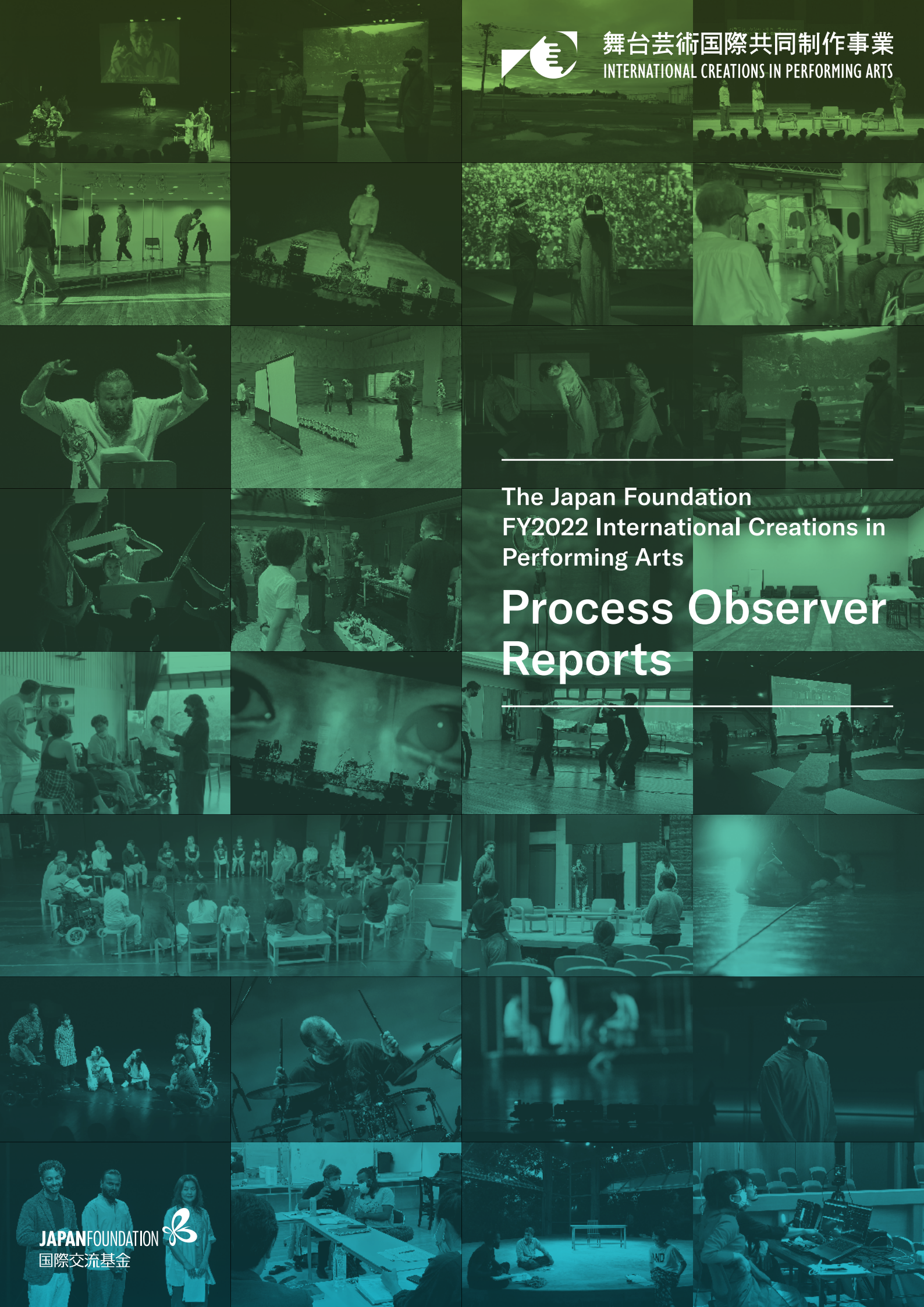




舞台芸術国際共同制作事業
INTERNATIONAL CREATIONS IN PERFORMING ARTS



The Japan Foundation
FY2022 International Creations in
Performing Arts

Process Observer Reports

JAPAN FOUNDATION
国際交流基金



Preface

The Japan Foundation's program to promote international creations in the performing arts has entered its second year. This year, five highly unique works were produced.

In addition to its aspect of seeking out new forms of expression through interaction between Japanese and overseas artists, the project also focuses on an observer system to record the processes from the early stages of production to the final performances through third-party perspectives and to make them more visible. Reports by the observers who tracked the creative process of each work have once again been compiled this year. Although the works are all productions for the "stage," they have completely different production processes leading up to their performances, a testament to the diversity of the performing arts. By shining a spotlight behind the scenes of international co-productions, which are also opportunities for international exchange, these reports are aimed at demonstrating the potential of exchange through the performing arts and, at the same time, contributing to the further development of international exchange projects between Japanese and overseas artists.

The Japan Foundation March 2023

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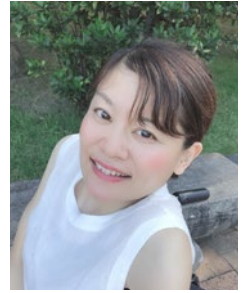
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LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and Jung Young Doo (Korea)

BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB)
“Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty”

MORITA Kazuyo

Dancer and actor. Born with a congenital disability. Her performances in Japan and abroad include the National Cultural Festival, the Niwa Gekidan Penino theater company, and the Asia-Pacific Festival of Artists with Disabilities. She appeared in the opening ceremony of the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games. In recent years, she has been involved in teaching workshops open to public participation, including those with disabilities, as well as choreographing and directing performances. She completed the master's program in the Department of Human Development at the Kobe University Graduate School of Human Development and Environment. She also has a regular column, “Kazuyo Morita's Creation Notes,” in *Co-coco*, a creation magazine that explores questions about welfare, and she was named a “Good Workista” in the Diversity category of the PERSOL Work-Style AWARD 2020.



Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and SAKAMOTO Ryuichi
“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)”

KWON Sanghae

Curator. Born in 1990 in South Korea. He completed a Ph.D. in Arts Studies and Curatorial Practices at the Graduate School of Global Arts, Tokyo University of the Arts. Focusing on curation, platform management, and writing that traverses contemporary art and the performing arts, he explores the collective nature of performance. He serves as joint representative of the performance art platform Stillive (stillive.org) and Japan correspondent for the Korean monthly publication *PUBLIC ART*. His major projects include *Awakening and Illusion: Dialogues with the Invisible* (Goethe-Institut Tokyo, 2022).



SHIGA Lieko, Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI (Hungary), and Richard PINHAS (France)
“Merzbow, Balázs Pándi, & Richard Pinhas with Lieko Shiga: ‘Bipolar’”

MORIYAMA Naoto

Theater critic. Born in 1968. From October 2001 to March 2022, he served as a professor in the Department of Performing Arts at Kyoto University of the Arts, a senior researcher at the university's Kyoto Performing Arts Center, and a member of the editorial board of the Center's journal, *Performing Arts*. From 2012 to 2019, he served as the chair of the executive committee of the Kyoto International Performing Arts Festival (Kyoto Experiment). He has written books including *Butai Geijutsu no Miryoku* (The Appeal of the Performing Arts) (cowriter; Foundation for the Promotion of the Open University of Japan). His main published papers include *Nihongo de “Utau Koto,” “Hanasu Koto”: Engekiteki-na “Koe” o Meguru Kosatsu* (“Singing” and “speaking” in Japanese: A study of the theatrical “voice”) (*Performing Arts*, Vol. 24).



WADA Nagara and Sankar VENKATESWARAN (India)

“Goodbye, and good wishes for your success — a response to *Annihilation of Caste* — a speech prepared by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at the invitation of Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore in 1936 but NOT DELIVERED owing to the withdrawal of the invitation because the organising committee found the contents of the speech unbearable.”

SHIBATA Takako

Associate Professor at the School of International Communication at Senshu University. Completed the doctoral program in the Graduate Course in Cultural Studies on Corporeal and Visual Representation at the Gakushuin University Graduate School of Humanities and earned her Ph.D. (Cultural Studies on Visual Representation) in 2013. After working as a part-time lecturer at Azabu University, Chuo University, and elsewhere, and as Assistant Professor at Gakushuin University Graduate School of Humanities, she assumed her current position. She is a member of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) Japan Center and, since 2021, has served as Editorial Representative of its journal, *Theatre Arts*. Her review of the VENKATESWARAN-directed *Water Station* was published in the online edition of *Theatre Arts*, and her own book, *Oskar Schlemmer: Bühnenkunst [Oskar Schlemmer—Bauhaus Performing Arts]* was published by Suiseisha in 2021.



Photo by EMORI Yasuyuki

Company Derashinera, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia), LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and Jung Young Doo (Korea)

“Hourglass”

SUZUKI Rieko

Editor and writer. After working in the Editorial Department of the theater magazine *Theater Guide*, she turned freelance in 2009 and now edits performing arts-related pamphlets and books, as well as working on her own writing. She is a founding member of the non-profit organization Arts Commons Tokyo, and lectures part-time in the Arts and Cultural Administration Course in the Faculty of Humanities of Seikei University. Her edited publications include “*Gendai Engeki*” no Resson (Lessons in Contemporary Theater) (Film Art, Inc.), and her papers include *Takarazuka-fu Myujikaru Gekidan no Orijinariti* (The Originality of Takarazuka-like Musical Theater Troupes) (in “*Chiiki Shimin Engeki*” no Genzai—*Geijutsu to Shakai no Atarashii Musubitsuki* (Local Community Theater Today—New Ties Between the Arts and Society)) (Shinwasha). She is also the supervising editor of the ACL Archive of Contemporary Theater Reviews and *Nihon no Engeki: Koen to Gekihyo Mokuroku 1980-nen–2018-nen* (Catalogue of Japanese Theater Performances and Drama Reviews, 1980–2018) (Nichigai Associates, Inc.)



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“Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty”

BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (US)

Collaboration between BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB) of New York, US. BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI (Artistic Director: NAKASHIMA Makoto) actively works to realize a society of coexistence, producing JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre where people with and without disabilities share the stage. TBTB (Artistic Director: Nicholas VISELLI) is a professional off-Broadway theater organization that features actors and writers with disabilities. They collaborated to create opportunities to explore and share with audiences the diverse ways of living, values, and the inner beauty of human beings beyond borders and disabilities.

This production consisted of *Ctrl L*, *A Difference of Beauty*, and *Epilogue*. “*Ctrl L*, a stage adaptation of an online work, featured a chaotic rehearsal of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. *A Difference of Beauty* was a new monologue play based on the writer’s interviews with each performer. *Epilogue* portrayed the love that connects humans. The production premiered at “BIRD Theatre Festival Tottori 15” in September 2022.



NAKASHIMA Makoto



Nicholas VISELLI

Outline of Performances

Schedule: September 24 (Sat.) and 25 (Sun.), 2022, 14:00

Duration: 1 hr. 25 min.

Venue: BIRD Theatre

Credits

A Difference of Beauty by Tatiana RIVERA

Ctrl L by Jeff TABNICK

Epilogue by Stuart GREEN

Co-direction: Nicholas VISELLI and NAKASHIMA Makoto

Translation: MASUKAWA Tomoko, Ayako IBARAKI (*Epilogue*)

Performed by:

(from JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre) ITANI Yuuta, ISHII Yuumi, MIYOSHI Mahirou, SHIMADA Hikaru;

(from TBTB) Ann Marie MORELLI, Bree KLAUSER, Scott BARTON, Stephen DRABICKI;

(from BIRD Theatre Company) SAITO Yoriaki

Stage Manager: MITSU Hisashi, Arthur ATKINSON

Lighting: Eric NIGHTENGALE, SAEGUSA Atsushi

Sound Coordinator: DAIKOKU Hironori (Ohara Kikaku)

Assistant Stage Manager: Gaia VISNAR

Subtitle Operation: YASUDA Maya

Handheld Subtitle Operation: SHIMADA Keiko

Interpretation: SAWADA Akiko, KITAOKA Tomoko

Production: arts knot (NISHIO Sachiko, MIYAUCHI Nao, SONODA Shoko), BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI

Organized by: BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI

Co-Organizer: The Japan Foundation

Co-Production: BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI, The Japan Foundation

Grant: OSAKA 21st Century Association, the Japan-United States Friendship Commission

This engagement is supported by Mid Atlantic Arts through USArtists International in partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and the Mellon Foundation.



BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (US) “Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty” First Report: Launch of Project MORITA Kazuyo

This production is an international collaborative project between BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI, a theater company based in Tottori that carries out creative activities together with people with disabilities through their project JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, and Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB), an off-Broadway theater company in the United States.

In Japan, with the promulgation and enforcement in June 2018 of the Act on the Promotion of Cultural and Artistic Activities by Persons with Disabilities, which I was involved in as a member of the expert panel, and the hosting of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, the idea that everyone, regardless of disability, has an equal right to enjoy arts and culture has been increasingly shared throughout society, with growing attention on creative activities involving people with diverse bodies and backgrounds.

First, let's look at the origin of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre. In 2014, BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI collaborated with people with various disabilities to create theater productions for the 14th National Arts and Culture Festival for Persons with Disabilities held in Tottori Prefecture. They staged CHEKHOV's *Three Sisters*, which led to the birth of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre as a project produced by BIRD Theatre Company. It is quite rare and valuable for a project like this to come out of the National Arts and Culture Festival for Persons with Disabilities, which is a national initiative, and remain ongoing.

At the time of this performance, I interviewed the director, NAKASHIMA Makoto, who is also the artistic director of BIRD Theatre Company, about the purpose of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre. Nakashima points out that people with disabilities are often first noticed for their disabilities or limitations, and it is less common for others to recognize their humanity beyond those challenges. This is especially true in culture and the arts, where the presence of a disability can often be overemphasized in the evaluation of a person's creative work. Simply because someone has a disability, their abilities tend to be underestimated.

The goal of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre is to create a space for people with disabilities to perform. While people with disabilities may be provided with the bare minimum environment for survival within the framework of social welfare, it is not necessarily a “free” (the meaning of JIYU) environment for them. Nakashima wants both participants and audience members to feel a sense of “freedom,” which is one of the most important aspects of being human, through the medium of theater.

Nakashima also notes that for humans, freedom of choice only becomes meaningful when there is freedom in both objects and actions, and this reflects the fundamental difference in the purpose of welfare and artistic activities.

Relationship with TBTB

TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre (BIRD Theatre Company) have been nurturing a relationship since 2014. Nakashima says that he chose TBTB because, “At that time, I could hardly find any theater groups in

Japan involving people with disabilities, so I searched on the web and found TBTB.” Approaches to disability differ between countries, and TBTB creates conversation plays that make disability a theme, sometimes using humor. These plays have been well-received by general audiences. JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre has also staged performances with actors in wheelchairs playing Shakespearean characters, which I presume was influenced by TBTB. This goes beyond the framework of disability, inspiring new possibilities in acting.

TBTB was invited to perform at the BIRD Theatre Festival TOTTORI in 2014, 2017, and 2018. In 2014, they performed a collection of short plays; in 2017, *The Other Plays: Theater + Dance = Inclusion*; and in 2018, *The Fourth Wall*. Since 2014, JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre's activities have mainly revolved around annual performances at the BIRD Theatre Festival. Inviting TBTB to the festival initiated the exchange between the two groups.

Originally, a joint production was planned for 2020 in the lead-up to the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, but it was postponed due to the spread of COVID-19. In 2021, amid the pandemic, they produced two video works using Zoom: *CTRL L*, based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *THE CASTING PARTY*.



From the online work *CTRL L*



From the online work *THE CASTING PARTY*

About the Production

For the new production of *A Difference of Beauty*, written by TBTB's Tatiana RIVERA, the playwright asked American and Japanese actors the following two questions and built the script around their answers:

“What do you think is beautiful?”

“When I say you are beautiful, what do you think?”

Additionally, she asked in detail, “Why do you think that is beautiful?” and “Which aspects do you find beautiful?” The second question in particular seemed to puzzle the actors, so she conducted detailed interviews about “what they think is beautiful” and asked again, “I still think you're beautiful. What do you think about that?”

Nakashima commented, “Tatiana is a Mexican-American and a minority living in the United States with a strong sense of fairness. What's interesting is that instead of preaching about it, she has sublimated it into literature in her text.”

As a dancer and actor with a disability myself, I can say that people with disabilities in particular tend to have difficulty finding beauty in their own bodies. Documentary theater techniques like this are sometimes used in creating theater with diverse cultures and people, and they are effective in bringing out the depths of the actors.

Nakashima points out that the word “beautiful” holds many meanings. While “beautiful” is subjective, at times the definition of beauty has been used as a mainstream value along with political power. He argues that it is meaningful to turn the table and create a work that questions “what is considered beautiful” from a universal viewpoint, not only the perspective of disability.

The performance of *CTRL L* in this production is an actual staging of a piece that was created remotely in 2021.

(Interview conducted on August 9, 2022)

* Reference materials

CTRL L, a Japan-U.S. co-produced video by JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6gP...ICE2w>

THE CASTING PARTY

A Japan-U.S. co-produced video by JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dADg6JgBfk>



“BIRD Theatre Festival TOTTORI 15” poster

BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and
Theater Breaking Through Barriers (US)
“Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty”
Second Report: Rehearsals
MORITA Kazuyo

This report looks at the creative process of Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB) during their visit to Japan. The creation for the performance took place in two parts: the first part from September 7th to 12th, and the second part from the 20th to the 23rd, with TBTB’s performance of *BRECHT ON BRECHT*, a musical theater piece about the German playwright Bertolt BRECHT, at the 15th BIRD Theatre Festival TOTTORI in-between.

Rehearsals focused especially on the new work, *A Difference of Beauty*. The cast was divided into two groups. In the first part, two female actors from TBTB and two male actors from JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre (Ann Marie MORELLI, Bree KLAUSER, ITANI Yuuta, and MIYOSHI Mahirou) performed, while in the second part, two male actors from TBTB and two female actors from JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre (Scott BARTON, Stephen DRABICKI, SHIMADA Hikaru, and ISHII Yuumi) took the stage.

The script is a mixture of Japanese and English, and it was anticipated that memorizing the lines would be challenging, so remote read-throughs were conducted before the actual face-to-face rehearsals. In addition to textual information, actors from TBTB and the BIRD Theatre Company also recorded lines, and the audio was shared with the JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors for practice. Two separate self-practice sessions were also held for the JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors.

COVID-19 Measures

Upon arrival, antigen tests were administered to everyone. JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre has a member with underlying health conditions, so COVID-19 prevention measures were taken very seriously, such as separating toilets. TBTB has a hard-of-hearing actor, for whom lip-reading is crucial, so transparent masks were used.

Rehearsal Content

First day of rehearsals (September 7, 2022)

TBTB members, who were scheduled to arrive in Tottori on the 6th, were held up at Haneda Airport due to confusion with immigration procedures and traveled to Tottori the morning of the 7th. All actors and staff



First day of rehearsals



Rehearsals

introduced themselves, and the first-half team for *A Difference of Beauty* did a read-through. Most actors had their scripts in hand. Since English and Japanese lines alternate, there was some confusion among all the actors, as they had trouble recognizing the end of their partner’s lines and understanding where they were in the script. The same issue was faced by the second-half group and continued to be a challenge until the end.

A Difference of Beauty was rehearsed separately under the direction of NAKASHIMA Makoto, director of JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, and Nicholas VISELLI, director of TBTB.

In *A Difference of Beauty*, the four actors’ lines are intertwined, but each actor’s lines are essentially monologues. Viselli praised each actor for their unique physical energy and asked each one to maintain that energy from beginning to end. While the four characters exist independently, he also asked them to interact occasionally and exhibit unhindered freedom, as if in unison.

Based on this, Nakashima’s method was to have each actor deliver their entire monologue in the middle of the rehearsal. With his guidance, each actor was able to experience the emotional changes of their character and more clearly define their personality.

In the latter half of the rehearsals, Nakashima used harsh words at times to instruct actors who struggled to express emotions. As he had spoken about JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, I strongly felt that he did not judge them solely based on their age or disabilities, but instead focused on their abilities as actors equally. I believe Nakashima's approach of questioning the "quality as an actor" suggests the direction that actors with disabilities should aim for in the future.

Helping Each Other Within the Group

One notable aspect of this collaboration is that both TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre have been active in theater for many years. JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre consists of actors with and without disabilities, including actors who also perform with BIRD Theatre Company. With years of accumulated experience, members naturally helped each other.

I would like to share an episode that occurred during the creation process. Itani Yuuta, an actor with JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, has cerebral palsy and a mild speech impairment. He uses an electric wheelchair in daily life and on stage. During a rehearsal, YASUDA Maya, an actor from the BIRD Theatre Company who is also involved with JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, suggested that he try lowering his feet from the wheelchair. He usually rests his feet on the wheelchair's footrest, but Yasuda thought that Itani's articulation would improve if he lowered his feet to the ground and pushed against it. I was impressed with this advice, as it could only come from someone who has worked with the other person for many years, knows his or her physical condition, and is able to step into the other person's territory. When moving on stage, Itani has to place his feet on the footrest. Moreover, the timing and coordination of such movements are essential. I often saw Yasuda giving advice on these things as well.

In this production, several actors with intellectual and mental disabilities are part of the JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre cast. As rehearsals progressed, the actors were asked to move while engaging in conversation, away from the script. There were detailed directions, such as "place a hand on the shoulder and make eye contact," but some JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors seemed unfamiliar with receiving such detailed instructions, taking time to understand and occasionally appearing confused. This is likely inevitable. Some actors even said they felt "confused." In such cases, it left a lasting impression to see their fellow actors who had worked together with them offer a helping hand.

**BIRD Theatre Company TOTTORI and
Theater Breaking Through Barriers (US)
“Ctrl L / A Difference of Beauty”
Third Report: Performances and Summary
MORITA Kazuyo**

This time, I would like to report on the presentation of results and summarize the entire project.

The performances took place on September 24 and 25, 2022. The order was *A Difference of Beauty 1*, *Ctrl L*, *A Difference of Beauty 2*, and *Epilogue*. As *A Difference of Beauty 1 and 2* are conversation plays with connected monologues, the insertion between them of *Ctrl L*, which has comedic elements, kept the tempo progressing at a good pace and captured the audience's attention.

Epilogue featured all eight performers from *A Difference of Beauty* expressing their own emotional changes. The focus shifted away from individual episodes that had dominated until then, creating a circle of unity like a warm breeze. The eight actors looked at each other and seemed to connect heart to heart beyond words, illustrating the strong message embodied in the entire production.

Ctrl L was a piece originally created online and now performed on stage. It depicted discrepancies in love that occurred during rehearsals as American and Japanese actors attempted to perform SHAKESPEARE's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Lighting was used to divide the stage into left (America) and right (Japan), with the producer character (played by SAITO Yoriaki) at the center, traversing both worlds freely. As it was originally produced using Zoom, the producer's face was projected onto the background through a camera, emphasizing the online nature of the piece. The content humorously portrayed interactions between the two countries, with the intermediary Saito's facial expressions and movements being particularly comical and eliciting laughter from the audience. At one point, actors not appearing in *Ctrl L* played musical instruments as sound effects, creating a sense of unity as a single group that transcended the program.

Now, I would like to provide a more detailed description of the performance of the new work, *A Difference of Beauty*.

A Difference of Beauty begins with eight actors on stage being asked the questions “What do you think is beautiful?” and “When I say you are beautiful, what do you think?” Four actors then remain on stage, and *A Difference of Beauty 1* begins. In the background, Japanese translations of lines spoken by Theater Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB) actors and English translations of lines spoken by JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors are displayed as subtitles.

In *A Difference of Beauty*, the actors express their thoughts on being called “beautiful” and the confusion it causes. They explore what associations the word “beautiful” brings to mind, and through overlapping episodes, they share stories about their appearances, families, and past events. The four monologues stand alone, yet occasionally intersect in a mysterious way, creating a space where the emotional changes arising from the connection of their words are depicted. The script, created through interviews with the actors by the playwright, is sometimes spoken in poetic language. The words of the Japanese actors were translated and then expanded into lines by the American playwright. The episodes discussed here do not solely focus on aspects of disability; they also

include elements such as the acceptance of disability, including physical appearance, and the desire to be seen as a mature individual. Many universal issues were present, despite their different environments and communities.

The differences in language and living environments, as well as the fact that the TBTB actors had physical disabilities and the JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre actors had mental or intellectual disabilities, understandably made the performance of intersecting monologues extremely challenging for both countries' actors. Particularly in the final days of rehearsals, efforts focused on increasing the level of completion and substance of the performance. However, some actors struggled with the sudden changes and speed, and physical considerations forced the cancellation of the planned talk event “The Three-Year Trajectory of the Collaboration between TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre” on the opening day, to be replaced with a final rehearsal (the event took place on the second day).

I attended the first day's performance. There was one striking scene during the show. In *A Difference of Beauty 2*, actor ISHII Yuumi would stop talking, as if she had trouble remembering her lines. Silence filled the air, and tension spread through the audience. She repeatedly went back to her previous lines, searching for the words within herself, and finally continued speaking as if tying the found lines together. This happened two or three times during the performance I saw, and it was clear that she appeared confused. According to director NAKASHIMA Makoto, she has a cognitive disability due to a memory loss she suffered in middle school. I had seen this happen several times during rehearsals as well. While it's purely speculative on my part, perhaps she encounters situations like this in her daily life. I felt as though I had caught a glimpse of her everyday life by sharing this moment. There were also times when the other actors' bodies, too, not just Ishii's, clearly appeared to have gone beyond their roles.

Watching this scene made me question, “What abilities are required of actors?” As actors, it is ideal to speak lines smoothly and we tend to strive for strength and certainty. However, is that all there is? Of course, this is not to say that delivering lines haltingly is the correct approach, and I do not want to focus solely on disability. It is dangerous to become trapped by disability traits. The individuals on stage exist as actors, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. However, I was greatly moved by Ishii's performance, as if it had given me a new standard of value for “acting” from the way she sincerely confronted her physical and mental situation on stage. There might be a kind of richness that we miss if judgments are based solely on normative values.

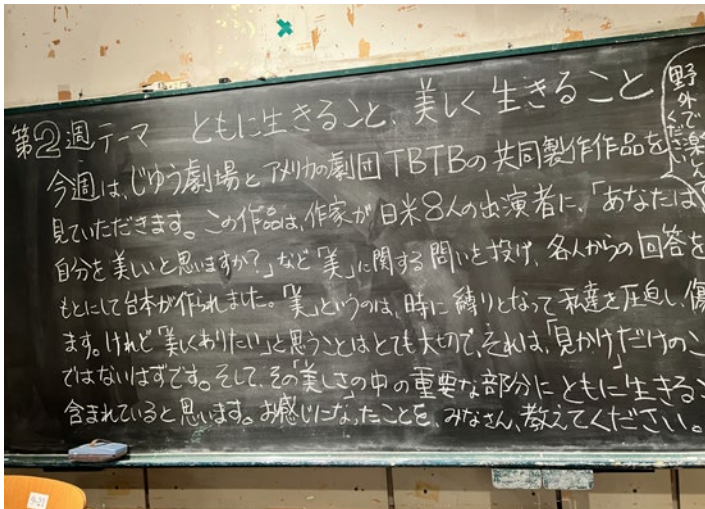
This collaborative performance also gave me food for thought about the possibilities of theater. In a chat during rehearsals, I was a bit struck when Nicholas VISELLI, the director of TBTB, said, “What's the problem with an actor in a wheelchair playing Macbeth?” Although both TBTB and JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre have staged Shakespeare several times in the past, theater companies that embark on such adventures are few and far between, especially in Japan. What Viselli might have been referring to, I believe, is the potential of theater. Theater is not about reproducing reality as it is. Through direction, actors' imaginations, and modes of expression, realistic characters can be created regardless of physical characteristics. For example, the presence of a wheelchair can make a situation more realistically depicted and allow the audience's imagination to be expanded. It's not just about “whether in a wheelchair or not” or

limiting and pitiable phrases like “despite having a disability,” but daring to engage with the wheelchair as a positive element, creating an entirely new kind of expression.

Unfortunately, there are not many performances in Japan that take this perspective and put it into practice. As an audience member, the experience of seeing actors in wheelchairs performing on stage is still rare. One reason for this is the lack of attention to the development of diverse actors, including those with disabilities.

In Japan, the distinction of the profession of an actor is ambiguous, regardless of whether or not one has a disability. According to Viselli, there is also ambiguity in the United States, but one guideline is whether or not an actor can join an actors’ union. Although the hurdle is high, once registered, actors can obtain work with a guaranteed fee. Furthermore, at TBTB, training opportunities are provided to nurture and evaluate aspiring actors with little experience. In addition to actors, there is also a movement to create opportunities, specifically for people with disabilities, for nurturing playwrights and directors. As an actor with a disability myself, I cannot help but hope that the theatrical activities of diverse people, including those with disabilities, will become more vibrant in Japan.

During their stay, TBTB released several videos on social media as vlogs (video blogs). In these videos, actors from both JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB were seen interacting through music. Although the language barrier was present during this collaborative performance, the actors were able to bridge the gap, both in what they could and could



not express through words, by playing musical instruments, singing, and spending time rehearsing together.

ITANI Yuuta, an actor at JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre, said after the performance, “I felt connected in a way beyond language. Through this project, I learned experientially the importance of the power to sense what the other person is trying to say, including non-verbal aspects, and the communication born from actual interaction.” There are lines in “Epilogue” that embody the whole project:

No matter how different we appear, underneath it all, whether we think it…
 Feel it.
 Sense it.
 Know it.
 We’re all the same.
 Human beings with the same wants and needs.
 Needs that play out differently through the architecture of our bodies.
 Transcending Language, Thought and Culture.
 We all desire to love…
 (Omitted)
 We all recognize in others that which we have in ourselves.
 Whether it’s understood by words.
 Whether it’s experienceable through music.
 Whether it’s noticeable in the body.
 Whether it’s felt through the soul.
 No matter how different we are… We are all connected by Love.

The performance concludes with these words.

This collaborative performance was made possible through the steady exchange between JIYU Gekijo-Freedom Theatre and TBTB since 2014. Amid pandemic travel restrictions, last year’s online creative work led to the creation of *Ctrl L*. Furthermore, a play like *A Difference of Beauty*, where actors reveal their inner selves, could not have been created without mutual trust. The decision to create and perform this work is commendable. It is the fruit that came from the two theater companies overcoming challenges by connecting with love while accepting differences in nationality, language, and bodies. There are still very few examples of such international initiatives, especially by theater companies that include people with disabilities. I look forward to further efforts in this direction.

“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)”

Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and
SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

In this international coproduction, Thai film director Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL, who continues to update the history of cinema with numerous masterpieces, collaborated with leading Japanese composer SAKAMOTO Ryuichi and a team of creators led by TANIGUCHI Katsuya, one of Japan’s most skilled VR production engineers, to create his first interactive performance using VR technology. Featuring communion with unseen spiritual beings, sick and sleeping bodies, and a sense of time suspended in a circle, Apichatpong’s cinematic world almost seems to have anticipated the post-pandemic era. With that world boldly expanded by VR technology, he sought to achieve ritualistic performances in which previously inaccessible physical sensations are created and collectively experienced. The world premiere performance took place at the international art festival “Aichi Triennale 2022” in October 2022.

Outline of Performances

日時: Schedule: October 4 (Tues.), to October 9 (Sun.), 2022

1:00 p.m., 1:30 p.m., 2:00 p.m., 2:30 p.m., 3:00 p.m., 5:00 p.m., 5:30 p.m., 6:00 p.m.,
6:30 p.m., and 7:00 p.m.

October 10 (Mon. public holiday)

1:00 p.m., 1:30 p.m., 2:00 p.m., 2:30 p.m., 3:00 p.m., 5:00 p.m., 5:30 p.m., and 6:00 p.m.

Duration: 60 min.

Venue: Large Rehearsal Room, Aichi Prefectural Art Theater

Credits

Concept & Direction: Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL

Creative Assistant: Sompot CHIDGASORN PONGSE

Cast: Jenjira Pongpas WIDNER, Sakda Kaewbuadee VAYSSE,
Chai BHATANA, Sam MITCHELL, and Sita KIATNERAMIT

Music: SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

Sound Designers: Akritchalerm KALAYANAMITR and SHIMIZU Koichi

Director of Photography: Chatchai SUBAN

Camera Assistant and Production: Thanayos ROOPKHAJORN

Set Director: Natchanon PRIBWAI

Film Production Crew: Jirayu RATTANAKHANAHUTANON,
Pongsakorn NANTA, and Suttipong NANTA

Film Production Manager: Phatsamon KAMNERTSIRI

Film Production Assistant: Somporn RUENSAI

Film Production by Kick the Machine Films

VR Creator: TANIGUCHI Katsuya

VR Production: YAMAGUCHI Taisei, KIDO Hideyuki,
THIANTANUKIJ Nuttanit, KONDO Kana, YOSHIZAWA Satomi,
SATO Hisashi, IKEDA Yoshinori, and TAKATORI Hikaru

VR Adviser: NOMURA Tsuyoshi

Thai Translation: FUKUTOMI Sho

Technical Manager: OZAKI So

Stage Manager: OIKAWA Sato

Lighting Designer: YOSHIDA Kazuya

Sound Engineer: DOI Shinjiro

Video Documentation & Photography: SATO Shun

Producer/Curator: SOMA Chiaki (Aichi Triennale 2022)

Production Manager: SHIMIZU Tsubasa (Aichi Triennale 2022)

Production Coordinator: SHIBATA Haruka (Aichi Triennale 2022)

Operation Staff: HASHIBA Miran and HANZAWA Nanami

Organized by: Arts Commons Tokyo and Aichi Triennale Organizing
Committee

Co-Organizer: The Japan Foundation and Aichi Prefectural Art Theater

Co-Production: Arts Commons Tokyo, Aichi Triennale Organizing
Committee, The Japan Foundation, and Theater der Welt 2023

Special Support: Shane AKEROYD

Support: RHINO STUDIOS INC., Goethe-Institut Tokyo, SCAI THE
BATHHOUSE, and Museo Larco

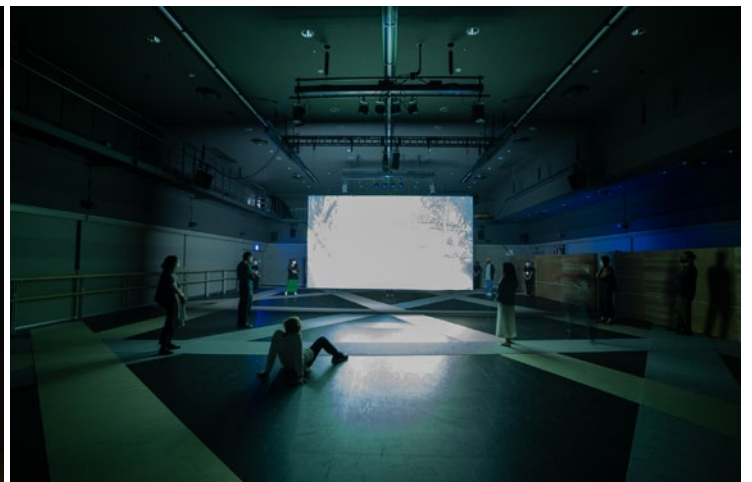
Equipment Support: Psychic VR Lab Co., Ltd.



Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL
Courtesy of Apichatpong Weerasethakul
Photo by Supatra Srithongkum and Sutiwat
Kumpai



SAKAMOTO Ryuichi
Photo by zakkubalan ©2020 Kab Inc.



A Conversation with the Sun (VR) (Aichi Triennale 2022, performance photo)
Photo: Shun Sato

Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and
SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)” First Report: Background to the Coproduction and Observation of Rehearsals

KWON Sanghae

Background to the Coproduction

A Conversation with the Sun (VR) by film director Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (1970–) is a coproduction with Arts Commons Tokyo.¹ According to Weerasethakul, the title means coming into contact with the source of all life and art while observing and walking through the world illuminated by the light of the Sun. The work will show viewers footage and landscapes realized using virtual reality (VR) technology from all angles while they listen to ambient sounds recorded by Weerasethakul in Chiang Mai, Thailand, and the Peruvian Amazon, as well as music composed by SAKAMOTO Ryuichi in response. Weerasethakul will use the “(virtual) conversation with the Sun” that emerges through contact with these dreamlike scenes as a starting point to expand the future of landscapes, humanity, and technology that he has continually explored.

The coproduction began with Arts Commons Tokyo representative director and art producer SOMA Chiaki commissioning a new VR performance from Weerasethakul. According to Soma, around June 2021, she asked him to create a VR work and submit it to the international art festival “Aichi Triennale 2022.” This was because she felt that a VR work not only would be highly feasible despite the COVID-19 pandemic but also had the potential to redefine human perception. When Weerasethakul first received the commission, he was worried about his lack of knowledge and creative experience with VR.² However, he decided to join the project after seeing some of the past VR works that Soma had curated. Next, in October of that year, a meeting was held with the VR technical team, and the decision was made to collaborate with Sakamoto. Weerasethakul, who took a deep interest in Sakamoto’s music, was the one who proposed the collaboration to the production team. In March 2022, Weerasethakul visited Aichi Prefectural Art Theater with TANIGUCHI Katsuya from Rhino Studios, which specializes in creating VR works and games, and VR adviser NOMURA Tsuyoshi.³ There, they fleshed out the image of the work, and in June of that year, Weerasethakul recorded ambient sounds of the Amazon while staying in Peru. At the rehearsals in August that I attended as an Observer, I was able to watch elements created in separate locations be assembled and set up as a performance space.

Rehearsals

Schedule: August 23–26, 2022 (I joined only on August 23 and 24.)

Location: Large Rehearsal Room, Aichi Prefectural Art Theater

A Conversation with the Sun (VR) is divided into two parts, each 30 minutes long. Viewers watch a movie on a screen in the first part and then view VR footage in the same space in the second part.⁴ Both parts can be viewed while moving through that space. This composite structure mutually expands the real and virtual worlds by way of “sleep,” “dreams,” and “the Sun,” themes that Weerasethakul has long taken interest in.

VR is technology that simulates the experience of being in artificial

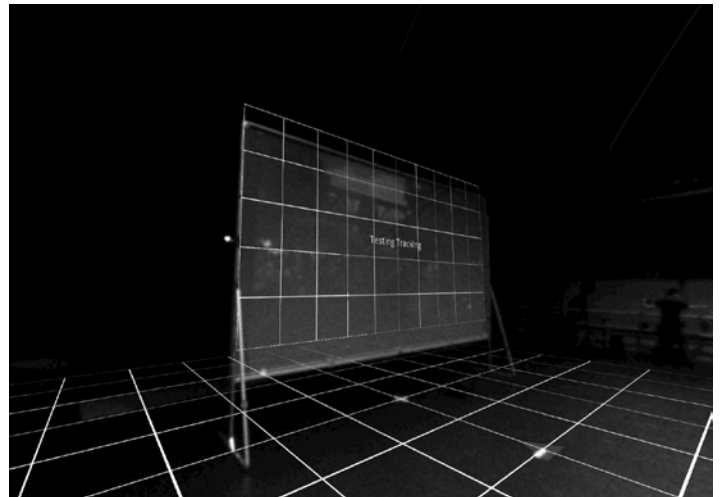


Figure 1: The tracking test screen (Credit: Arts Commons Tokyo)



Figure 2: Staff conducting the tracking test (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)

environments created on a computer, as if transcending time and space. In ordinary VR works, the viewer can no longer see the real-world space after putting on the VR head-mounted display (HMD). A key concept in *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* is the creation of a sense that the actual and virtual spaces are connected by reproducing the same images that exist in the actual space (the Large Rehearsal Room), such as the movie on the screen and the patterns on the floor, in the 360-degree virtual space.⁵ To actually realize this kind of mechanism, a great deal of ingenuity is required on both the technical and operational sides, including not only installing the screen and projectors for the set and checking the lighting and sound, but also operating and controlling the HMDs, programming the VR, and fixing any glitches in the VR footage.

During the rehearsals on August 23 and 24, installation of the screen and projectors, a tracking test, and a VR footage test were conducted in that order. On August 23, a freestanding screen was assembled in the center of the Large Rehearsal Room, and two movie projectors were installed on either side of it. That afternoon, a tracking test was conducted to confirm that the cameras on the HMDs were correctly obtaining spatial position data. If tracking was not performed correctly, the VR plane would be tilted, making it difficult to view the footage. Therefore, it had to be checked for tilting while wearing a test HMD with a gridded screen (Fig. 1). If tilting was discovered, patterns called feature points would need to be added to the space or the movie projected on the screen changed to

one with less movement to make it easier for the HMD to obtain position data. As the movie was difficult to track, the production team proposed switching it to a different one (Fig. 2) but eventually remedied the problem by laying carpets in three colors on the floor in a random pattern (Fig. 3).

In the VR footage test, everyone viewed an about 30-minute demo video that Rhino Studios had created based on a storyboard drawn by Weerasethakul. Afterwards, Weerasethakul himself pointed out areas for improvement related to specific images in the footage, computer-generated effects, and the frame rate (Fig. 4). He asked the production team to revise elements such as the texture of a huge cloth that comes flying from afar, afterimages around the outlines of light and shadow, and the speed of walking figures. The VR production team led by Rhino Studios and Arts Commons Tokyo sought to enhance the quality of the finished work by proposing and implementing specific methods of improvement in response to Weerasethakul's feedback.



Figure 3: Carpets used to create feature points (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)

- 1 *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* is an extension of an installation by Weerasethakul with the same title (*A Conversation with the Sun*, exhibited from May 28 to July 10, 2022, at Bangkok CityCity Gallery), in which he reconfigured fragments of footage that he had previously shot using AI technology.
- 2 While this was Weerasethakul's first time working on a VR project, he had already expressed interest in doing so around 2017. SASAKI Atsushi, "APICHATPONG WEERASETHAKUL—Fever Room," The Japan Foundation website, July 5, 2017 (last viewed September 13, 2022) <https://asiawa.jpf.go.jp/en/culture/features/f-ah-tpam-apichatpong-weerasethakul/>
- 3 Rhino Studios led by VR creator Taniguchi Katsuya is a company involved in a wide range of cultural and artistic VR productions, spanning the performing arts, visual art, music, and games.
- 4 In this report, "movie" refers to the film projected on both sides of the screen and "footage" to the images viewed in VR.
- 5 In the early stages, the plan was for the project to combine augmented reality (AR) and VR technology in a work that would show see-through camera footage together with effects and animation, eventually turning into VR. However, due to the characteristics of the HMDs used, a see-through camera could not be implemented if there was too much contrast between the depictions of the Sun and shadows. Because of this technical issue, the project ended up only using VR.



Figure 4: Weerasethakul in a meeting (second from right) (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)

Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and
SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)”

Second Report: Observation of Rehearsals and Interviews

KWON Sanghae

Observation of Rehearsals

Schedule: 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., September 21, 2022

Location: 5th Gymnasium, Athletic Building B1,
National Olympics Memorial Youth Center

This report describes the rehearsal held at the National Olympics Memorial Youth Center on September 21, as well as interviews conducted thereafter.

The rehearsal mainly consisted of multiple VR footage tests, each with slightly different content (Fig. 1). Although the test venue differed significantly from the actual performance environment in terms of spatial area, the material and pattern of the flooring, and video and sound equipment, wearing an HMD made it possible to experience VR footage reproducing the actual performance space. The content of the footage had changed a great deal since August. For example, a scene in which the Sun rises from the ground and gives birth to multiple smaller suns, a scene in which fabric falls down from just above the screen, and scenes of a giant clay statue and a cave had been newly added. The feeling of encountering the lifelike presence of the clay statue that appears at the midpoint and that of slowly rotating inside the cave were physical experiences only feasible with VR, which would have been difficult to achieve in real life.

Thus, both the format and content of the coproduction continued to transform. What was the process through which this collaboration was being carried out? After the VR test, I interviewed Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL and VR creator TANIGUCHI Katsuya (Rhino Studios) ahead of the completion of the project.



Figure 1: Weerasethakul testing the VR (Photo: Kwon Sanghae)

Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul

—There were a lot of changes in the footage from last month’s version. Is this version basically the finished product?

Weerasethakul: Yes, it’s almost finished. But we haven’t tried it on the same screen as the actual performance yet, so I think that what you saw today will only be half of the full experience.

—I heard that this is your first time working on a VR project. Is there anything about this production that’s been different from previous ones?

Weerasethakul: Yes, it’s been completely different. The collaboration with various people and especially the production using computer technology was very different from filmmaking and full of new things for me. Normally, I make very simple drawings to convey what I want to do during production, but this time, I had to draw lots of storyboards (Fig. 2).

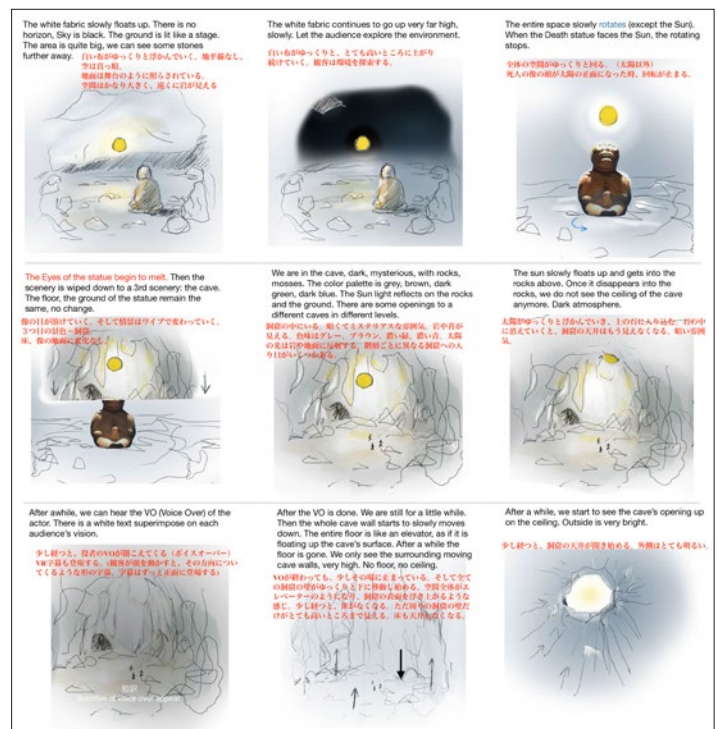


Figure 2: Weerasethakul’s storyboard (Credit: Arts Commons Tokyo)

—This international coproduction was carried out amid travel restrictions, and nearly the entire production process was completed remotely. That being said, I’m sure that on-site rehearsals are important to the overall process. What sorts of things can you only discover in an actual location?

Weerasethakul: Most of all, it’s being able to experience that space. This work has a mechanism whereby viewers can perceive each other within the VR as balls of light. By testing the VR in an actual space, you can actually experience this feature. You can also experience the moment when the installation with a movie projected on both sides of a screen switches to VR. Devising how these aspects are perceived by the audience is our current task.

—This project was created through collaboration among people working in various fields, such as Arts Commons Tokyo and Rhino Studios. Is there anything that has left a particular impression on you?

Weerasethakul: What's left the biggest impression on me is the process of creative collaboration among three groups specializing in film, VR, and the performing arts. With film, the director can guide the audience to look at something specific, but with VR, you can't control the audience's gaze. In that sense, I feel like VR has a more open aspect.

Interview with Taniguchi Katsuya

—How was it collaborating with Apichatpong?

Taniguchi: It was very interesting. There are ways in which our thinking is similar and also ways in which it's different, so we started by probing those. He works in film, and I work in VR. I found it fascinating how these are so similar and yet completely different. Even though we both work with images, which are something visible to the eye, it was interesting creating them together with totally different ways of thinking.

—I heard that Apichatpong visited Rhino Studios in Tokyo several times in September. What did you work on at those times?

Taniguchi: The process was always that Apichatpong would send me a kind of timeline, I'd create footage based on that for him to experience, and we'd discuss the footage (Fig. 3). Then, I'd remake it. Each time, the footage kept changing, as if the previous versions hadn't even existed.



Figure 3: Weerasethakul doing tests at Rhino Studios (Credit: Arts Commons Tokyo)

—What have you found the most rewarding in this collaboration with Apichatpong?

Taniguchi: Even though I've created various things in VR, Apichatpong will present ideas that had never occurred to me. When we create those together, there have been times when it revealed a world I'd never seen before, which was really amazing. It's been one thing like that after another. I'm glad to have been given the opportunity to contemplate things I normally wouldn't think about.

Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL (Thailand) and
SAKAMOTO Ryuichi

“A Conversation with the Sun (VR)”

Third Report: Performance

KWON Sanghae

Owing to his health condition, I was unable to interview one of the leaders of the international coproduction, composer SAKAMOTO Ryuichi. Before reporting on the performances, I would like to share the background to Apichatpong WEERASETHAKUL commissioning music from Sakamoto, along with an anecdote related to the production.

Weerasethakul proposed the collaboration to Sakamoto in October 2021, urging him to have fun with the production while resting. The two dined together in March 2022 and discussed Sakamoto’s health issues as well as books they had read recently.¹ In August of that year, Weerasethakul shared his image of the music he would like to commission with Sakamoto, along with a written explanation of the content and structure of the work, a storyboard, ambient sounds that he had recorded in the Amazon, and so on. He proposed details about the music, such as further explaining that it should be “Something between natural and man-made” “Something emotional” and drawing a timeline of the parts that would feature Sakamoto’s music (Fig. 1). Sakamoto’s music used in the performances was completed a month later, at the beginning of September.

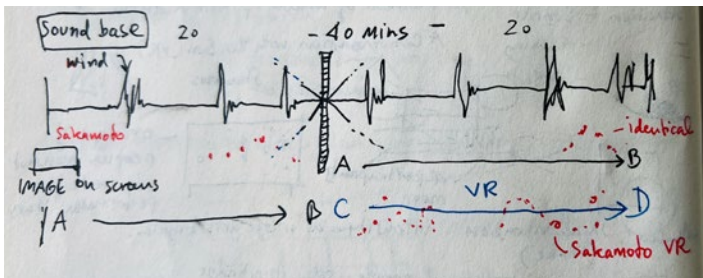


Figure 1: The music timeline that Weerasethakul sent to Sakamoto

Performances

On October 5, 2022, I traveled to Nagoya to attend one of the performances of *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* as well as a talk event featuring Weerasethakul. This final report describes the outcome of the international coproduction, challenges, and future prospects.

First, I will discuss the artistic attainment of the work while touching on its overall content and the experience of audiences. Before entering the venue, viewers receive explanations from staff on how to use the VR, precautions on bumping into other audience members or the set, and what to do if there is a problem during viewing. Upon entering the venue, a two-sided screen can be seen hanging from the center of the ceiling, along with people wearing HMDs surrounding it (Fig. 2).

The work is divided into two parts, each 30 minutes long. Because the 15 audience members in the first half continue to view the second half in the same space, there are always about 30 audience members in the venue, excluding the first and last timeslots. The movie projected onto the screen in the first half depicts segmented events such as sleeping people, scenes of a night market, structures with neon signs, a crowd gathered in a plaza, and bushes swaying in the wind. While viewing fragmented images of

evening progressing into night, audience members are transported to a time and space where the boundaries between dreams and reality and between the unconscious and cognition are blurred. The movie can be viewed while sitting in the chairs along the walls of the venue or while walking around the space. However, as the venue is scattered with people wearing HMDs, I had to move around to locations where the movie was more visible while watching it.

At the end of the first half, the audience members who were viewing the VR take off their HMDs and leave the venue. Then, the audience members from the first half view the VR (Fig. 3). After the HMD is put on, Weerasethakul’s movie is visible in the central frame with multiple small balls of light around it. Audience members can explore the space without bumping into others or the set by remaining aware of the positions of the balls of light and the frame. If they get too close to their surroundings, a gridded wall called the “guardian” appears and alerts them of the danger of contact.

While looking at the central frame, six or seven frames appear floating in the distance. They show footage of people sleeping indoors or outdoors and trees swaying in the wind. The floating frames disappear, and then the floor transforms into reddish-brown ground, and stones of various sizes slowly fall from the sky. As piano music composed by Sakamoto mixes with ambient jungle sounds, the surrounding scenery switches to a cave. Emotional music briefly brings back vaguely familiar memories and images. Then, a clay statue suddenly appears in a corner of the cave. As the Sun moves closer to the statue’s head, the statue’s eyes melt. The entire space slowly rotates counterclockwise, and the ceiling of the cave starts to open up. The footage ends with the Sun floating up toward the ceiling and dividing into countless balls of light.



Figure 2 (Top) / Figure 3 (Bottom): *A Conversation with the Sun (VR)* (Aichi Triennale 2022, performance photo)

Photo: Shun Sato

What is notable about the work is that audience members are not restricted to their seats or to a particular perspective. They can view the entire space, including the movie screen, from their desired position or while walking around wearing an HMD. This complex structure conforms with Weerasethakul's recent tendency to extend his experimentation with film through the two-dimensional medium of the screen into the three-dimensional time-space of the performing arts. The experience of moving between real and virtual (dream) spaces through the introduction of VR and the induction of movement in the audience are features that differentiate this work from his past ones.

Interviews

Within the production process, Weerasethakul regarded “audience movement” —audience members exploring the space according to their own lines of flow and sight—as an important component of the work and aimed to create a presentation space in which both people watching the movie and those experiencing the VR can move around. I will explain the significance of the audience movement and the process of realizing it with quotes from interviews I conducted with Weerasethakul and production coordinator SHIBATA Haruka (Arts Commons Tokyo).²

Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul

—Tell me about the composition of the work, in which seated audience members and those walking around are in the same space.

Weerasethakul: It's like I'm showing my vision for how we'll exchange ideas and emotions in the future. The first part is experienced while seated in a chair or walking around, and the second is experienced while moving around the installation in VR. By synchronizing these experiences, my aim is to activate memories through the movie—to make the experience of watching the movie not just a passive one. The work can inspire a physical experience in audience members, as if in a dream. As the technology is currently still in its infancy, you feel a sense of wearing the gear. But in the future, I suspect that it'll be possible to have very natural experiences, and immersing oneself in a fictional environment will become common.

Operational techniques are necessary to guide the movement of audience members, because any contact between viewers or with the set not only affects viewing, but also puts viewers in danger while in a vulnerable state. Production coordinator Shibata described the actual operational situation as follows.

Interview with Shibata Haruka

—It seems like the operational techniques of Arts Commons Tokyo for the performing arts were very important in realizing audience movement. How did the audience movement envisioned by Weerasethakul actually manifest itself?

Shibata: The audience members moved around a lot. There were situations that put a large burden on the operational side, so I think improvement might be necessary. When you have 30 people in the same space, some move around a lot, whereas others don't move at all. My impression is that audience movement varied by individual. Within the first audience, there were a lot of people who walked around quickly

even when using the VR, which was quite dangerous, so we made an announcement asking them to walk around slowly before they entered the venue and repeated that same message while they were wearing the HMDs. After that, they moved around more slowly.

Evaluation of Project and Future Prospects

As I have already mentioned, the VR used in the work is a medium that holds new potential for art appreciation but also has various technical limitations.

In artistic terms, the work has important implications in the sense that Weerasethakul's aim of an experiment with expanding the concept of a movie has taken on further potential through VR technology. Rather than simply showing audiences Weerasethakul's movie in VR, the work gives them an integrated experience of the disparate elements of a movie, VR footage, and music in a presentation space that emphasizes audience movement. It could be said that the artistic significance of the work is the viewing experience thus realized, an experience of seeming to traverse dreams and reality.

The VR technology that supports these artistic aspects currently has several limitations. Examples include the low image quality of the VR footage and the motion sickness produced by the scene of rotating inside the cave. These technical issues with VR in the present can be resolved by improvements to VR performance in the longer term. The act of production using new technology itself is surely not as important as accumulating expertise in production processes and operational frameworks to realize a richer experience for audiences.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Sakamoto Ryuichi, Rhino Studios, and Arts Commons Tokyo collaborated systematically while sharing an overall picture of the work and successfully established an operational framework on-site. In this sense, I believe that the international coproduction, comprising the remote production due to the Covid-19 pandemic and on-site rehearsals, will provide an excellent example for VR in future international coproductions.

What implications does the coproduction have for Weerasethakul himself, and how will it lead to future prospects? I would like to conclude by quoting some of his impressions of the VR production that he shared in an interview with producer SOMA Chiaki.³

- VR allows the viewer to simulate, which leads to a more expansive and dreamlike experience of the world. This becomes very important in navigating the audience through the space.
- VR effortlessly conveys rich sensations from every angle. It reflects humans' ability to see the world beyond our own viewpoint.

Through this VR production, Weerasethakul appears to have obtained a critical vantage point for exploring the audience's movement and lines of sight. However, at the same time, he maintains a cautious attitude toward “the fact that technology comes to the forefront and emotion is forgotten when talking about VR.” His proposal of the collaboration to Sakamoto was the result of him focusing on the underlying commonalities between Sakamoto's music, which mixes traditional instruments with futuristic sound production, and his own art blending film with other media.⁴ While expanding the range of human perception and expression through technology, he always seems to shine a light on the touches of humanity that spill out. I believe that it is Weerasethakul's inexhaustible

inquisitiveness and vigilance toward technology that will lead to a driving force for expanding humanity's imagination with regard to VR and art in the future.

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- 1 The books included *Freedom from the Known* by Indian-born writer Jiddu KRISHNAMURTI.
 - 2 In this production, Shibata was responsible for clerical work, interpreting for Weerasethakul, and production coordination.
 - 3 "Interview with Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Interviewer: Soma Chiaki)," *Apichatpong Weerasethakul "A Conversation with the Sun (VR)" Performance Pamphlet, 2022*, page 4
 - 4 *Ibid.*, page 5

PROJECT

“Merzbow, Balázs Pándi & Richard Pinhas with Lieko Shiga: ‘Bipolar’”

SHIGA Lieko, Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI (Hungary), and Richard PINHAS (France)

This visual concert marked the first attempt at collaboration between internationally renowned photographer SHIGA Lieko; Merzbow, a noise project by AKITA Masami; Balázs PÁNDI, a drummer who joined Akita on the musical album *Cuts*; and Richard PINHAS, who pioneered experimental rock in France from the 1970s onward. Improvisation and video blended together in the experimental work, with layered sounds born from improvisation by the three performers and new videos that Shiga has continually produced over the course of three years, which she edited in real time.

The work premiered at Kyoto Experiment (Kyoto International Performing Arts Festival) 2022 in October 2022.

Outline of Performances

Schedule: 7:00 p.m. on Saturday, October 8, and Sunday, October 9, 2022

Duration: approx. 60 min.

Venue: Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza

Credits

Performers: Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI, and Richard PINHAS

Video Creation and Live Editing: SHIGA Lieko

Video Shooting and Editing Technical Support: SATO Takahiro

Camera Assistants: OHKUBO Motoki, KURIHARA Yusuke, CHIBA Dai, NAGASAKI Yoshitomo, and FUKUDA Misato

Main Performers (Video): ARIMURA Maki, IWAMA Tomonori, KIKUCHI Soutaro, KUDO Natsumi, KURIHARA Yusuke, SAITO Harumichi, TAKAHASHI Manabu, NAKAMURA Yuki, and MORIYAMA Manami

Stage Manager: OTA Kazushi (Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts)

Sound: NISHIKAWA Bunsho, FUKAMI Hokuto, and KIRIHARA Madoka

Lighting: TAKADA Masayoshi (RYU)

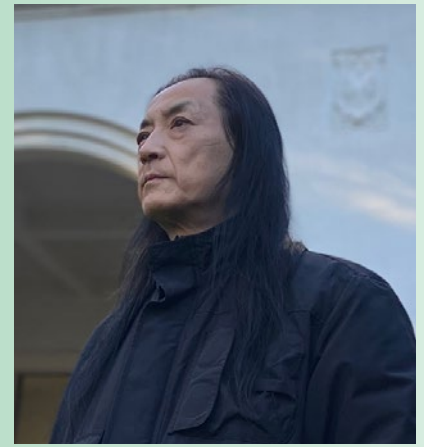
Technical Support: MORITA Ryo

Production Managers: GOTO Takanori and KAWAHARA Miho (Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts)

Organized by: Kyoto Experiment and Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts

Co-Organizer: The Japan Foundation

Co-Production: Kyoto Experiment, Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts, and The Japan Foundation



AKITA Masami Photo by Jien Akita



SHIGA Lieko



Balázs PÁNDI



Richard PINHAS Photo by Richard Dumas



Photographer: INOUE Yoshikazu
Credit: Kyoto Experiment

SHIGA Lieko, Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI (Hungary), and Richard PINHAS (France)

“Merzbow, Balázs Pándi & Richard Pinhas with Lieko Shiga: ‘Bipolar’” First Report: Launch of Project

MORIYAMA Naoto

This project was planned as part of the “Shows” program of Kyoto Experiment (Kyoto International Performing Arts Festival; “KEX”), and its character as an “international exchange project” is based on that premise. Not only the specific work by the participating artists but also the concept proposed as a launchpad on the planning side had important implications for the process as a whole.

Accordingly, my report will start by focusing on the above two aspects.

Aims of the Planners

On July 22, 2022, I conducted an online interview with KEX co-directors TSUKAHARA Yuya, KAWASAKI Yoko, and Juliet Reiko KNAPP.

- (1) The seeds of the project were born around the summer of 2019, when the three festival co-directors were confirmed as the successors to their predecessor HASHIMOTO Yusuke. Considering that past programming had included (1) performing arts and “music” and (2) presentation of historic artists, they apparently thought immediately of the combination of Merzbow and SHIGA Lieko.
- (2) Since meeting Shiga for the first time in 2010, Tsukahara had cultivated their relationship in various ways. Shiga had been devoted to ballet as a child and became familiar with avant-garde performing arts while studying in the UK. Her photographic works reveal an ability to involve others and an interest in physicality. The three co-directors discussed Tsukahara’s proposal and decided to bring her on board.
- (3) Merzbow had frequently collaborated with overseas musicians in the past. Although various overseas musicians were proposed as candidates for the project, changes had to be made due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the finalized members, Richard PINHAS was proposed by AKITA Masami himself. Upon further research, it was found that Pinhas had a very interesting background, having majored in philosophy in the 1970s and studied directly under Gilles DELEUZE and Jean-François LYOTARD. Balázs PÁNDI had already established a reputation as a musician, despite his young age.



Online interview with the KEX direction team

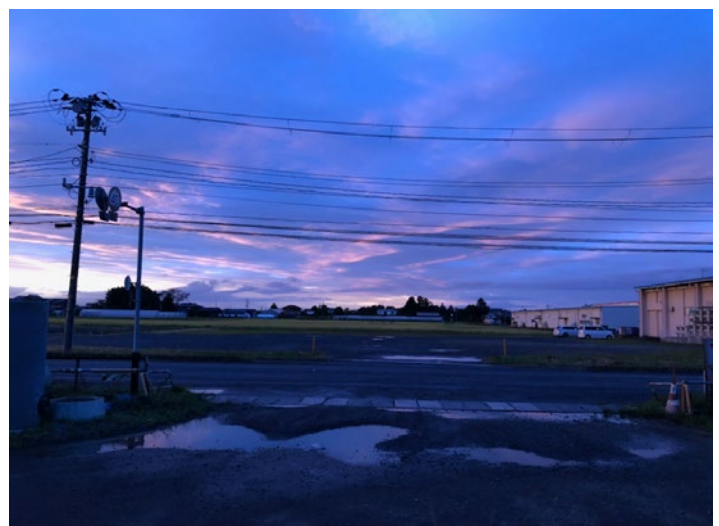


Inside Shiga’s studio (video work in progress was projected onto the white wall in front)

Work of the Artists

A defining feature of the project is the fact that all of the participating musicians are at their best when improvising. Thus, the international coproduction is not of the type in which all of the participants complete a single package over a long period. What should be shared in advance and how, and what should not be shared in order to produce the richest improvisation during the actual performances? As of July 22, a basic profile of Shiga and samples of her work had been sent to the musicians and received a good response, but the participants had (intentionally) not engaged in further interactions.

The format of a “visual concert” meant that Shiga’s video footage would be a key element of the jam sessions, so producing it preceded other tasks. To learn more, I visited Shiga’s studio in Miyagi Prefecture on September 20. Her studio is a large space that was formerly a pachinko parlor, allowing her to project video on almost the same scale as the screen to be used for the actual performances (22 by 7 meters). The video footage to be used in the actual performances was nearly complete. Shiga explained the structure, which consisted of 16 sequences (each one looped) with 11 layers along a single timeline, using a diagram. She said that she planned to improvise with this basic structure in response to the live music during the actual performances, like a DJ. I was fortunate to have the chance to see a roughly 50-minute video clip using the basic layers—



Scenery surrounding the studio

already shared with the musicians in data form on September 2—on the large screen. It was incredibly impressive.

Nearly all of Shiga's past photographic works have been still images. She said that when Tsukahara first approached her about the project, she felt it would be a good time to take on the new challenge of "video," as she had actually been continually working on various experiments with filming for three years. She described her photographic works as "images that hit you in one breath." Previously, she had focused on "how to receive the moment when the unexpected occurs or something crosses over," which she believed without fail to occur. Thus, whether in photo collections or exhibitions, a leap forward or gap between moments (breaths) exists between one photograph and another, which triggers the audience's imagination. However, with video, the time gap must be given concrete form. That was her challenge in this project. She felt that actively representing the "in-between" time (narrativity) that she had previously only expressed as invisible gaps would give her a unique opportunity to review the temporality of the 11 years that have passed since the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami, as well as her own photography. This is a somewhat rough summary of what she explained to me.

Like Tsukahara, Shiga said that she had "idolized" Merzbow since her teens. On the day of my visit, she was projecting videos while blasting Pinhas' music. She said she was "also imagining the entry of Balázs' drums" as she edited the video. In this large studio space that would have been impossible to maintain in a major Japanese city, as I immersed myself fully in the overwhelming footage with a gritty feel with which Shiga must have repeatedly experimented, I could sense that an "image" of the actual performances was steadily building up within her.



Full view of Shiga's studio

SHIGA Lieko, Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI (Hungary), and Richard PINHAS (France)

“Merzbow, Balázs Pándi & Richard Pinhas with Lieko Shiga: ‘Bipolar’” Second Report: Rehearsals at the Theater

MORIYAMA Naoto

Arrival of the Video Footage at the Theater

After the runup that I described in my first report, final checks prior to the actual performances were conducted on October 6 and 7 at the performance venue, Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza. I was able to attend both days, watching the work mainly from the audience seats.

Lighting staff began prep work on the morning of October 6. When I entered the theater after 4:00 p.m., a special video operating booth had already been installed in front of the entrance to the actors' waiting room in the lowest tier of seats, and SHIGA Lieko and SATO Takahiro (video shooting and editing technical support) were working in front of a monitor. The lighting prep finished around 4:50 p.m., and a run-through of just the video began at 5:00 p.m.

When the footage that I had seen at Shiga's studio in Miyagi was actually projected onto the screen to be used for the performances, the impact was overwhelming even in the vast space of Shunjuza. The footage began with breathtaking video of waves processed into red tones and projected across the entirety of the massive 22-meter-wide screen. This was followed by video of a number of people walking on top of a seawall, as if hurried along by something. On the other hand, I also noticed slight differences from what I had seen in Miyagi. Theatrical lighting that had not been present in Shiga's studio cut across the screen, and it seemed like the contrast of the video was somewhat weaker. Balancing video and lighting, two different kinds of “light,” has long been pointed out as difficult. However, it is even more important in this work because the success or failure of the “video” is so key.

The run-through finished in about an hour, followed by a meeting between theater staff including the stage manager and the video team. Shiga conveyed to the staff that she wanted to properly show footage of people walking at various speeds for the first 15 minutes. She also shared with them that the fades to white and black that occurred about

once each during the course of the hour would serve as major breaks in the progression of the footage. During this time, TSUKAHARA Yuya, representing the planning side, was constantly near the video operating booth engaging in detailed exchanges with Shiga.

Combining the Music and Video

The musicians finally joined the others at the theater on October 7. Their arrival was preceded by another run-through of just the video starting at 3:00 p.m. At first glance, the footage had a completely different feel from the previous day, which surprised me. Defining aspects such as the redness and blueness of the light, the gritty feel of the surface, and the depth of the pitch blackness in the background loomed with overwhelming clarity. The edges of the lighting for the musicians and footlights had been clearly isolated from the light of the video screen through close technical coordination, making the entire stage look very vibrant. When I checked with Shiga after the run-through, she said that she “had tried varying the brightness in different ways during yesterday's run-through but adjusted it as little as possible today.” She herself was testing out various possibilities ahead of the performances.

Meanwhile, Richard PINHAS (guitar) came onstage at 3:20 p.m., with Balázs PÁNDI (drums) and AKITA Masami joining him by 4:15 p.m. For a while, the three musicians were absorbed in checking their instruments and equipment. The positions of the “musicians' video monitors” are an important aspect of this work. As each musician will essentially be facing forward during the performances, they will be unable to look directly at the massive screen behind them. Thus, they will need to check what kind of footage is playing behind them by using monitors on the floor of the stage. The space around each musician was crammed with musical equipment and speakers, so the optimal positions were determined through detailed arrangements with the theater staff. Pándi checked the volume level of each drum such as the bass drum, the snare, and so on with the sound engineer.

The musicians finally began playing at 4:40 p.m. The sound from the specially installed speakers was incredibly loud, but also very clear. During this time, Shiga would occasionally walk over to the center of the audience seating and check the balance between the sound and video while testing out various footage. At 5:10 p.m., Tsukahara, using a microphone, told the musicians he wanted to share the cues for the start and ending of the video. Next, Shiga explained the general progression of the video



Shiga Lieko (closer to the camera) and Sato Takahiro running checks from the video operating booth



Rehearsal with all of the musicians

in English. As expected, the impact of the video and that of the sound matched spectacularly. All of the arrangements were finished by around 6:00 p.m.

In the end, a dress rehearsal was not conducted. When I asked Tsukahara about this at a later date, he explained that he had actually been quite conflicted over whether to hold one. All of the musicians were experienced with jam sessions, so he had few concerns about their relationships, but the issue was that this was a brand-new experience for Shiga, who was joining as the “fourth improviser.” A dress rehearsal would

be a good idea for her sake. At the same time, forcing improvisational musicians without a culture of dress rehearsals to take part in one might affect their motivation toward the actual performances. The decision not to hold a dress rehearsal was in some ways a gamble. However, come to think about it, in Noh drama, which emphasizes the concept of *ichi-go ichi-e* or the transient nature of the performance, only a simple run-through is conducted on the day before the show. In that sense, the final preparations had some commonalities with traditional Japanese performing arts.



The music and video coming together for the first time



An almost full view of the stage

SHIGA Lieko, Merzbow, Balázs PÁNDI (Hungary), and Richard PINHAS (France)

“Merzbow, Balázs Pándi & Richard Pinhas with Lieko Shiga: ‘Bipolar’” Third Report: New Horizons Opened Up by a “Visual Concert” MORIYAMA Naoto

The Performances

On October 8 and 9, two performances of *Bipolar* were held as scheduled at Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza. I was able to attend both.

As described in my previous reports, a massive screen was installed at the back of the huge theater, which was about 18 meters wide. The three musicians were lined up in front of it with Merzbow (AKITA Masami) to the left from the audience's viewpoint (stage right), Balázs PÁNDI (drums) in the center, and Richard PINHAS (guitar) to the right (stage left). SHIGA Lieko's video operating booth was set up near the back of the elevated walkway through the audience (the entrance to the actors' waiting room). A large digital counter with red numerals was projected above the proscenium arch, which began ticking as soon as the performances started.

Due to the nature of improvisation, describing the ever-changing details of the work is difficult and will tend to become incoherent. However, if I were to sum up the “visual concert,” I might say that it was actually each audience member fully feeling the trajectory of the approximately hour-long “once-in-a-lifetime encounter” between the tremendous “explosion of sound” from the musicians and the huge, constantly transforming and shifting images.

From my perspective after viewing the performances, the main features of the work can be summarized as follows.

- (1) While concerts by “explosive” noise artists such as Merzbow are normally held at small music clubs, this work was staged at a large theater with the capacity for large-scale theatrical productions.
- (2) Musicians and an artist who have already built global reputations collaboratively created a highly unique “improvisation space.” Furthermore, unlike your garden-variety music video or VJ performance, in which either the “music” or “video” dominate and the aim is mainly to create a stylish ambience with appropriate harmony, this collaboration demonstrated the potential for a new kind of live performance in which the two balance each other in a true sense.
- (3) Video creator Shiga Lieko, a photographer who employs a unique production process very similar to that of theater or dance productions, ventured into the realm of video improvisation, a new horizon of expression for her. Furthermore, the video she created strongly reflected the concepts she has explored throughout her career as a photographer.

With regard to (1), it is difficult for me to make comparisons, as I myself am not an expert in noise music. However, when I interviewed multiple audience members familiar with Merzbow after the performances, they said that both the volume and sound quality were very different from what they had experienced at live music clubs. Even producer TSUKAHARA Yuya said he “got goosebumps” when he heard the sound from the



The audience just before the performance on the first day

specially installed large-theater speakers during the rehearsals. Thus, it seems accurate to say that the performances achieved a sense of texture and volume that would not have been possible at a music club.

The Core of Collaboration

Nonetheless, it is clearly (2) that was at the core of collaboration in this international coproduction. How can a unique improvisation space in which “video” and “music” balance each other in a true sense be created? In that very sense, the fact that Shiga's video in this work is backed by a single flow or force invoking vast voices and narratives while maintaining a certain fragmentation presents a crucial approach to that question.

For example, the first roughly 15 minutes of the work were constructed around footage of various figures walking as if hurried along by something, each at their own speed, on top of a seawall built after the Great East Japan earthquake and tsunami. These “walking scenes,” in which Shiga herself said she continued to experiment with various “speeds” over the course of a three-year runup period, are an intense eruption of the accumulation of time within Shiga as an artist as she exhaustively probed the relationship between the act of photography and its subjects through the disaster by which she herself was also affected, as well as its leadup and aftermath, and provide the frame on which the work is based. The music responded accordingly to this intensity through improvisation by each performer, and video operator Shiga, in turn, responded to the music in the form of real-time “improvisational editing.” *Bipolar* as a work consisted of the frenzied blending of these processes throughout the approximately hour-long performances.

That being said, Shiga, who revered the musicians and had a deep understanding of their characteristics, said she worried that verbally sharing the narrative elements surrounding the “disaster” with the two foreign musicians in advance would end up weakening the energy at stake in the “improvisation.” This point aligned conceptually with Tsukahara, who chose not to hold a dress rehearsal (refer to my second report). For *Bipolar*, which is substantively different in nature from a packaged work, each performance was not only a “work” but also a collaborative “dialogue.”

The performances were truly overwhelming, lasting about 70 minutes on the first day and slightly under 60 minutes on the second. At the same time, both had a subtly different feel. However, before describing these differences, I must mention the fact that the three musicians actually looked closely at Shiga's video during both performances. The

video monitors installed onstage helped the musicians follow the video in progress without looking behind them. However, in addition to the monitors, there were situations in which the two musicians other than Balázs PÁNDI, who had the video directly behind him, escalated their playing while occasionally gazing back at the massive screen. In that sense, one might say a nonverbal “dialogue” was firmly established within the improvisation space through Shiga’s video.

Some of the most critical moments in the international coproduction were found in the “dialogue” between Shiga’s video and Pándi’s drumming. According to multiple sources, immediately after he finished playing on the first day, Pándi said that he “sensed an intense dynamism in the video” and felt something that strongly stimulated his own musicality in the previously mentioned “walking scenes” in particular. During the first day’s performance, Pándi kept drumming at full power for about 70 minutes, with almost no breaks. It was remarkable how the drums asserted their presence without becoming lost in the explosive noise. Afterwards, rather intensive discussions were held backstage ahead of the next day’s performance. These discussions would end up making the performances on the first and second days feel subtly different.

Pándi suggested that “it would be better to keep the performance time within 60 minutes due to the physical limitations of full-powered drumming” —in other words, that it should be shortened by about 10 minutes. However, Shiga’s collection of footage was constructed to form a complete story in about 65 to 70 minutes. Thus, shortening it by 10 minutes would require a change of no small magnitude.

The next day, Shiga and video assistant SATO Takahiro arrived at the theater at 9:00 a.m., 10 hours before the start of the performance, to take on the task of “reconfiguration.” When I finished viewing the second day’s performance, I realized that the structure of the latter half of the work was very different from that on the first day. Footage that had been presented over the course of about 30 minutes on the previous day was condensed into about 20 minutes on the second, and countless images were layered within mere moments as if to generate a subliminal effect. If a sense of keeping track in a linear fashion was dominant on the first day, on the second day, I felt a stronger sense of doing so three-dimensionally. When I asked Shiga about this at a later date, she said she “was able to do live editing much more freely on the second day by planning for a climax during the last fifteen minutes.” The feeling of three-dimensionality

was the work of complex live operations that were not structured as a package but rather generated and altered moment to moment.

New Horizons Opened Up by the Project

As observed above, this work set sophisticated artistic goals surrounding “improvisation” that served as the basis for sophisticated, intensive technical and artistic dialogues, mainly during the performances. Attendance was 344 people on the first day and 336 on the second. The fact that the work drew a wide audience including not only fans of the performing arts but also those of fields such as music and visual arts might be called a planned outcome. However, in some ways, it is possible to take the view that the outcome was “confusing.” This is because although it definitely represented a major accomplishment in artistic terms, we don’t yet really have the language to critique it accurately. The fact is that Shiga Lieko’s followers can only speak from a visual-arts perspective, whereas followers of Merzbow and noise will tend to lean toward music. How should the encounter between “video” and “music” in the improvisation space, along with the as-yet-unknown sensations born from that encounter, actually be put into words? The work is perhaps a challenge posed to contemporary art audiences in general, including me as I write this report.

Sometime after the performances, I had the opportunity to discuss them once again with Shiga, albeit online. She explained as follows. As the practitioner of the real-time video editing, she definitely felt that she had established “communication” with the musicians during the improvisation, which was an amazing experience for her. In particular, the sense of freedom that she enjoyed during the jam session in the final 15 minutes of the second day was one that she would never have found elsewhere. Shiga said that Merzbow’s sound had commonalities with the “sound” she perceived while taking photographs, and that Balázs Pándi definitely led the musical team. Furthermore, after the performances, she gained confidence in the immense expressive potential of the real-time video editing in which she had engaged. If possible, she said she would like to develop this method in some way starting with her upcoming solo exhibitions.

It seems safe to say that this international coproduction is having a strong impact on one photographer’s future.



Photographer: INOUE Yoshikazu
Credit: Kyoto Experiment

PROJECT

“Goodbye, and good wishes for your success — a response to *Annihilation of Caste* — a speech prepared by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar at the invitation of Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore in 1936 but NOT DELIVERED owing to the withdrawal of the invitation because the organising committee found the contents of the speech unbearable.”

WADA Nagara and Sankar VENKATESWARAN (India)

This theatrical production is a first-time collaboration between Sankar VENKATESWARAN, an internationally acclaimed director based in Kerala, South India, and WADA Nagara, a Kyoto-based director.

It tackles *Annihilation of Caste*, an undelivered speech written in 1936 by B.R. AMBEDKAR (1891–1956), a central figure in the drafting of the Constitution of India and a leader in the fight for social equality for the Dalits (the so-called untouchables). The text, which continues to be read in India today, is filled with universal contemplation and eloquence in critiquing discrimination and division, and remains as relevant as ever. The theatrical work reexamines and contemplates this timeless text through the lens of contemporary perspectives. Performed by Anirudh NAIR, Chandra NINASAM, and TAKEDA Aki, the piece premiered at Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza in December 2022.

Outline of Performances

Schedule: 3:00 p.m. on Dec. 10 (Sat.) and Dec. 11 (Sun.)

Duration: 1 hr. 40 min.

Venue: Kyoto Art Theater Shunjuza

Credits

Co-direction/Concept: Sankar VENKATESWARAN and WADA Nagara

Performers: Anirudh NAIR, Chandra NINASAM, TAKEDA Aki

Dramaturge: MORIYAMA Naoto

Producer: TSURUDOME Satoko, KAWAHARA Miho (Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts)

Technical Director: OTA Kazushi (Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts)

Lighting: KASAI Kenichi

Sound design: KODA Toru, TAKIGUCHI Sho

Japanese subtitle / Subtitle Operator: TSURUDOME Satoko

Production manager and Press: FUJII Hiromi (Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts)

Production assistant: IKAWA Moe (Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts)

Technical administrator: OHNO Junichiro, OYAMA Harumi, TERASAKA Sunao

Backstage manager: YUKI Toshie

With the special cooperation of YAMADA Setsuko

Source: “*Annihilation of Caste*” by B.R. AMBEDKAR, translated by YAMAZAKI Genichi and YOSHIMURA Reiko, 1994, Akashi Shoten

Publicity cooperation: Kyoto Experiment

Organized by: Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts

Co-Organizer: The Japan Foundation

Co-Production: Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts, The Japan Foundation



Sankar VENKATESWARAN
Photo by: Gabriela NEEB



WADA Nagara
Photo by: MORIYA Yuki



Photo by: INOUE Yoshikazu
© Kyoto Performing Arts Center at Kyoto University of the Arts

WADA Nagara and Sankar VENKATESWARAN (India)

“Goodbye, and good wishes for your success – a response to *Annihilation of Caste* – (…)”

First Report: Launch of Project

SHIBATA Takako

“*Goodbye, and good wishes for your success – a response to Annihilation of Caste – (…)*” is a project in which Sankar VENKATESWARAN, an internationally acclaimed theater director based in Kerala, South India, and WADA Nagara, a theater director based in Kyoto, Japan, collaborate on co-directing a theatrical piece focusing on the theme of “social exclusion,” which exists in all societies, taking the appeal for the abolition of the caste system in *Annihilation of Caste* as their starting point.

About *Annihilation of Caste*

Annihilation of Caste, which is the focus of this project, is a speech manuscript written by Dr. B.R. AMBEDKAR (1891–1956), a central figure in the drafting of the Indian Constitution and a leader of the fight for social equality for the Dalits (the so-called untouchables). In 1936, Ambedkar was invited to be the chairman of the annual conference of a caste abolition association (Jat-Pat Todak Mandal) and prepared this manuscript for his keynote speech. However, Ambedkar’s views, which fiercely attacked even Hindu members of the association, were difficult for the association to accept. After they requested revisions and negotiations broke down, the invitation was withdrawn, and the speech was never delivered. This manuscript, self-published by Ambedkar himself, has become an important work in India’s anti-caste resistance movement.

First Stage of Production: Online Meetings and Rehearsals

This project is an extension of the dialogue in an online study group on *Annihilation of Caste* led by Venkateswaran and Wada since 2021. The project aims to explore the performative aspects and intentions behind Ambedkar’s words, focusing on the fact that the text was originally intended to be heard as a speech, and to bring it to the stage as a theatrical production. As the first stage of production, online meetings and rehearsals were held using Zoom.

Participants (titles omitted)

From India: Sankar Venkateswaran (director),
TSURUDOME Satoko (producer), Anirudh NAIR (actor),
Chandra NINASAM (actor)
From Japan: Wada Nagara (director), TAKEDA Aki (actor),
MORIYAMA Naoto (dramaturge),
KAWAHARA Miho (producer)

Online Meeting (September 30, 2022)

The performance format had been tentatively decided as a post-performance talk following the speech. To realize this, the direction of online rehearsals was discussed on a level playing field without distinguishing between actors and directors. It was decided at Wada’s suggestion to have the actors try reading the text as a speech. Even among the participants from India, the sense of distance from the text varied. Some recalled experiences around them, whereas others

reinterpreted the issues in connection with their own experiences. There were also remarks like not knowing if they could break away from what has shaped them within a culture based on “caste” and “Hinduism.” As for the Japanese side, there was a gap between the logical context and reality, and both the actor and director could only grasp it abstractly, but they felt the importance of this incomprehensibility. Thus, they decided to discuss the issues of power and hierarchy within the text after physically capturing them through the process of reading aloud in rehearsals.

Online Rehearsals (October 21–30, 2022)

For several chapters, Anirudh Nair read the English text, Chandra Ninasam read the Kannada text, and Takeda Aki read the Japanese text in sequence. By speaking and listening, they were able to understand the intentions and energy of the words in the text. Differences between languages, such as the English version’s barrage of short sentences and the pacing of the Kannada version, were also pointed out. The original speech manuscript was written in English, and it was mentioned in the meeting that the Kannada translation was adapted to be more acceptable to the translator’s caste, which was the ruling class. This is one example that demonstrated this point viscerally. After the reading, the actors who actually read the text raised questions actively about the content and their feelings while speaking, leading to lively discussions.



Zoom meeting before coming to Japan

Observing a Rehearsal

The point carefully discussed was how and what to present from among the issues written in the text to an audience of a different culture, namely Japan. There was also an awareness of the multicultural nature of the performers. Although the discussion aimed to bridge the cultural understanding gap, the Japanese participants tended to lean toward

learning about “caste” as an outsider. This led to consideration of the structure of discrimination internalized even in Japanese examples, with Wada bringing up discrimination against women. The author initially felt that the Indian participants had a question as to why the issue was not about Japan’s *burakumin* (discriminated social minority) problem. However, the issue of women seemed to function well as a common ground, and in the latter half of the rehearsal, it was pointed out that while the upper classes have various ways to cleanse themselves of various impurities, the lower classes and women do not, and the social structure itself is designed to be more comfortable for the upper classes.

During the rehearsal, Venkateswaran repeatedly pointed out that the

problem of caste is not an issue of the untouchables or the non-dominant classes, but of the dominant classes. Those who have experienced discrimination desire its elimination, but many who benefit from the structure of discrimination are unaware of it. Moreover, culture exists within the connections between people, such as families, and some struggle with the idea of abandoning everything because it fosters discrimination. Viewing an event in a different culture as an outsider reveals the structure but does not solve the problem. It will be interesting to see how the questions raised through their own experiences and physical sensations will be spatially developed in the future.



Rehearsal in India

WADA Nagara and Sankar VENKATESWARAN (India)
**“Goodbye, and good wishes for your success
 – a response to *Annihilation of Caste* – (…)”**
 Second Report: Production Process and
 Rehearsal Observation
 SHIBATA Takako

Interview: Sankar VENKATESWARAN and WADA Nagara
 (November 23, 2022)

—How did this project begin?

Venkateswaran: During the production of *Criminal Tribes Act*, I encountered AMBEDKAR’s text and wanted to take it on as an artist, but at the same time, I thought it was impossible. At that time, thanks to YAMADA Setsuko’s bridging efforts, I had the opportunity to collaborate with the Kyoto Performing Arts Center of Kyoto University of the Arts, and I thought that, in the environment of a foreign culture, it might actually be possible to stage a performance.

Wada: The trigger for me, too, was receiving a phone call from Yamada Setsuko, asking if I would like to work with Sankar. When I heard that *Annihilation of Caste* was the subject matter, I was worried because I was neither knowledgeable about India’s caste system nor Japan’s discriminatory structure. However, having worked on the play *Couvade*, in which actors who had never experienced pregnancy perform pregnancy and childbirth, I felt the potential of theater performed by people who are not participants in an event. Also, I thought that *The Water Station* directed by Sankar was entertaining, so I wanted to give it a try together.

Venkateswaran: Through a collaboration with Nagara, the meaning and perspective of the text expanded. I was surprised by the viewpoint from outside, which an Indian could not possess.

—How was your stay in India?

Wada: I was happy to meet everyone in person. Although the stay was short, Sankar’s theater was wonderful. I felt how amazing it is to maintain an independent theater in the mountains and create works while communicating with the local community. I knew, seeing THEATRE E9 KYOTO in Kyoto, that building a theater while maintaining a relationship with a specific community is extremely tough. I spent most of my time at the theater in Attappadi, but I went to the city of Thrissur, an urban area, for just one day. I noticed that men were the only ones driving cars and motorcycles, women above a certain age wore traditional clothes, and there were no other women in the bars where we could drink beer, which became an important experience connected to this creation.

—Are you interested in women in society?

Wada: Although it wasn’t central in the initial phase of the creation, I feel that the importance of women has gradually expanded within me. However, I am not an Indian woman, but a woman who has had a

fortunate life in Japan. I have come to realize in our discussions that I am in a privileged position as a woman, so I often think about the meaning of that in the creation process.

—How were the rehearsals at the theater in Kerala?

Venkateswaran: The rehearsals were led by Nagara, and everyone read aloud the speech in three languages. Each day, one person read the entire speech, and we all shared our reactions to it in discussion. Reading out Ambedkar’s speech for three to four hours straight every day revealed the different tones of the text and the three people’s respective perspectives.

—By different tones, do you mean linguistic, or the physical characteristics of the actors?

Venkateswaran: Both. We had been reading the text in online rehearsals, but reading it through was a historic moment because this text had never been read aloud before. It was deeply emotional to hear it voiced in three languages, and that itself was already three performances.

Wada: On the first day, Rudy (Anirudh NAIR) did it in English, on the second day, TAKEDA (Aki) did it in Japanese, and on the third day, Chandru (Chandra NINASAM) did it in Kannada.



Rehearsal in Kyoto

— I think it requires a lot of concentration to listen for three or four hours straight. Were the performances that intense?

Venkateswaran: They were something I wanted to make public to an audience as an open rehearsal. Perhaps, doing it in India made a big difference. In Japan, it probably wouldn't have been the same.

— What kind of staging do you have in mind at this point?

Wada: I want to make it a performance that can't help but refer to the reality of living in contemporary Japan. I'm thinking of staging something like a post-delivery talk, as a mechanism for the audience to think about this text in their own lives.

Venkateswaran: Making a post-delivery talk into the performance is a very natural and practical method. Imagining the unspoken text brings creative thinking and deliberation. I think it will plant a tiny question in the minds of the audience about their places in society. Ambedkar is addressing the issue of caste, which is unique to India, but there are hierarchical issues in every social system. The anger, exclusion, and power structures at the root of these problems are important.

— How are you thinking about the audience and theater space?

Wada: I think it's important to have an intimate distance with the audience, so we'll create a thrust stage. I hope to use of the spatial relationship between far and near on the stage and the *hanamichi** to good effect in the temporal distance between the work and the audience.

Venkateswaran: This text was written in 1936. On the other hand, the performance takes place *here and now*. In Noh, a form of Japanese theater, things come to visit, and in this performance, a text that exists as something from the past appears in the here and now. A text written about 100 years ago in India appears in a theater in Kyoto after a long journey.

* An elevated walkway running from the stage to the rear of a theater through the audience



WADA Nagara and Sankar VENKATESWARAN (India)

“Goodbye, and good wishes for your success – a response to *Annihilation of Caste* – (…)”

Third Report: Performances and Reflection

SHIBATA Takako

This work, with its long title, *Goodbye, and good wishes for your success – a response to Annihilation of Caste – (…)*, went through online rehearsals, rehearsals in Kerala, South India, and Kyoto, and finally reached its performances at Shunjuza on December 10 and 11, 2022.

Production Process

Online rehearsals: April–September (1 or 2 meetings per month),

October 21–30

Rehearsals in India: November 3–7

Rehearsals in Kyoto: November 14–December 9

Performances at Shunjuza: December 10–11

Summary of the Work

The production is largely made up of excerpts from Ambedkar’s speech and talks based on the actors’ personal experiences. There is a microphone stand and a podium at the back of the stage, and a sofa and a low table are placed in front. The space with the podium at the back of the stage is where Ambedkar’s unactualized speech is *re-enacted* through the actors, presenting a time from the past. The living-room-like space on the edge of stage is a place for *here and now* responses, where the actors freely discuss topics related to the speech from a contemporary perspective.

The performance begins with the three actors making their entrance along the *hanamichi* that runs through the auditorium and “introducing themselves” to the audience at the front of the main stage. The show progresses through reading of Ambedkar’s original speech and follow-up discussions and story developments. The topics brought up in the speech include caste as unjust discrimination against “untouchables” who are placed outside caste by Hindus, the isolation and indifference to others brought about by the caste system, the existence and contradictions of women in the caste system, and other issues related to India’s caste system that are still far from being resolved even after nearly 90 years. In the actors’ talks, it is suggested that these structures of discrimination are not only problems in distant and exotic India, but also in Japan and probably in other regional cultural zones as well. The performance ends with Ambedkar’s words of apology for the speech being too long, with the actors then stating their own names to the audience before leaving the stage.

“Quotation” and “Translation” in the Creative Process

This is a creative place where discussions are held on an equal footing without being bound by the roles of actor, director, and dramaturge, using English, Kannada, and Japanese. The talk parts are scripted based on the actors’ personal histories and experiences in Japan and India. In the initial “self-introduction” scene, the three actors switch places. Anirudh Nair (Rudy) says he is “TAKEDA Aki,” and Chandra Ninasam (Chandru) speaks

of his identity as “Rudy” while stating that his name is derived from caste and Sanskrit. Takeda Aki does not reveal a surname because it would make “his” true identity known, and only gives the name “Chandru.” While indicating the distance to caste on a personal level, the aim is to expand the possibilities of theater as fiction by adding the gesture of “quotation.”

Creation was carried out with attention to six relationships: (1) that between the three actors, (2) that with the text, (3) that with a country different from one’s own, (4) that with the audience, (5) that mediated by the voice, and (6) that with the content/topics being spoken about. There was a common understanding of *translating* others’ stories, including Ambedkar’s speech, and showing how they were transformed into one’s own. “Translation” is not just about exchanging words. The Ambedkar texts used included the original English, a Japanese translation (translated by YAMAZAKI Genichi and YOSHIMURA Reiko), and a Kannada translation, which give a very different impression in terms of the sound of the words. The English, which piles on short sentences, is the most powerful, while the Kannada, for which two translations have been published, was translated into a form that is more acceptable to the ruling class, perhaps because the translator was from the ruling class. It is also said to be more difficult to understand than the English. To Sankar Venkateswaran and others on the Indian side, the Japanese version sometimes sounded like a story being told. And then there are the bodies of the actors who mediate those words. As there is no language that all members of the creative team can understand, there was a constant process of translating others’ remarks with explanations, even in rehearsals. This “translation” process leads to showing the boundaries between the cultures of Japan and India, the differences between the privileged class and the discriminated class, and the differences between men and women from different angles. It can be said that this performance was made possible because it took a form of production different from creation divided into roles such as playwright, director, and actor.

Thematic Setting: Response to “Incomprehensibility”

Despite dealing with heavy themes such as the caste system in India, the issue of the so-called untouchables, and the structure of discrimination, which are still far from being resolved, the impression one gets from this work is light and cheerful. This is probably intentional on account of the difference in degree of interest on the part of the audience. As the title suggests, the theme of this work is a contemporary “response” to a speech manuscript that was never delivered. The 1,500 copies of the English first edition immediately sold out, and *Annihilation of Caste*, which has been translated into the official languages of various Indian states and the languages of other countries, including Japan, has already become a historical text. The creative team focused on conveying the *incomprehensibility* of this historical text, which has a large gap between the logical context and the reality being told, rather than promoting easy solutions or a correct understanding of the problem.

On stage, even when questioned about Japan’s *burakumin* issue, Aki (Rudy) avoids eye contact and does not try to answer. Although the Japanese side had researched discrimination against ethnic Koreans in the Utoro District of Uji City, Kyoto Prefecture, and the Bank of Yanagihara* in the Sujin District of Kyoto City during the preparation phase, they had a reason for not lecturing on stage about what they had learned, but instead limiting themselves to gestures of embarrassed confusion. In rehearsals, there was a scene where the Indian side pointed out that they felt

uncomfortable as the discussion proceeded in the direction of learning about caste. Just as being Japanese does not mean one understands the problem of *burakumin* discrimination, being Indian does not mean one understands the problem of caste. The sight of “Aki” being at a loss for words demonstrates the discomfort of being questioned from the outside as an interested party about a problem that “she” was not aware of.

For those living in India, the annihilation of caste in Ambedkar’s speech and the consequent departure from Hinduism mean leaving the community they have spent their lives in, shaking to the very foundations their accumulated being. Hinduism, which is not a proselytizing religion, is passed on in the form of children joining their parents’ caste. Religion is so closely intertwined with culture, customs, and community that leaving it is nearly impossible. However, by showing a response to this “incomprehensibility,” the work attempts to sow small seeds in the hearts of individual audience members.

The Presence of Women

A part of the speech that is quoted on stage rebuts the claim that the four-varna system of Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra is an occupational classification. Ambedkar shows that the exclusion of women from these four classes is based on the relationship to the jobs women take on. When asked about the connection between the text of the speech and herself, WADA Nagara mentioned the internalized discrimination against women in daily behavior as a commonality in the structure of discrimination. Referring to the fact that the treatment of “untouchables” starts with the treatment of women in the house, and that while the upper classes are provided with methods to purify pollution, classes in lower castes, whereas women are not, the issue of patriarchy latent in Hindu customs was discussed during rehearsals. This speech scene reminds us that not only is the issue of women in the caste system unresolved, but also that discrimination, under the name of “distinction,” is internalized even in Japan, where there is no caste system.

The response scene brought up the example of an Indian who landed a job in an IT company, where it is said that there is no caste discrimination because it is not part of the job classification. It shows how even in Silicon Valley, far away from India, caste is transferred as long as there is a Hindu community. The scene where one person recognizes the other’s origin by name, behaves in a friendly manner, and casually touches the person’s shoulder to check for the presence of a sacred thread, a mark of the high caste, is similar to the Japanese attitude of valuing hometown and alumni communities. The cold treatment Chandru (Aki) receives as a person outside the caste somewhat overlaps with the way women are seen in workplaces and elsewhere.

Post-Performance Reaction

A review by TAKASHIMA Megumu was published in the art museum and art information web magazine “Artscape” (January 15, 2023 issue). Takashima writes, “This work, which gives *voice* to unspoken and suppressed words, presents the duality of how Takeda/Wada make their own voices take the part of this *text of the other*.” She also notes that the play questions the “difficulty in seeing the fragmented discriminatory structure within minorities” through the theatrical technique of proxy (i.e., representation), demonstrating the fictitious and irrational nature of the caste system. The reviewer, who precisely decodes the multi-layered speech scenes, highlights the audience’s participation as “hearers,” and



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highly praises the performance as reaffirming the power of *theater* to think and critically reinterpret together with the audience.

Other positive reactions and comments could be seen on social media and heard in the lobby after the performance. Regarding the ending, some, such as KAWASAKI Yoko, co-director of KYOTO EXPERIMENT (Kyoto International Performing Arts Festival), wondered whether it was okay for the ending of the response to Ambedkar's criticism of Hindu nationalism to conclude with individual identity, and whether there was room for further refinement. On this matter, I look forward to the next work by Sankar Venkateswaran, who dreams of making this a trilogy.

Potential of International Co-Productions

There are various methods for international co-productions. This attempt involved a meticulous discussion and rehearsal process, including online meetings, without a common language among all the participants, who worked on crafting the script through recording, transcription, translation, and editing as a collaborative effort by all. This production process, which leveraged remote meeting systems, speech recognition software, and automatic translation, is already an interesting challenge to the nature of theater as a language art. International co-productions do not necessarily require a complete understanding of each other's languages. In the case

of this work, there were parts that drew on the inability to communicate in the creative process. The online environment introduced early in the production also seemed to have worked effectively in building a flat relationship not confined to the roles of actors or directors.

International co-productions require different communication skills from conventional productions. The stage is not a place to find compromise with others and reach a conclusion. Therefore, not only knowledge-based communication in terms of language proficiency and cross-cultural understanding, but also the creativity to imagine others through the body and substitute that with shareable expressions is essential. Although communication is time-consuming, including translating and repeating what is understood, highlighting the differences in each other's ideas and approaches is the key to conveying different cultures to the audience. International co-productions open up the possibility of presenting a richer creative future through the participation of people from different cultural backgrounds. This project was a great contribution to considering the possibilities of communication in international co-productions.

* A bank founded by and for burakumin, a minority group subject to prejudice and discrimination



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PROJECT

“Hourglass”

Company Derashinera, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia),
LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and Jung Young Doo (Korea)

This is a new work-in-progress by ONODERA Shuji-led Company Derashinera, which has continuously engaged in international co-productions since 2016.

Company Derashinera members, KAJIHARA Akiko, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia), and LIU Juichu (Taiwan), who appeared in the 2021 production of *Toge* were joined by Jung Young Doo (Korea) as a new cast member. Through international collaboration and cross-cultural exchange among the cast members from different countries, they felt the differences in physicality rooted in cultural background and lifestyle. While examining the physical language and imagination they have in common, they underwent an intensive 10-day workshop in an attempt to capture a new “language.”

This piece, inspired by Bruno Schulz’s *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*, is a non-verbal play depicting a fantastical world that oscillates at the border between dream and reality. It was presented at Hoku Topia in December 2022.

Performance Outline

Date & Time: Friday, December 23, 2022, 19:00

Duration: 40 min.

Venue: Asuka Hall, Hoku Topia

Credits

Direction: ONODERA Shuji

Cast: LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia), LIU Juichu (Taiwan), Jung Young Doo (Korea), KAJIHARA Akiko, SAKIYAMA Rina, FUJITA Momoko, ONODERA Shuji

Lighting: ABE Yasuko

Sound Coordinator: IKEDA Nobu, SAKURAUCHI Shomi, TANNO Musashi

Scenic Design: ISHIGURO Takeshi

Stage Manager: HASHIMOTO Kanako

Interpreter: IWASAKI Mark Yudai

Production cooperation: NISHIO Sachiko (arts knot), SONODA Shoko (arts knot)

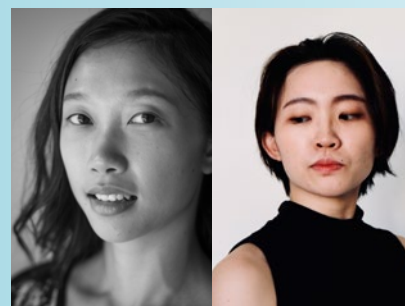
Organized by: Company Derashinera

Co-Organizer: The Japan Foundation, Kita-ku Culture Foundation

Co-Production: Company Derashinera, The Japan Foundation



Top left: KAJIHARA Akiko ©Amandine Crochet
Bottom left: FUJITA Momoko, Top right: SAKIYAMA Rina, Bottom right: ONODERA Shuji (Company Derashinera) ©Suzuki Jouji



Top left: LEE Ren Xin ©Bernie Ng
Top right: LIU Juichu ©Yi Hsin Lo
Bottom left: Jung Young Doo ©LG Arts Center



Photo: SUZUKI Jouji

Company Derashinera, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia),
LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and Jung Young Doo (Korea)

“Hourglass”

First Report: Preparation

SUZUKI Rieko

Creation at the Intersection of Body and Language

The Global Theater Project “Ba (Place)” (the project name at the time of application) was launched as a platform for Company Derashinera, led by ONODERA Shuji, to come together with various artists based in other parts of Asia to engage in dialogue, creation, and presentation of their work. Derashinera has regularly engaged in international co-productions since conducting workshops and performances of *Another Story* and *An Occurrence of a Night* in Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2016. In December 2021, they welcomed KAJIHARA Akiko, who is active in Europe with France as her base, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia), and LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and premiered *Toge*, a work inspired by George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, at the Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT) as the first phase of this project. This fiscal year, building on these achievements, they plan to hold an intensive 10-day workshop and a work-in-progress showing in late December 2022 for their new piece, *Hourglass*.

Onodera said of the impact of the first phase, “I have the feeling that the experience with *Toge* will serve as a launchpad in a big way. International co-productions are often highlighted for the cultural exchange aspect, but I feel this project is more than that; it is an opportunity to extend the base of what I’ve been doing even further. There are many ways to describe what we do—non-verbal theater, physical theater—but I want to solidify the uniqueness of our work. Meeting the members with whom I worked in 2021 and 2022 is definitely a plus for staying true to this ambition.”

Derashinera’s style, which isn’t strictly dance or mime, allows for individual bodies to converge and create narratives by setting up scenes while building relationships. Even though there is a textual guide (original work), they don’t strictly follow the plot. This approach seems to have brought various discoveries for the participants from abroad as well. Lee Ren Xin, based in Malaysia and actively creating and presenting her own works, reflected on *Toge*, saying, “I feel that different parts of the work offer different experiences. In some parts, we invite the audience to experience the texture of the body, and in others, we show social connections. I found it interesting that each scene was distinct, yet seamlessly connected.” Liu Juichu, who met Onodera at an audition in Taiwan in 2018 and is participating for the fourth time, had been trained in dance from elementary to high school, and majored in theater in college. “Our studies focused on physical training for dance and academic

theories for drama, so we might not have had much experience in mixing language and body in expression. Derashinera’s works are non-verbal, but there are scripts, and each scene has its own color. I have to understand those shades and think about how to use my body. Having the script gives me a sense of what I should do and where to start, and I find it comfortable being able to express that freely. There is also the aspect of carrying out various tasks as performers in the live performance, and I was surprised at how watching the streamed version of *Toge* had stimulated my imagination differently from what was written in the text,” Liu added.

Although Derashinera had previously used pieces based on an “original work” or took literary works as motifs, *Toge* was actually the first time they had created a textual script before the production. It started as an attempt to share an image of the piece as soon as possible, as the planned rehearsal period had been shortened due to quarantine measures against the spread of COVID-19. However, it helped expand ideas and enrich the creative process.

Hourglass, currently in preparation, is structured around Bruno Schulz’s short story *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass*. The narrative of a person, “I,” who visits a sanatorium in the suburbs to see his father and finds himself wandering in a time and space where the past and present, and reality and fantasy, mix, rejects logical understanding and explanation. At the same time, it includes many elements that stimulate bodily sensations, such as repeated depictions of sleepiness and sleeping. Onodera said, “I felt a desire to tackle poetic language, and I feel motifs like dreams and memories are close to what we’ve been doing at Derashinera. Given that this is a work-in-progress, I think the focus is more on creating several pieces rather than assembling a complete work.”

Online meetings with each cast member began in early December, just before the residential rehearsals in Tokyo. Discussions revolved around how to elevate the original work into a performance. Onodera and company member FUJITA Momoko explained the vision, including the conditions of the venue, stage design and lighting, and the use of space (which can be seen as the start of image exchange through “language”). They also gave “homework” related to ideas for movement and choreography. There were some intriguing words heard here, such as “multiple people playing a single role,” “Noh,” and “male–female duo.” An experiment was about to begin, where the images of language left by Schulz would clash and mix with the language of physical art that Derashinera has constructed, and the body language of the participants from different backgrounds, including Jung Young Doo from Korea, who is participating for the first time.

* Online interview with Lee Ren Xin on September 6, interpreted by IWASAKI Mark Yudai

* Online interview with Liu Juichu on September 6, interpreted by YAMAZAKI Rieko

* Online interview with Onodera Shuji and Fujita Momoko on November 14



From an online meeting

Company Derashinera, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia),
LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and Jung Young Doo (Korea)

“Hourglass”

Second Report: Rehearsal to Showing

SUZUKI Rieko

Creating a “Drama” Depicted by the Body

The first time I visited the intensive workshop by Company Derashinera was on the afternoon of December 13, 2022. In the rehearsal room prepared upstairs at the venue where the showing would be held, a large box-shaped set made of a level platform and metal pipes stood ready. The performers from Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Korea arrived in Japan on December 11, just prior to the workshop. Two of them, LEE Ren Xin and LIU Juichu, have been involved since last year’s *Toge*, while Jung Young Doo, who is participating for the first time, has experience creating works in Japan. This put the team in a relaxed mood that one wouldn’t expect on the second day of a workshop.

To my surprise, at this point, the contents of each scene were already taking shape. When ONODERA Shuji, who also directs, calls out, “Let’s do what we did in the morning,” everyone quickly pairs up and acts out the relationship of being inside and outside the walls of the aforementioned “box.” They depict a state where they are touching it but can’t get out, or the boundary itself is distorted. The scene titled “Sanatorium” in the script has “I” arrive at a sanatorium in the suburbs to visit his father and proceed down a corridor, checking the room numbers. Only “I” and a female ward clerk appear in the original story, but here six people in three pairs move simultaneously. This creates an effect where the actions of two people in the past, present, and future overlap, and conveys the closed-off and labyrinthine nature of the sanatorium, with its dozens of doors and no way to grasp its overall picture.

Upon inquiry, it seems that the images and parts of movement for each scene had almost been completed as a result of the cast bringing together and developing ideas in response to the themes that Onodera presented beforehand. Therefore, the subsequent workshop was devoted to adjusting how to show the relationships between the performers, their positions and timing on stage, and what to show through deformation. Watching the same scenes repeated over and over again under the direction of Onodera, who is responsible for adjusting the entire work, gradually makes one aware that the drama on stage continues, including the moments when the performers don’t move. Of course, it’s essential that they move smoothly and express clearly, but what is required here is probably to express the worldview of the work, the space on the stage, and a sense of distance, all of which must first be firmly contained in the body. In our preliminary interview, it gradually made sense that Onodera raised the exploration of Derashinera’s unique “body language” as a project theme, and expressed their work as “non-verbal theater” rather than dance or performance.

Two days before the showing, when I visited the rehearsal site again, the work was almost perfected. A lot of time was being spent confirming whether there were any hiccups in the overall flow and making adjustments. As it is a work-in-progress performance, there was a possibility of performing extracted scenes, but the run-through rehearsals showed that all scenes in the script, albeit in a fast-paced manner, were skillfully composed into a single, complete work. In particular, the way in which the work depicts “time” is unique, with multiple performers playing

“I,” “Father,” and the “doctor” in the sanatorium, repeating the same sequence, and with the prologue and epilogue scenes also being repeated. This is why the performers must understand and express that sense with the body. Here, the body is akin to a pen that creates the worldview, and movement creates the phrases.

Communication during the workshop was conducted in Japanese and English with an interpreter. Even with a focus on bodily expression, halting exchanges wouldn’t be enough to share the image of the work. Moreover, in Derashinera’s works, even slight differences in nuance hold significant meaning. IWASAKI Mark Yudai, who has been an interpreter for this



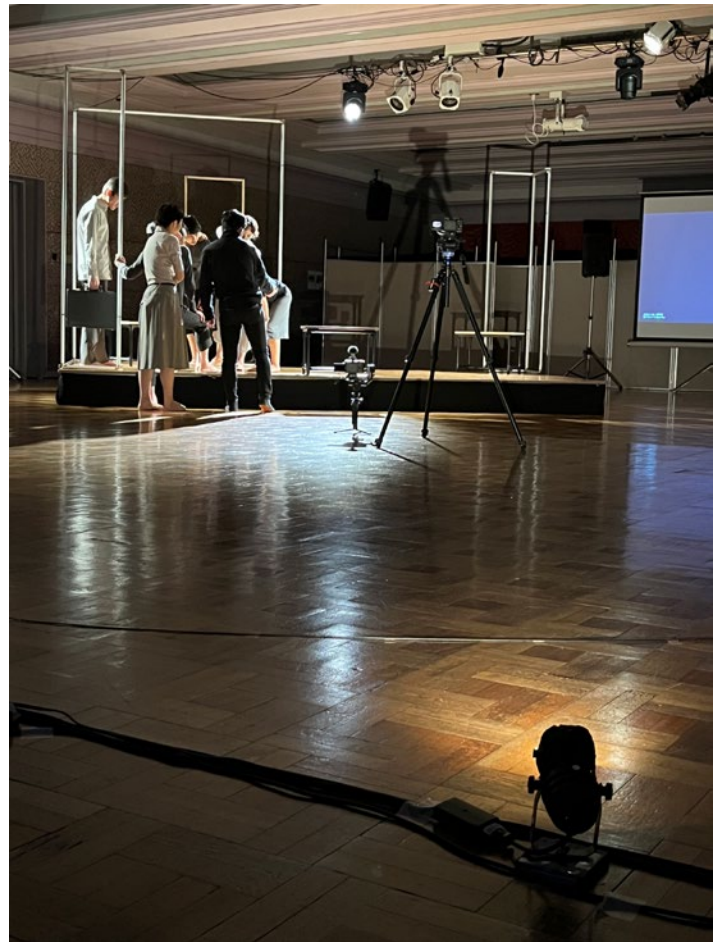
Rehearsals

project since 2021 and is also an actor himself, was impressive in handling communication with the overseas participants while sharing the overall picture of the work and movements for transitioning to the next scene.

The day of the live show arrived. Before an audience of over 100 people, some of whom were standing, each performance was enhanced with lighting, sound, and other effects, creating even more contrast and variety. The decision to reveal the bare space, which can also be used as a banquet hall, and to have a man with a flashlight enter from a corner door at the start, brought a strange sensation that this peculiar world exists contiguous to our everyday life.

During the post-performance talk, when asked about the relationship between their cultural backgrounds and physicality, comments like “There might naturally be differences, but I didn’t focus on it. Here, the body is a path, and through it, expression was born.” (Lee Ren Xin), and “Bodies are different due to local climates, but this experience made me realize that physical expression is also a ‘method’.” (Liu Juichu) were made, which is intriguing considering the theme of this project, “body language.”

Onodera, while asserting that “how to bring out the appeals of being human is the basis of theatrical expression,” dreams of the set boundaries between “dance and theater breaking down, melting, and changing into a new form of expression.” The fact that this project was so successful despite the short period is largely due to Derashinera’s preparation and attitude toward communication, as well as the result of gathering performers who have already received specialized training and are technically and mentally independent. When Onodera’s vision of the future begins to take shape in reality, what skills, training, and creative environment will be needed for the performers who follow? These are themes that go beyond the activities of a single company.



During rehearsals on the day of the performance, everyone checked video footage that was shot separately for streaming.

Company Derashinera, LEE Ren Xin (Malaysia),
LIU Juichu (Taiwan), and Jung Young Doo (Korea)

“Hourglass”

Report 3: Reflection Interview

SUZUKI Rieko

Interview: ONODERA Shuji × FUJITA Momoko

—The showing for this project, *Hourglass*, was a short work in the Company Derashinera style, depicting, with a focus on bodily expression, the strange dream world composed by Bruno Schulz. Including the scenic design, sound, and lighting, it turned out to be highly polished for a work-in-progress.

Fujita: We had actually planned to take more time to experiment than ever before. However, as we also had plans to present a somewhat finished piece through video streaming, we inevitably went in the direction of completing it in a hurry. Even so, I’m satisfied that these 10 days were very well spent. In particular, we’ve worked with both LEE Ren Xin and LIU Juichu before, and just giving them a small seed of an idea, they’d expand upon it vibrantly, so I felt once again that we could create great work together.

Onodera: The relationship between a director and actors or dancers tends to follow a pattern of “convey à reproduce.” So, after the show, I was pleased that in the post-performance talk with the members who came from overseas, there were comments like “I wanted to make the strange world of the original author and the director even stranger” and “I was able to exercise my imagination.” Juichu, who came from Taiwan, said that in her local scene, most projects only demand either dancing or acting, so she finds it very enjoyable to do both at Derashinera. In this workshop, what each person wanted to do and our desires matched well, so I think we were able to form a wonderful relationship.

Fujita: I’m glad we were able to continue this project with *Knife* in 2020, *Toge* in 2021, and now into 2022. While learning from others about contract documentation and overseas remittances, we’ve managed to do these things on our own, albeit with some unfamiliarity. Along the way, it was encouraging that all the participants always had a positive perspective on this project. While we don’t have a concrete plan, after the COVID-19 situation improves, I’d like to present this work abroad.

—The first time I observed the intensive workshop for *Hourglass* was on the second day. At that point, I think the movements and flow for the opening scenes were beginning to jell. It was a fairly fast pace, but what kind of work and discussions led up to that?

Onodera: I think the second day was when we held a workshop led by KAJIHARA Akiko in the morning, grasped the theme of the work, and began to create specific scenes. The idea of having a dancer hold a workshop came about when I contracted COVID-19 during the project before last, *Knife*, and was quarantined in a hotel. As the rest of the cast tested negative and were able to rehearse, I had each of them lead a workshop that I watched online. Derashinera member SAKIYAMA Rina, Kajihara Akiko, and Juichu all led workshops. At that time, I realized that

this method could be used to gather movement elements and create textures, apart from what I wanted to do as a director. By examining each person’s skills—for example, if Kajihara leads the workshop, then sticking to her skills—we can in a way share more of what we want to do. I had previously asked Kajihara to hold a workshop for the contemporary Noh Collection IX *Taketori* to help explain to the performers what I wanted to do, and it went very well. So, I asked about doing this again as an evolution of that, and when they conducted the workshops, everyone started moving and creating elements for the scenes.

—I think what you just said made me better understand that what you’re doing in this project is *directing*, not *choreographing*. The performers must develop their own *body language*, that is, what they can express with their own bodies, in the rehearsal studio and propose it.

Onodera: Yes, that’s right. Also, how they deform or abstract their body language will, I think, become the color of the company. The members this time had good chemistry, even in terms of how to develop everyday gestures, for example. Although Ren Xin and Juichu may have regulated themselves somewhat by looking at the bodily expression of Fujita, Kajihara, and Sakiyama, who have been working with me for a long time, it was very interesting to me how those two, they created a subtlety and energy that no Japanese person could embody. For instance, when Ren Xin appeared on stage and breathed heavily, I felt that “there’s no Japanese person like this.” Even with a slight gesture, the way she reveals her body is different. That kind of energy and strength is something you don’t see often in Japan, especially among women. Of course, whether that’s due to cultural differences or individual differences, I still don’t know. However, meeting such people has enriched my life, and I consider this project to also be a journey in search of such encounters.

—So far, the destination of this journey is set in Asia, isn’t it?

Onodera: I feel that I’m focusing on the region of Asia as a sort of research subject. As I mentioned earlier, the question of how physicality and the culture behind it are connected is not something that can be answered simply by working together a few times. That’s why I want to focus on Asia and keep examining this question. Then, if possible, I would like to show our work in Europe someday to see what kind of reactions we would get there. When creating with people from overseas, I always have a feeling like “we’re all the same,” but there must be some kind of originality or identity of our own behind that, and we must not forget to think about that. Isn’t extolling diversity leading to monotony? So, I feel that clinging to what is being blurred by that may provide clues for creating new expressions.

—During rehearsals, communication was in Japanese and English. IWASAKI Mark Yudai, the interpreter, is also an actor, and his approach of supporting rehearsals while sharing the content and flow of the work was impressive. I felt that the use of “language” here was a key to bringing out the “body language.”

Onodera: There are parts that can be understood even without words, but I think the reason the participants from overseas can say “I see, that’s what it means” is that Mark was there. Also, and this is something I felt when I had Mark join us in the previous work *Toge*, but once we go through an interpreter, I feel that a black box in a good sense is created.

Listening to my talk with the sense of “it seems that’s what he’s saying” may stimulate their imagination. So, even if I were to become able to use English, I think it would still be better to have Mark there.

—So, you are saying that having an interpreter as a third party not only arouses imagination, but also guarantees a certain objectivity that what the director is saying may not be the only correct answer.

Onodera: Exactly. Pina BAUSCH’s company (Tanztheater Wuppertal) is made up of members from various countries, and although they are each proficient in languages, I feel that more than that they have a strong sense of wanting to “share the same image.” I think that’s a good way to be.

In the first place, in international co-productions, we often have to try hard to communicate in English, but as a result, we may get caught up in explanations, or lose sight of what we have expressed with our own languages and bodies. NUNG Van Minh, a previous participant from Vietnam, and I used to communicate almost intuitively without using English. He had good intuition and could participate without any problem, but gradually the people around him started to learn Vietnamese and they would try hard to explain things to him. I thought that process was very important in such projects. In fact, Jung Young Doo, who participated for the first time this time, is very proficient in Japanese, but because of that, I ended up relying on him and making him feel uneasy at times. Superficial explanations came first, and I feel like that might have confined his body. As he takes things very carefully and seriously, I think it would have been better if I had been more creative in how and how much I explained things, even in Japanese.

—In the post-performance talk mentioned earlier, you said that through this project, you aim to acquire a new “body language” and eventually establish an expressive field beyond categories. If there is an environment to further spread the core of Derashinera’s expression, its thoughts and methods, and to cultivate talent, what would it look like?

Onodera: Dance has various elements, and it’s a legitimate enjoyment to see how far you can go in terms of difficulty, how visually imaginative you can make it, and how much you can improve technique. But I don’t aim for such superhuman and technical goals; I want to focus on and pursue body expressions that make people feel the beauty of everyday life, relationships, flow of feelings, and sometimes even clumsiness. To do that, I want to unravel as much as possible the things that have become habitual and commonplace.

After the performance, Ren Xin said, “What I’m doing is not dance.” When Juichu heard that, she said, “It’s Ren Xin style.” Whether or not you can have your own style is the greatest strength in expression. So, if we can convey the message that we should not only hone our skills within a certain category, but also take them to the point where we can change them into our own style, the future of education and the establishment of an environment may change as well.

While preparations for the overall concept, such as meetings with the scenic designer and stage manager, had been underway since around January 2022, the performers had only 10 days to build a relationship with the prepared environment (stage set, co-performers), weaving the story’s time with their bodies. During this process, the fact that “language” (including the script) became an important tool for sharing the image of the work and a challenge is intriguing.

Also, the purpose of this project, which was to explore new possibilities of expression by bringing together differences in physicality based on cultural and social backgrounds, is abstract, and the results are hard to grasp unless you are an expert or a connoisseur who knows what to look for. However, that is exactly why there is significance not only in Onodera’s endeavor to persistently cling to it over and over but also, although it may be self-flattery, in recording the process of this experiment in this way.



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