, the performance improved again, and at the climax of the piece, the cast's high concentration and teamwork drew the audience in.

Overall, the scenes moved forward precisely and rhythmically, and this highlighted the artists' individual performances. However, some stiffness in their acting remained. In the solo scenes, in particular, the tempo was too fast, leaving little room for emotion to be added to the artists' movements.

On the third and final performance day, right from the start, the audience seats and stage were filled with emotion. The movements, music, and lighting all combined perfectly, making the aims of the performance clear and increasing the dramatic effect. Moreover, each artist shined,

and the radiant, realistic depiction of the piece's world was entrancing. Technically, there were some small mistakes, but the performance created a world that was so solid that these issues were of no concern.

In general, the piece has no lines. Regardless, the “conversations” that it feels like one is hearing when watching it are what makes it interesting. Further, the occasional words, grunts, and cries the performers let out go beyond meaning to grip the audience and bring the stage and theater seats closer together. In the climax of the play, MINAKAWA Mayumu, who is struggling while suspended in midair, is finally able to break free from the chaos and, using a rope held out by her fellow artists, climbs upward. During this scene, there were not a few audience members who shed tears.

On both days that I attended, the performances ended not just with applause but, especially on the third day, a standing ovation. After the third curtain call on the final performance day, Boitel spoke to the audience about her thoughts on the project. Without a microphone or script, Boitel spoke sincerely while also mixing in Japanese, and was rewarded with even greater applause from the audience.



The “spider” scene, the climax of *Fierce 5* (photo by Yohta Kataoka)

Evaluation of Piece Selection

The idea for creating a Japanese version of *5es Hurlants* (which premiered in 2015) came from Raphaëlle Boitel herself. For Company L'Oublié(e), it was their third project since their establishment and only the second large-scale project. Setagaya Producer SAKAI Atsumi commented, “It was the piece that brought her worldwide attention and is something she is very proud of.” It is truly a condensation of the things that characterize Company L'Oublié(e): A rich language of choreography intermixing the vocabularies of dance, drama, film, and circus; unique production that organically and beautifully displays stage machinery and equipment; and a touch that expresses relationships between people emotionally. Compared to *When Angles Fall*, which Company L'Oublié(e) staged in Japan in 2019, *5es Hurlants*' production composition is simple. This makes it a perfect base for recreation with the aim of cultivating young artists.

Conversely, *5es Hurlants* is strongly colored by the original cast both in technical terms and in terms of characters. Because there was very little time to recreate the piece to match the Japanese cast, it is undeniable that there were some areas where *Fierce 5*'s direction was unnatural and forced. Particularly regarding the technical side, of the five main cast members, two had to use equipment they had very little experience with, something that is quite risky. With regard to the character aspect, all of

the cast members had fun working with their characters, and on the final performance day, their individual uniqueness styles emerged, enabling realistic expression to be achieved. Perhaps because the piece depicts the “backstage,” it was easier for the cast members to feel comfortable and familiar.

Contemporary circus incorporates dance, theater, and a variety of other elements and is developing in diverse ways. From the perspective of the possibilities that contemporary circus can show us, *Fierce 5*'s direct story about the growth of young circus artists also seemed to work effectively.

In the epilogue of *Fierce 5*, the cast members put on old-fashioned circus costumes and form a circle, then sit on chairs arranged in a circle on stage. All five of the antique costumes the performers wear were borrowed for the piece from Annie FRATELLINI. Fratellini was the first female clown of a historic circus family. She established France's first national circus school. She also discovered a young Boitel and encouraged her to follow the path of the circus. This scene shows the connections to traditional circuses. Placing it at the end of *Fierce 5* shows great respect for history and also successfully highlights the characteristics of contemporary circus, which has become a creative performing art.

Looking back, Boitel stated that the COVID-19 pandemic might have influenced her choice of this piece. She said that she felt that perhaps its message was especially important now when people were experiencing great stress, and pessimism and division were spreading.

This is truly symbolized in the “spider” scene, which is achieved by all of the artists working together and rising above the differences in their specialties. It is a scene that elicits strong emotions from the audience. Pushed to their very limits physically and psychologically, the artists summon all of their strength, work together and, in the end, overcome a dangerous situation.

The message we are sharing here might be a small one. We might be small, and this piece might be small, but I believe this message is necessary in order to live in this world.

—From a post-show discussion (October 10, 2021)

It overlaps with the current state of the world as well as the history of this project, in which the cast and crew arrived at its performance amid a variety of restrictions after “*nana korobi ya oki*” (“falling seven times and



The epilogue, in which the artists form a circle while wearing traditional circus costumes (photo by Yohta Kataoka)

getting up eight times”). Because of this, the piece's message hit audiences even harder. With regard to this point, as well, the choice of the piece can be praised for being very timely.

Evaluation of Degree of Achievement

This piece was filled with elements that Japanese pieces frequently tend to lack. These include production created via close collaboration with technical staff, a composition including more group work than solo work for displaying individual specialty skills, and choreography emphasizing a shared baseline of physicality. Achieving these was not easy when both the environment for cultivating artists and the production methods differed completely from those of France. In the end, there were also some elements that had to be eliminated.

A Shared Body Language

In this piece, not only were the artists required to have high technical abilities, but there were also many scenes that tested their form on stage in terms of walking and standing, as well as their ability to handle group work incorporating dance elements. This seems to be a reflection of the French academic training system. In fact, the main cast of *5es Hurlants* are all graduates of the Académie Fratellini (France's first national circus school), and they all accordingly possessed a certain level of shared experience. Conversely, in Japan, there is no specific training system, and each artist has trained in a different way and in different amounts. To develop a piece like this in Japan required that the cast members first build a shared physical foundation.

It is regrettable that almost no time could be taken for exercises to cultivate basic physical ability during the remote rehearsals required because of COVID-19. This time, it was necessary to rely on the skills the individual artists had already cultivated. In the future, however, building a shared body language between the cast members would likely improve the quality of the piece even further.

Customizing the Production and Choreography According to the Individual Artists

The project team had their hands full just finishing all of the arrangements and completing development of the piece. They were unable to adjust the production and choreography according to the individual artists. In light of this, it may have been the realistic decision to use all the same circus equipment as in *5es Hurlants*. Forcing the cast members to use equipment they were not familiar with was a heavy burden, but it also had the merit of enabling them to practice based on videos of *5es Hurlants*.

Rehearsal Time for Solo Numbers

As much of the rehearsal time was used for group work, there was less time to rehearse solo numbers, and some of the details were left rough. As all of the solo numbers consisted of a series of high-level techniques, it was also necessary to practice and get used to doing them in the dark as well as under the powerful lights actually used on stage. This time, the artists were unable to take the time to increase the precision of their solo numbers just before the performance.

That being said, given the intense schedule, it was a good decision to choose to focus on certain aspects over others. As a result, the cast and crew were able to achieve sufficient quality for public performance in a short amount of time.

YOSHIKAWA Kento, who originally specialized in juggling and slack

wire, had just five months from auditions to learn the tightwire, a highly difficult skill, and he showed tremendous growth. Indeed, all eight artists had to try new things outside their own areas of expertise. For example, contortionist SUGIMOTO Shun took on the challenge of learning aerial straps. Juggler MEGURO Yosuke handled ropes, and dancer Minakawa Mayumu worked in an aerial harness. In one sense, the project development process was *Fierce 5* itself.

This piece put a great physical and technical burden on the performers. Further, it included elements that were impossible to predict, such as the slipperiness of the floor due to the talcum powder used. Making it possible to stably stage the piece required high-level and detailed adjustments, including in terms of the artists' physical strength. A lot of practical experience must be needed to master the ability to display accurate technical skills and rich emotion at all times while also dealing with daily changes in physical condition and unexpected problems.

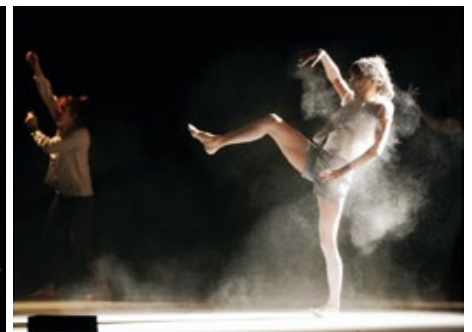
In the first week from the start of on-stage rehearsals, the piece showed remarkable progress. In the final performance, it felt like all of the pieces had finally come together. I fully expect that, with this first performance in Tokyo, this piece will develop a good flow as it is performed time and again in the future.



Yoshikawa Kento on the tightwire (photo by DAIDO Hiroyasu)



Meguro Yosuke juggling
(photo by Daido Hiroyasu)



Minakawa Mayumu dancing
(photo by Daido Hiroyasu)



Sugimoto Shun on the
aerial straps
(photo by Daido Hiroyasu)



Hasegawa Aimi on the aerial hoop
(photo by Daido Hiroyasu)



Yamamoto Hironobu (photo by
Yohta Kataoka)



Yasumoto Asami (center; photo by Yohta Kataoka)