

Setagaya Public Theatre and Raphaëlle BOITEL (France)

“Fierce 5” Fourth Report: Reflection

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Fierce 5 was the Setagaya Arts Foundation’s first international project since the COVID-19 pandemic. In this report, I will provide a review of the entire project and summarize its accomplishments, challenges, and future outlook.

Post-Performance Reaction

A review of the piece’s performance was published in the *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper on October 14, 2021. In addition, many passionate reactions were posted on SNS and other sites immediately after the opening day performance. Looking at the content of these, many favorable reviews of the following points could be seen.

The Lighting Effects

Conspicuously, many were surprised by the visual effects making powerful use of light and shadow.

The Themes of the Piece

Many stated that they were emotionally moved by the human relationships in the piece. Many posts also presented interpretations of it, and it could be seen that the piece was designed such that it encouraged viewers to imagine many different things.

Making Technical Operations Appear Theatrical

Some also focused on the staging, which made the preparations and assisting work involved in dangerous acts appear as part of the show, and the height of the skills of the cast members, which made this possible and successful. A representative example was the “spider” scene, in which one of the cast members is suspended in air by the other cast members.

In addition, there seemed to be many comments on the seven individual artists appearing in the piece. There were both positive and negative comments regarding details of the artists’ acting. In particular, there were several comments pointing out a lack of proficiency with regard to the acting of failures and emotions.

That being said, the piece was highly praised for showing the possibilities of circus as a performing art, and for being a successful large-scale international collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Setagaya Public Theatre Producer SAKAI Atsumi also said that the piece had stimulated artists, presenters, and other people involved in the performing arts scene.

One thing that was unfortunate is that some people mistakenly assumed that this Japanese version of *5es Hurlants* was only created because only a few members from Company L’Oublié(e), instead of the entire company, were able to come to Japan due to the travel restrictions. In Japan, most so-called international projects involve inviting overseas artists to come perform an already-completed piece. The above reactions indicate that the development and creation process is not yet fully understood. However, this was the first year for the Japan Foundation’s new International Creation in Performing Arts program, and this perhaps is also why there is not sufficient understanding of the program’s framework.

Evaluation by Director Raphaëlle BOITEL

Director Raphaëlle Boitel positioned this project in the fields of “learning” and “mutual understanding.”

Life is a series of encounters, and art is the same. By interacting with people, receiving inspiration, making discoveries, and being influenced, we cultivate our ability to imagine and create, and this makes art richer.

—From an email interview conducted on October 11, 2021

Two years ago, when Company L’Oublié(e) last came to Japan to perform, Boitel stated that the next time she came to Japan, she didn’t want to tour an existing work of her company’s but rather collaborate with Japanese artists. This wish was made a reality at a much faster pace than she originally expected. From the first day, Boitel gave detailed comments each day and worked to improve the piece’s quality up until the last moment. Immediately after the final performance, Boitel was elated, stating, “The emotion filling the stage reached not just me but the audience in the full house,” “The change was clear and distinct,” and, “I’ve been given an amazing present.” She also praised the eight participating artists not only for their high expertise and meticulous work ethic, but also for being filled with ambition and enthusiasm.

Regarding the piece’s remarkable improvement during the week of performances, Boitel was analytical, thinking it may have been because of the deepening relationships of trust among the entire team, including the staff members; and because the team had gained a shared mind toward the piece. She indicated that conversely, this sort of connection had been missing up until this point. Boitel said that it is truly important to share time together outside of rehearsals and, for example, to drink together and talk about things other than the piece. It is through this process, she said, that one becomes a real “family,” and that they hadn’t had the time to do that with this project. Looking back on the entire process, Boitel repeatedly said, “If I had been able to be in Tokyo one more month, we could have taken the piece even further.”

Project Accomplishments and Challenges

Accomplishments

Boitel and her team were unable to come to Japan for the auditions in April and the master class in June. In turn, these had to be conducted remotely. Of the approximately month-long period they stayed in Japan from September to October, two weeks were taken up by quarantining. The amount of time they had to do work in person was drastically cut. Amid a schedule that was extremely tight throughout, Sakai Atsumi stated, “We prepared for the performance while constantly thinking about when we should stop things.” *Fierce 5* is a piece involving risk, both physically and technically. Sakai says that, in order to avoid danger while dealing with a constantly changing situation, they were always considering numerous patterns and developing the project while determining what was and wasn’t possible with Raphaëlle Boitel. It is likely that this system of taking all measures to ensure safety first contributed greatly to the success of the project. Specific factors are discussed in more detail below.

The Participating Artists

The majority of the project development process was conducted remotely. This required the participating artists to be highly autonomous

and adaptable, and to have strong communication skills. All eight of the artists selected for the project excelled at all of the above. Spanning experienced veterans to young artists with high growth potential, the team was well-balanced. From the start of in-person rehearsals, as a team they engaged in repeated discussion and together searched for ways to incorporate the director's opinions into their performances.

The amount of time the artists had to practice using the actual equipment was also limited. The result was that the project relied heavily on the artists' individual abilities. For example, the "spider" scene, which involves all of the main cast members, would not have been achievable in such a short amount of time if the cast hadn't included members who understood and were familiar with aerial techniques. The piece's eight cast members were all not only highly skilled but also had a diverse array of experience and were versed in multiple techniques.

The production side prepared understudies just in case, and had staff from the stage management section on standby on-site. Nowadays, even large productions frequently do not establish an understudy in order to cut costs. *Fierce 5's* choice to hedge risk by having understudies is laudable. There was also always a body trainer on hand in the dressing room providing physical care for the cast members, who were pushing their bodies to their limits. Such support systems are essential for a physically strenuous program, and I hope understanding of this fact will grow in the future.

Above all, the introduction of an assistant to help with rehearsals was highly successful. As the performance approached, the entire team became more rushed. Under this situation, having someone who could stay calm, watch everything going on, and provide support was very important and likely contributed greatly to the project moving forward safely.

Staff System

Amid many uncertain elements, it was necessary to repeatedly engage in discussions with the busy Company L'Oublié(e) team and provide direction to the staff of the Japanese team. Until the Company L'Oublié(e) team was able to do in-person work, it was up to Sakai, thoroughly knowledgeable about the technical aspects of the circus and also familiar with Boitel, to mediate, explain, and persuade. Once the Company L'Oublié(e) team was working in person, the pace of production development picked up, with Stage Manager KIMURA Mitsuharu working closely mainly with Boitel; and Lighting Coordinator NOGI Fuyuki and Sound Coordinator ABE Fumihiko, who both had worked with the company when the company came to Japan in 2019, working closely with Technical Director Tristan BAUDOIN. The technical abilities and responsibility of the Japanese team staff won the trust of the company team.

In terms of the project moving forward smoothly, interpreter KATO Rit-suko's contribution was also large. She worked alongside the project, providing interpreting, from the auditions in April through the performance of the piece in October. Kato had been frequently involved in the Setagaya Arts Foundation's projects including the last time Company L'Oublié(e) came to Japan. She was deeply trusted not only by the people of Setagaya Public Theatre but also those of Company L'Oublié(e) as well as the artists. Circus and dance rehearsals frequently involves providing explanations while moving. This makes it particularly important for any interpretation to both be near-instantaneous and able to blend in with the surrounding rhythm in order to maintain accuracy and not stop the flow of things. Kato enabled communication that felt like there was no language barrier at all.

The Company

Another important factor was Raphaëlle Boitel, the leader of the team

partnering with the Japanese team in this international collaboration, having a strong desire to develop a project with Japanese artists. As I reported previously, the idea for this project's story came from Boitel. Boitel proactively used Japanese during rehearsals and breaks, and also spoke to the audience after performances without a mic. This attitude clearly expressed her passion toward making this project a reality in Japan.

The fact that not only Director Boitel but her company, Company L'Oublié(e), was invited to participate in this project is also praiseworthy. To borrow Boitel's words, this project became an opportunity for both the Japanese and French teams to take a step away from the paths they had so far followed and the environments they were familiar with to discover new ways of doing things and move forward together. Julieta SALZ, who worked as rehearsal assistant for the first time for a project of this size, said with tears in her eyes after the last performance, "There were difficulties, but the artists accepted me with an open mind and supported me. It was truly a good experience."

It was not easy securing a month-long block of time from a popular company during the start of the new theater season in Europe. While Boitel and Salz were in Japan, Company L'Oublié(e) was also staging another piece in Nice, France. Tristan Baudoin, who took part in the Nice production, was only able to work in person in Japan for just six days despite having to quarantine for two weeks. Composer and sound and lights operator Arthur BISON was unable to schedule enough time for the quarantine period and unfortunately was unable to accept the invitation to come to Japan. Even so, having three of the French team's central figures come to Japan was a great accomplishment and was a result of the passion on both the Japanese and French sides.

As a result, there were no major accidents or injuries and the project finished its final performance in good form. All of the participating artists are extensively active and it can be expected that through them this project will have a huge ripple effect on the entire scene going forward. Two of the original goals of this project were 1) cultivating artists, and 3) international exchange and stimulating the performing arts, and I believe it is safe to say that *Fierce 5* achieved these to the maximum extent possible under current conditions. Conversely, the project did not fully realize its second goal of cultivating technicians. I offer the following regarding this point.

Future Challenges

In order to prioritize production safety, there were some elements that the project chose not to implement and leave as a challenge for next time.

Cultivation of Technicians

Alongside the development process, this project also originally planned to create an opportunity for technical staff, production staff, and artists to learn about circus techniques and skills from Company L'Oublié(e). Due to the schedule, however, this was abandoned.

Even with outstandingly skilled artists, without technical and production staff who have the proper skills and knowledge as well as an understanding of the creation process, it is impossible to expand the breadth of a piece's expression. They must be in charge of maintaining safety while at the same time have the ability to accept sudden and unexpected changes with flexible thinking. The artists, as well, must also gain the experience of achieving expression that is one step further through cooperation with technical staff.

For *Fierce 5*, Company L'Oublié(e)'s music and light operators were unable to come to Japan, and the Technical Director was unable to be

present from the second performance day. Coordination and operation of each section was thus handled entirely by the Japanese team's staff. Despite the short amount of time, it seems that many things were gained through the form of this project's international collaboration, which was different from staging existing overseas projects in Japan.

Both Boitel and Saki showed the will and desire to put more effort into international collaboration and cultivating technicians in the future.

Cultivating Artists in the Broader Sense

In planning this project, Sakai asked Boitel for opportunities for as many artists as possible to come in contact with the project development process, such as using a workshop-style for the auditions. Unfortunately, however, this, too, had to be abandoned due to time limits.

France has many circus schools and solid curriculums as well. In comparison, chances for even receiving professional education in Japan are extremely limited. While there are studios that teach specific specialty skills, there are almost no institutions where people can comprehensively study circus techniques. The Sori International Circus School is the only circus school in Japan. According to Boitel, having comprehensive systems and support and a clear career path is not always a good thing. Sometimes, Boitel says, these can result in a lack of independence. However, I feel that it would be extremely regrettable if passionate and skilled artists in Japan were unable to perform on global stages because of differences in educational and production environments.

If theaters continue to take the lead in high-level international productions like *Fierce 5*, it would provide opportunities for participants to improve their skills. It would also stimulate those around the participants, provide a target to aim for, and stimulate the entire scene. In addition, just like with Boitel, such projects can become an opportunities for the strengths of Japan-based artists, within a different culture, to become known by world-class artists over the course of the creative process.

Sakai is concerned that simply inviting overseas companies to perform existing works in Japan will not help the Japanese scene to develop. Her hope is to "increase opportunities to create, cultivate talent, and ensure the safety of pieces created in Japan, and, beyond this, see even greater variation." The Setagaya Arts Foundation respects long-term relationships with artists and organically creates links between multiple projects. Great things are expected from its activities going forward.

The Significance of this Project

This project was the second time the Setagaya Arts Foundation collaborated with Company L'Oublié(e). The company was invited to Japan to perform *When Angels Fall* in 2019. The company also held workshops, and some of the participants became cast members in this project. Concrete discussions regarding this project began in early fall of 2020. Originally, the idea was to start it in fiscal 2022. However, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the theater's schedule becoming open. The Japan Foundation also announced that it was accepting proposals for projects like this. Accordingly, it began to seem possible to conduct the project in fiscal 2021. In a short amount of time, the project schedule was quickly adjusted and candidate artists began being contacted around year-end. The project was made a reality in around just one year from project proposal. For a project of this size, this is rare in Japan because large-scale theaters' schedules are usually full for the upcoming two years. It is likely this was possible because there already existed a positive relationship with the company, and because drafts of the plan had already been worked on.

It was also highly significant that the project was realized through collaboration between an artist and a producer in their thirties who will lead the next generation of performing arts. In addition to the cast members, the stage manager and technical staff were also young, meaning that this project will impact the future. Like ballet dancers, circus artists are very hard on their bodies, and this means age is a problem. Waiting for the pandemic to end could have resulted in artists nearing their primes missing an important chance. Sakai said, "Shrinking away because of COVID-19 will shrink everything. I want to move forward even if it has to be done under restrictions." This desire of hers helped push the project forward early on.

This project was a highly physical work, and it was thought that it would be difficult to make it a reality using remote communication. Its success gives confidence and encouragement to the Setagaya Arts Foundation and to the Japanese performing arts scene as a whole. At the curtain call of the final performance, Boitel spoke with strength to the audience, saying, "We have proven that international exchange is possible for the performing arts" even under COVID-19.



Final performance curtain call (photo by Yohta Kataoka); from left to right: Yamamoto, Yoshikawa, Minakawa, Meguro, Sugimoto, Hasegawa, Yasumoto

Future Outlook

Both Raphaëlle Boitel and Sakai Atsumi positioned the performance of this project as a first step and plan on future long-term collaborations. The next development has already been decided. When *5es Hurlants* is performed at the Grand Théâtre de Bordeaux in November 2021, *Fierce 5* cast member HASEGAWA Aimi will perform with the original French cast.

They are also aiming to perform *Fierce 5* at a circus festival in France, and to take it on tour in Asia. Someday, they would also like make this into a project involving staff and artists from a variety of countries, much like how the five main cast members of *5es Hurlants* came from different countries. There is no doubt that using the shared language of physical movement while encountering the differing audiences and cultures of various cities would help *Fierce 5* to develop even further.

This project has also made clear what elements are needed for the Japanese performing arts scene as a whole to develop and grow. Below, I discuss the points that came up during the project development process and in my interview with Producer Sakai.

Creating a Grand Cycle of Creation and Performance

Circus performances cannot be properly rehearsed without sufficient

floor space and a sufficiently high ceiling. The equipment used for things like tightwire and aerial performances also requires the facilities themselves to be strong and sturdy. Accordingly, circus rehearsals continue to face the challenge of there being very few facilities that meet the necessary requirements. In recent years, nongovernment organizations have begun proactively creating and maintaining rehearsal and production environments. These include Setouchi Circus Factory, Circus Laboratory CouCou, and Kansai Aerial. The situation is improving, but there is still a lack of environments for creating large-scale theatrical works.

Creating high-level productions requires time for the development process to be conducted together with technical staff using an actual stage and relevant machinery. Under the current system where facilities are rented out for profit between the theater's own productions, it is not realistic to engage in a long development process while using them. With *Fierce 5*, the company said that stage rehearsals would require a month, but they were only able to secure two weeks. Even a public theater recognized as a top-level space for creative development must engage in the business of renting its facilities for a fee, and there are major problems with this operation system.

While prefacing that there are continued challenges, Sakai stated that the role of a public theater is to create model cases focused on the grand cycle of creation to performance, and to share these models with other theaters. The problem is a lack of staff able to handle performances, as well as presenters who can evaluate circus artists. Solving this problem would definitely expand the field of possible activities. Sakai spoke of an ideal future of a virtuous cycle between talented artists and the theaters that would seek them out: creation and development would be led not only by theaters, but also by artists creating and proposing their own works independently.

Mixing the Audiences for Street and Theater Performances

Today, street performance festivals are being held across Japan, and the potential audience for circus performances is huge. However, there is still a gap in the audiences for street and theater performances. Technically, however, they are very close to each other, and in fact, some of the artists who appeared in *Fierce 5* are also active in the street performance scene.

One of the Setagaya Arts Foundation's strengths is that it has a successful track record of producing outstanding contemporary circus performances in its theater while also having continued to organize the street performance festival "Sancha de Daidogei" for the past 25 years together with local shopping districts. In fact, Sakai became interested in contemporary circus while serving on the production staff for Sancha de Daidogei. She enthusiastically stated, "I hope pieces like this help people see the fun of going to the theater."

Updating the Discourse and Systems Around Contemporary Circus

Sakai said that one thing that was very memorable for her was that all of the artists they had invited said that they called themselves "circus" performers because there was no other appropriate word for it, and not because they wanted to create any boundaries between genres. *Fierce 5* truly is an embodiment of this line of thinking. Some contemporary circus pieces are closer to contemporary dance or theater than they are to so-called "traditional" circus performances. Contemporary circus has both a free approach incorporating a variety of expression styles, and an intense physicality. Its potential is high and it could be a trigger to help revitalize the entire Japanese performing arts scene.

For this to be possible, it will also be necessary to update the discourse and systems that still hold on to vertical divisions. Artists have already

moved forward. In order to accept the diverse styles of expression they have created and deliver these to a wider audience, perhaps it is now necessary to look at contemporary circus not as a genre but rather as an approach, and to actively discuss it within the broader field of contemporary performing arts.

Sources of Quotes

Raphaëlle Boitel

- Remarks made during post-show discussion on October 10, 2021 (interviewer: Sakai Atsumi)
- Answers to email interview on October 11, 2021 (interviewer: Kuremiya Yurika)
- Interview for video on October 11, 2021 (interviewer: Sakai Atsumi)
- In-person interview conducted after final performance on October 11, 2021 (interviewer: Kuremiya Yurika)
- Other remarks from rehearsals

Julieta Salz

- Remarks made during post-show discussion on October 10, 2021 (interviewer: Sakai Atsumi)
- Other remarks from rehearsals

Sakai Atsumi

- Remarks during briefing on May 14, 2021
- Interview over Zoom on November 4, 2021 (interviewer: Kuremiya Yurika)

Artists

- MINAKAWA Mayumu, HASEGAWA Aimi, SUGIMOTO Shun, MEGURO Yosuke, YOSHIKAWA Kento, YAMAMOTO Hironobu, YASUMOTO Asami, YOSHIDA Aki
- Interview for video on October 11, 2021 (interviewer: Sakai Atsumi)