

Company Derashinera with LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia) and LIU Juichu (Taiwan)

“TOGE” First Report: Launch of Project

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1. Rehearsal Studio, Beginning

In preparation for the performances in December 2021, Derashinera gradually started rehearsals at the end of July with the Japan-based members who could get together: ONODERA Shuji, FUJITA Momoko, and SAKIYAMA Rina. I observed one of these, a rehearsal held in the multi-purpose hall at Academy Otowa on July 26.

At the beginning of the rehearsal, a meeting with the scenic design staff was held to prepare for the atrium performance. They brought in a cube-frame object that has been used several times in past Derashinera performances, and discussed how it looks and how it could be used. Especially as this is a joint production with an international cast, they seemed to be conscious about using “simple tools that could be found in any country.” One of the artists commented, “It would be nice if we could touch on something cultural.”



Consider using art used in the past

Then, after trying “movements like a drunk holding a light” with the lights dimmed, Onodera, Fujita, and Sakiyama next tried movements using “paper.” The paper was dropped, and Onodera and Sakiyama tried several patterns to see how they could connect while Fujita took video. They explored expression by changing the meaning of the paper and the power relationships of the people involved in various ways, such as



Trying out using a spotlight with the lights dimmed

imagining the paper as a letter, “with powerful words written on it like an election speech.” They crumpled the paper up, and Onodera and Sakiyama took on the roles of “one who wants to unfold” and “one who wants to close” the paper, with Fujita then replacing Onodera and giving it a go with Sakiyama. Factors such as the way the paper is unfolded and closed, and the timing and speed all make a difference in the way things appear. In the process of searching for the right image, Czech filmmaker Jan ŠVANKMAJER was mentioned as a reference.



Movement of competing for a piece of paper (photo by the author)

They plan to share these rehearsal videos with the performers overseas as a resource.

2. Interview with ONODERA Shuji, Director of Derashinera, on the Launch of the Project

Why Asia?

— What are your thoughts on creation with performers from other Asian countries?

Onodera: When I was active in the group Mizuto Abura (Water and Oil), I was more Europe-oriented and did not pay close attention to Asia. However, during my stay in Vietnam and Thailand as a Japan Cultural Envoy, I felt an energy that is not present in Japan today. In cities where many people live the same as in Tokyo, the stores and lifestyles are comparable, but at the base, the energy of the people who live in the city is completely different. It may simply be that people’s voices are a bit louder, but that sensation was the start. From there, I had opportunities to collaborate with many people in Asia and became more interested in the differences between Japan and other countries through the people I met there.

— What are those differences?

Onodera: For example, NUNG Van Minh was a performer in KAAT with Onodera Shuji’s *Without Signal!* (February 2017) created through a workshop in Hanoi. Van Minh is a member of an ethnic minority, living with his family near the border with China. He is very pure and honest, including his passion for dance. I have the impression that he knows how to live properly as a human being, rather than just looking for interesting activities based on his self-interest. I thought there must have been many young people like this in Japan in the past. I have the opportunity to meet with

young people in Japan, but I do not see many of his type in Japan today. I think this may be due to differences in the environment, such as the amount of information and technology. After his performance in Derashinera's *Knife* (December 2020), he could not return to Vietnam because his country had restricted travel from abroad due to the pandemic, including by its own citizens. So, he stayed in Japan for six months and we had him participate in Derashinera's *The Emperor's New Clothes* (March 2021). We had planned to have him join this performance as well, but as the Vietnamese government's policy had not changed, we decided against it because we felt that it would be problematic for him, considering his age and his career, if we invited him back to Japan and he could not return home for six months again.

Also, after my experience as a Japan Cultural Envoy, I had a project to gather young people from Taiwan and audition them to create a piece, which later met with a hitch, but I did a work-in-progress performance in Japan. At that time, I felt that the way female performers [in Taiwan] stand on stage is a little different from in Japan. I feel that there is a certain way that is considered good for female performers to express themselves on stage in Japan. Don't get me wrong, but I have the impression that Japanese women want to be "cute." That is great too, but with one standard for what is beautiful/not beautiful, everyone tends to look similar.

In both Taiwan and Vietnam, on the other hand, I was impressed with the strength that these female performers showed. I was fascinated by a Taiwanese work-in-progress performer, LIU Juichu, who was just so cool no matter what she did in the audition. She will be performing again this time, following her appearance in *Knife*. Then there is NGUYEN Thi Can from Vietnam, who is not participating this time, but appeared in *Without Signal!* She, too, was wonderful. When I look at other Asian countries, my honest impression is that there are quite a few female performers whom I would like to have perform and appear on stage with me. Of course, this is not to say that such performers do not exist in Japan, but rather that they tend to not make their presence felt at the right time or end up being forgotten. That is why I want to show how *cool* female performers are. Even when I was in Mizuto Abura, I enjoyed being told, "So there's this way of looking, too." This is work that can be done among Japanese performers, but again, as I continue to have opportunities to do it with people from other countries, especially in Asia, I want to bet on the possibility of showing a new value system when done with performers from other Asian countries.

Wanting to Present an Image of Strong Womanhood

— Especially with your style, I imagine that an individual's gender expression would have a big impact, as you use everyday gestures, such as receiving and not giving things or pretending to give things to others in your productions ...

Onodera: That's right. The acting aspect of how a person moves, which goes beyond the matter of dance technique, is important. So, the kind of life someone usually leads and how that person lives his/her life have an effect. I think it is interesting if I could pull out what is already inside a person. When I suggest something that I think is interesting, it might be new for the person, and even if they do their best despite a sense of discomfort, it may not work. However, when I talk with Liu Juichu and Fujita Momoko, a lot of times they sympathize with me and say, "That's only natural," or "I know what you mean." KAJIHARA Akiko, who is coming from France, is another dancer I love, and I hope she will show her strength to Japanese people. Also, although we have not worked together

yet, Lee Ren Xin from Malaysia will also participate this time, and I have high expectations for her. I think she is in the dance or performance category, but she also creates her own works, so I feel that she will present a new image of womanhood. I am looking forward to seeing how I will react to that.

— That would change your way of making productions a lot, wouldn't it?

Onodera: I think so. When I was working in Mizuto Abura, Fujita was the only female performer, and I asked her to take on characters who do not flirt or even laugh, aiming to erase the boundary between male and female. However, stories are inevitably told in "male/female" terms. In a society where men are always considered to be dominant, how to show this is one approach [to addressing this issue]. However, as there is an all female cast this time, I want to create a work that shows the strength and interest of each of them.

— What are your thoughts on the state of men?

Onodera: As a man myself, I cannot be objective in some respects, but I feel that men may be given preferential treatment in Japan. When I go to Europe, for example, the attitude of men toward women is totally different. I think men are strong in Europe as well, but I feel that they have overcome this dispute. I feel that [society] goes awry to the extent that Japanese men are not aware of their privileged position, but if what is happening in Japan today is a transitional period, it may be inevitable. Come to think of it, when I did a workshop in Thailand, it was a pleasant experience for me to be able to create just by being there, regardless of whether someone was male or female, because they were so open about the categories of gender.

Anyway, I feel that Japan has more to learn from other Asian countries, but as values never change in a stroke, I think there might be something to show after 10 years or so of continual work, rather than imagining a one-shot deal. As for myself, I think that I will keep making efforts little by little without bending.

Projects Spanning Ten or Twenty Years

— You just mentioned the words "after 10 years," and this performance is the first in The Global Theatre Project, which I understand is a 10- or 20-year project.

Onodera: This is related to my problem awareness. For example, when dancers who have been active abroad come back to Japan, there are almost no companies to receive them. KANAMORI Jo's Noism Company Niigata is open to people from abroad, yet in many cases, I feel that the dancers who return to Japan have to start from scratch. But I think that if Japanese companies were more global, there would be more openness and we would be able to see different things.

Until now, I had been more conscious of doing what I wanted to do and expecting someone to pick up the work, rather than engaging with society. It didn't make sense to me to go out of my way and say, "for the good of society," so I thought I would just do my own thing and do it well. But at some point, however, I began to think that I needed to reflect on various things and have words to express them in order to connect with society a little more. Now, I feel that my method of connecting with society is to find and present a kind of universality using mime, a potential and means of expression that does not involve words. Considering my age, I

feel that I will not be doing this for that long, so I must proceed little by little, as life is unexpectedly short.

Group Narrative, Both Abstractly and Figuratively

— What is your specific conception for this work at this point?

Onodera: I am thinking of George ORWELL's novel *Animal Farm* as a motif. The conception itself is interesting, and I feel it is close to the world we live in today, where a group or society is led around by the nose, and after going in the direction they thought was best, they realize that they ended up in a different place and are eventually swindled. However, as I am likely to be the only man in this project, it will be difficult to achieve a balance in terms of expressing the story. I am thinking of taking a different approach by adding some more elements such as different texts, paintings, and so on.

— By “paintings, and so on,” do you mean as objects? Or as stories?

Onodera: I don't mean to use the works as they are, but perhaps the concept or the idea behind them. Also, I feel that deserts, towers, and other things that are both abstract and figurative in some way create a world. I think it would be better to take in something different from the outside and approach it with the feeling that I am likely as not to break it, rather than to study it thoroughly as a basis, so as to not come off as preachy. We are going to make cut-outs of moments such as quarrels or when people say, “Let's try to do our best together,” but what kind of structure can we use to show this? Considering the quarantine period for the performers from overseas, we don't have much time for rehearsals, and there is also the language problem, so I am thinking of using a system where, for example, I give people a theme and ask them to create a solo, and then we discuss it.

I feel that *Animal Farm* has continuity with my previous work *Knife*. *Knife* was inspired by MAUPASSANT's *Boule de Suif*, in which a group of people are on a journey. I thought of it as the journey of life. In a sense, that's what I want to do this time, so I was thinking of using the same artwork once more.

— I think if you were to use completely different visuals, it would change the appearance and make it easier for both the performers and the viewers to see it as something new, but that's not the point, is it?

Onodera: No. It is wishful thinking, so I am not sure how it will turn out, but I *am* exploring new possibilities for expression, such as using paper. I do not want to make everything new all the time. I want to make new works, but I also want to be conscious of things like recycling and sustainability. The world is headed in that direction, and the performing arts are also feeling the economic impact of COVID-19. I don't want to gainsay shows that charge 10,000 yen to show something gorgeous and beautiful, but amid various restrictions, I would like to consider putting on a rich performance in a simple, minimalist way, as a place to showcase expression itself. I am very grateful to The Japan Foundation for giving me a push at a time when the common reaction is to question the need to invite foreigners [to Japan] during the pandemic. In the midst of all this, I feel that I, too, am being questioned about what it means to create a stage performance.

3. Impressions

An international co-production during the pandemic means that changes had to be made, such as canceling the performance of Nung Van Minh, and there are many uncertainties about when the performers would be able to attend rehearsals, depending on the COVID-19 situation and government policy. I can see that Onodera and other creators are struggling with this situation.

On the other hand, for Onodera, who has been active on stage for more than a quarter of a century, his encounter with other Asian countries has given him a new perspective and, coupled with his age, has brought him to a crossroads in terms of expression, in a positive sense.

As many rich expressions have come out of various constraints, it will be interesting to see how this creation will turn out and what those involved will gain from it.