

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

“TOGE” Second Report: Rehearsal

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1. Determining the Title and Concept of the Work

The plot was finalized in October, based on a concept that had been in the works for some time. In *Animal Farm*, the motif for the project, the animals who have driven out the controlling humans try to establish a free and equal self-government, but an imbalance gradually develops, and they are exposed to attacks from the dominant animals and the outside world. The project abstracts the “rulers” and depicts people who are unaware of their situation. The central characters are played by five women, with ONODERA Shuji in a supportive role. The name of the project is *TOGE*.

2. Start of Rehearsals at KAAT

In mid-November, in the run-up to the December live shows, rehearsals began at the Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT), the venue for the production. Prior to this, although there was some exchange of text and video via e-mail, there was no particular practice via Zoom or other means, especially with the overseas group, as the emphasis was on face-to-face creation in the rehearsal studio.

In early October, a tentative text (script) for the project was finalized, translated into English, and shared with the performers.

On October 21, the director and performers held a face-to-face Zoom meeting to discuss their impressions of the text and the original work.

On November 16, rehearsals began in KAAT’s 8th floor studio. This was the first day of rehearsals for Onodera Shuji, FUJITA Momoko, and SAKIYAMA Rina, who were already in Japan. LEE Ren Xin, LIU Juichu, and KAJIHARA Akiko, who were in quarantine, spent time working on their own solos and other ideas, and communicated with everyone via Zoom.

On November 18, Lee joined the rehearsals.

On November 19, Kajihara joined the rehearsals.

On November 23, Liu joined the rehearsals.

I visited the rehearsal studio on November 24, when everyone was present. The scene at the beginning of the story, where the “kept” characters conduct mutual surveillance on each other, is expressed using a long piece of rubber. Various shapes are created, just like in a game of cat’s cradle. Everyone holds the rubber, and when they go inside, it looks like a boat. It seemed difficult for the five people to handle a single piece of rubber, because if the timing was not right, the rubber would loosen or it would look like a different action. Onodera’s instructions were extremely detailed, such as, “Don’t start running suddenly, but lean a little.”



Using a long rubber band to represent unstable and swaying people (photo by the author)

For example, in a scene where Lee almost falls off the boat and Fujita appears to have saved her, Fujita falls off. When Lee then made a gesture as if to follow, Kajihara, who was standing next to her, reacted the same way, but Onodera pointed out that this made the movement too one-dimensional. So, Kajihara and Liu decided to make a movement of pulling Sakiyama, who was stumbling backward.

In this way, as the same scene is repeated over and over again while carefully crafting the details, the movements and nuances become richer and smoother. On the other hand, Onodera also says, “I want to show the individuality and presence of each character rather than a detailed story.”

Next, the rehearsal moved to a scene in which Kajihara agitates everyone, and her address brings about a change in the tamed people. Onodera’s cautioning to “go for discussion, not dance” was interesting.

Here, Kajihara and Liu put their weight on a slanted platform, whose durability was checked with the stage manager, IWAYA Chinatsu.

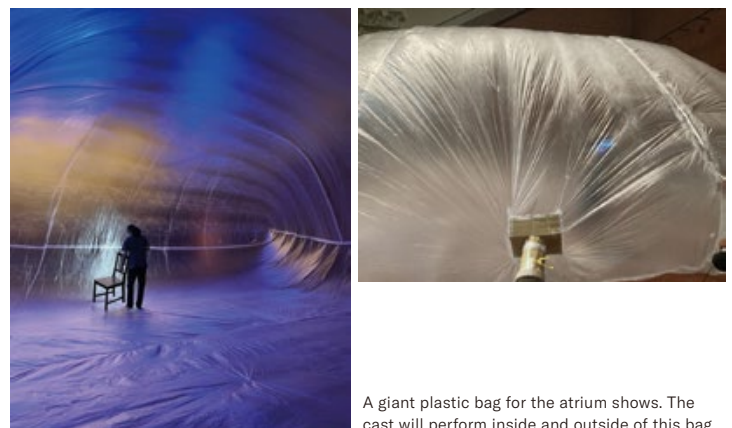


Checking the durability with stage director Iwaya (photo by the author)

Onodera says that he was inspired by artist Mark MANDERS, whose world of sculptures and other objects existing in mysterious equilibrium with simple chairs, tables, and platforms seems to fit the world of Derashinera.

Conversation in the rehearsal studio was a mix of Japanese and English, with Lee and Liu sometimes complementing these with Chinese. There was no confusion, and the atmosphere was friendly.

Although the rehearsal this day was for the theater performance at KAAT, experiments with a giant plastic bag to be used in the atrium space were conducted on another day. Preparations for this are also in progress.



A giant plastic bag for the atrium shows. The cast will perform inside and outside of this bag.

3. Interview with the Performers

— What are your expectations for this project?

Lee: This is not the first time I have collaborated with Japanese people, but it is the first time I have created a work together in Japan in this way. I was interested in how we would work with the director and as group to create a piece. When the rehearsals started, it was so detailed! I am now very curious to see what we can create together, including myself, with mostly Japanese people.

Liu: I participated in Derashinera's *Knife* in Japan last year. This time it is a new work, different from that one, but there are similarities, such as the table. I am curious to see what will happen.

Sakiyama: I was really looking forward to working with Liu and Lee, as they are female dancers close to my age. Last year in *Knife*, Liu pulled out an unexpected variety of useful tricks for handling things impromptu, and Kajihara's free spirit was refreshing, stimulating my stiff head and making me think, "It's okay to be free!" That was fun. This time, Lee will join us and likely show us a new bag of tricks, and I am determined to reveal what I've got up my sleeve as well. If not, I will be left behind, and as there are many people here who do crazy stuff (laughs), I feel that we will be able to generate some great energy.

Kajihara: With *Knife*, it was exciting to have a mix of people from different cultures, and as it was a creation made in a short period, there was a sense of excitement. This time, we are using some of the same props again but in different ways, with some of the same members but also some new ones……So while there has been a bit of switching around over time, I was looking forward to beginning another journey and going to an unknown world. This is my fourth creation with Onodera, and his work is always very detailed and precise, which feels very stimulating deep down. As I always work freely, I find it difficult and interesting to fit things into a proper form. In addition, I am also inspired by the activities of Derashinera, who are constantly searching for a different way of seeing things while maintaining their own style of expression, which is somewhere between theater and dance. I feel very blessed to be able to challenge myself and work with these young dancers.

Fujita: It may not be the case that I have created with so many people in Japan, but when I create with people from overseas, I can question what I think is normal and see that it may not be so. There are many things that I can learn from Lee and Liu, who come from overseas, and from Kajihara, who works outside Japan, that I cannot notice being in a small company, so I am looking forward to seeing how this will become part of the work.

— Ms. Lee, Ms. Liu, and Mr. Kajihara, what did you do during your quarantine period at the hotel?

Lee: Onodera had given me an assignment to see what I could do with wrapping film, so I went through a lot of trial and error with that in my hotel room. I memorized ideas and e-mailed them to Onodera and the group. I am still working on it in the rehearsal studio. I am going to use it in a solo scene.

Liu: During the quarantine period, I spent the first two days reading and rereading the plot. I had a hard time translating it into Chinese. After that, I juggled, did exercises in bed, and improvised moves. The last four days

I watched the videos they sent me and memorized and thought about my solo moves. My solo was supposed to be in the character of an office worker, and she was supposed move in a way between an animal and a human. I was given a video of what it might look like, and asked to think about how I wanted it to look.

Kajihara: I was rereading *Animal Farm*, which is the motif of the piece. I knew that my schedule would allow me to participate in the rehearsals right after they started, so I was trying to conserve my strength by doing yoga, Pilates, and other workouts, and sometimes improvisation (laughs).

— I think that a lot of things are different from the norm due to COVID-19. How is that affecting you?

Fujita: We were miraculously able to perform *Knife* despite the high probability of cancellation due to COVID-19 (the November shows were canceled due to a performer testing positive, and were held in early December). I feel fortunate that we were able to get together this time, as it feels miraculous again.

Sakiyama: I have become quite accustomed to rehearsing under COVID-19 [restrictions], but in terms of creating a piece with performers from overseas with no time to spare due to their quarantine period, I think that last year's experience has helped in preparing, with things written in English so they are ready to be explained right away. We are more prepared this time than last time. For example, we have devised a way to communicate more clearly by naming things, such as "prologue," and speaking in English.

Kajihara: I really get the impression that things are very well prepared. I am relieved that they have made the preparations so carefully. It must have been difficult for you two (foreigners) to prepare so many documents, wasn't it?

Lee: Yes, it was. But that's okay (laughs). I don't feel any problems in terms of COVID-19 measures either. I am just thankful to be here because the infection situation has been quite bad in Malaysia for the past few months, and there have been no events at all.

Liu: COVID-19 has made it difficult for me to go abroad for the past two years, so I am happy and grateful for the rare experience I am having by participating in this project. As Taiwan is quite safe, with few infected people, my parents were worried about the situation in Japan. But I decided that I would go, unless Japan banned entry, in which case I would have no choice. After all, working with Derashinera is so much fun. Every minute and every second are a great experience for me as a performer, and I am very happy. I feel that this is something I cannot experience in Taiwan.

— What is your impression of Onodera's direction?

Lee: Onodera's direction is very thoughtful about how the audience sees the performance. It is also impressive that he asks Momoko and others to look and try to capture things objectively. For me, it is interesting to learn how carefully he thinks about how the audience sees the piece, and it is fun to try different things here, to have Onodera explain the effects of the movements, and to try to change the way the audience sees the work.

Liu: Onodera just has a free imagination. He is full of possibilities. In rehearsing with him, I can try many different things for what I can do.

Dance, movement, action, acting, mime……all are included and all are put together. This also frees up my own imagination.

Kajihara: He is energetic. I am attracted by his passion, and we become passionate together. But sometimes he goes too fast, so I call him “TGV” [the French high-speed train] (laughs). What Onodera emphasizes is movement, situations, and people. What people are, how interesting people are……these [ideas] are interspersed throughout the process, and it is interesting and difficult to explore them through trial and error. But he has a clear vision, so I trust him and follow him. The collaborators who usually work with Onodera are just what you would expect, and for his part Onodera is supported by all of them. I feel that this is a group work. I am very happy to be able to join in as a guest from time to time. I live in France and work with people from France and other European countries, and their way of doing things really varies from person to person. So, it is fun to start with a blank canvas and experience, “Oh, this time it is this kind of color, this kind of painting.”

Sakiyama: I always work with Onodera. He has several patterns [of direction], such as when he gives us a big theme, or when he has a clear idea of what he wants to show, or when he says, “Give me this kind of atmosphere.” I enjoy the feeling of making the finished piece through a process of being asked, “How should we do it?” and then everyone saying, “Let’s do it this way.”

Fujita: I feel like I’ve gone around in a circle and now I’m back to mime. As I started to reflect more on mime as I got older, I found that continuous dancing or movement or speaking of lines isn’t necessary; it is possible to make one’s presence felt in the pauses, the blank spaces of inactivity presented. So, it is a great opportunity for me to collaborate with people who can do that, who can make it “work” when I say, “Hey, I’m going to present you with this space.”

— What do you enjoy most in the rehearsal studio right now?

Sakiyama: I feel it’s an amazing thing to be able to communicate through movement despite the language barrier. I can just say something like, “Let’s do it like *whoosh!*” and when we give it try, to my surprise, the mood got across and people caught my drift. And when they add a bit of color to that, I think it is a very special thing.

Liu: Everything is interesting. Lots of languages are flying about, but sometimes, even without language, you can tell what is going on, what the problem is, by the atmosphere and by looking at each other.

Lee: I guess the fact that everyone is trying to find something better. For my part, I sometimes wish that I knew more of your language so we could share images more clearly.

Kajihara: When I first went to France, I couldn’t speak French at all, and I sometimes created things as the only Japanese with French flying all about. So, I understand Lee’s feeling of “if I could understand the language,” but there is also the strength of being connected through non-verbal communication such as dance and mime. Sometimes it is more important to use the sixth sense to understand than words, and I think that is what makes international projects like this so interesting.

Fujita: Indeed, every year I sincerely wish I could speak English better, but

there are moments when I can understand who people really are when I stand facing them in the rehearsal studio or on stage. I feel very happy at those moments when we understand each other in the absence of words.

4. Comment from Onodera Shuji

Onodera: After the rehearsals began, I became convinced that this casting was the right choice. Lee and Liu catch [what we’re trying to do] and give output. I’m not going to agree with all the communication in the rehearsal studio now, and I don’t think that I need not study language so that I can explain more details, but I feel that we can use the fact that something is missing as a possibility for new expression. This is because I am now aiming for mime that I think is beautiful for what it lacks, rather than mime that is perfect in form. I am focusing on the fact that just standing still can be attractive, or that various imagery is created from people meeting and forming relationships, and I feel that what is strong in such situations is a body that does not explain itself.

In fact, there is a big difference between what you can do when you understand everything and what you can pick up and produce by feel. For me, this is a chance to think about creation once more. When dealing with people who understand Japanese, I tend to ramble on and on, but in this project that is difficult. So, I try to say very simple words. The cast moves in response to that and then I say “fast,” “slow,” or “a different sense of speed,” and each person decides for herself based on her own sense. Then, I say “no” or “yes” to it. Whereas normally I would have things pretty set in my mind, this time I am doing things the other way around and asking for help because I am lacking in some areas, and I am getting more and more excited thanks to everyone’s input. So, it is a matter of whether or not I can correctly select from among what the ladies have felt and brought out. On top of that, there are days when an interpreter comes in, and while it’s not like revealing a secret or something, I think it can be interesting to later be like, “Oh, this is what that person was saying.” I regret that I am stressing everyone out, but I also enjoy the unexpected discoveries that come out of it.

5. Impressions

I had imagined that the creative process would make extensive use of tools such as Zoom, but I got the sense that the creative process had progressed at a rapid pace after the performers met in person. Although the time until the live shows is limited, the performers are all experienced, so after making their own preparations, they are able to give their best in the rehearsal studio.