

国際演劇年鑑2025

# Theatre Yearbook 2025

# Theatre in Japan

NOH and KYOGEN

KABUKI

BUNRAKU

MUSICALS

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE

CHILDREN'S and YOUTH THEATRE

JAPANESE CLASSICAL DANCE

BALLET

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TELEVISION DRAMAS

## 日本の舞台芸術を知る

公益社団法人 国際演劇協会日本センター

ITI / UNESCO

# Theatre Yearbook 2025

## Theatre in Japan

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c/o Kokuritsu Nohgakudo (The National Noh Theatre)  
4-18-1 Sendagaya, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo 151-0051, JAPAN

Tel: +81-(0)3-3478-2189 / Fax: +81-(0)3-3478-7218

[admin@iti-japan.or.jp](mailto:admin@iti-japan.or.jp) <http://iti-japan.or.jp>

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The *Theatre Yearbook* (2014–) is available [here](#).

# はじめに

## FOREWORD

The Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute is a public interest incorporated foundation and belongs to the international network of National Centres and professional organizations in approximately eighty countries and regions that constitutes the International Theatre Institute (ITI), which is a non-governmental organization under the umbrella of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The preamble of the UNESCO Constitution begins with the famous phrase “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” Article 3 of the standing rules of the Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute stipulates that the purpose of the Centre is “to contribute to the development of culture and realization of peace in Japan by deepening mutual understanding and facilitating the creation and exchange of theatre and dance based upon the purpose of the UNESCO Constitution.”

The Japanese Centre has published the *Theatre Yearbook* since 1972. In 1997, it began to be published in two parts: “Theatre in Japan” (English version) for readers outside Japan and “Theatre Abroad” (Japanese version) for domestic readers. The yearbook’s publication has been commissioned and funded by the Agency for Cultural Affairs and Japan Arts Council since 2011, and it is now published to a wide audience online.

Under the same Agency for Cultural Affairs program, we have staged readings every year since 2009 to introduce remarkable plays from around the world as part of our research activities to promote international theatrical exchange. In 2024, we continued the ‘Theatre Born in Conflict Zones’ series for the sixteenth consecutive year, with the first Japanese translation and presentation of a new play created by a Ukrainian playwright in the midst of the Russian invasion.

This year also saw us launch a new initiative in the form of research aimed at gathering information about overseas performances of Japanese performing arts through a survey of efforts to expand activities onto the international stage, which had stalled during the pandemic.

Ongoing conflict and growing tensions in various parts of the globe have again cast a dark shadow across the world this year. However, numerous works for the stage have been created nonetheless, as can be seen from the many reports from within Japan and overseas that appear in this edition of the *Theatre Yearbook*.

The performing arts are a mirror that reflects society, which can help us to learn about the world and aid mutual understanding. That is our fervent belief at the Japanese Centre of ITI, and it is my sincere hope that the *Theatre Yearbook* will be widely used for this purpose.

We look forward to your continued support and cooperation with the activities of the Japanese Centre of ITI in the years to come.

March 10, 2025

Nagai Taeko

President

Japanese Centre of International Theatre Institute



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世界の国際演劇協会センター

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### «Editors' Notes»

- The articles in this publication report on the performing arts in Japan from the previous calendar year.
- Names are presented in the respective style of their country/region of origin. For Japanese names, the order is family name, followed by given name. The names in the contributor profiles are presented with a comma and in the following order (except for individuals with only one name): family name, given name.
- Titles for traditional Japanese performing arts (Noh, kyogen, kabuki, bunraku, Japanese classical dance, etc.) are presented in the following order: Japanese title (English Title).
- Other titles of works are presented in the following order: English Title (Japanese title).
- The English play titles, theatre venue names, and other formal names are the official ones or, when no official English name is available, newly translated for this publication.

# 3.27

## World Theatre Day

ワールド・シアター・デイ

World Theatre Day is a special occasion for performing artists worldwide to express their reflections, thoughts, and hopes for peace through the performing arts. It was first proposed by the Finland Center of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) and officially established by ITI Headquarters in 1961.

The date, March 27, was chosen to commemorate the opening day of the 1962 edition of the “Theatre of Nations (Théâtre des Nations)” —a pioneering international performing arts festival that ITI has been organizing since 1954. This festival has presented diverse theatrical works from around the world, including Kabuki, Peking Opera, the Berliner Ensemble, and the Moscow Art Theatre, among others.

Since then, March 27 has been observed annually with commemorative events and theatrical activities organized by performing arts institutions, including ITI National Centers in various regions.

One of the main highlights of World Theatre Day is a ceremony at ITI headquarters, where renowned figures from the stage—including Jean Cocteau, Arthur Miller, Laurence Olivier, Peter Brook, Eugène Ionesco, Ariane Mnouchkine, John Malkovich, and Dario Fo—have been invited by ITI to share their messages with the world.

# ワールド・シアター・デイ メッセージ

## World Theatre Day Message



Theodoros Terzopoulos (Greece)

008

Can theatre hear the SOS call that our times are sending out, in a world of impoverished citizens locked in cells of virtual reality and entrenched in their suffocating privacy? In a world of robotized existences within a totalitarian system of control and repression across the spectrum of life?

Is theatre concerned about ecological destruction, global warming, massive biodiversity loss, ocean pollution, melting ice caps, increasing forest fires, and extreme weather events? Can theatre become an active part of the ecosystem? Theatre has been observing human impact on the planet for many years, but it is finding it difficult to deal with this problem.

Is theatre worried about the human condition as it is being shaped in the

twenty-first century, where the citizen is manipulated by political and economic interests, media networks, and opinion-forming companies? Where social media, as much as they facilitate it, are the great alibi for communication because they provide the necessary safe distance from the Other? A pervasive fear of the Other, the different, the Stranger, dominates our thoughts and actions.

Can theatre function as a workshop for the coexistence of differences without taking bleeding trauma into account?

The bleeding trauma invites us to reconstruct the Myth. And in the words of Heiner Müller, “Myth is an aggregate, a machine to which always new and different machines can be connected. It transports the energy until the growing velocity will explode the cultural field.” To that, I would also add the field of barbarity.

Can theatre spotlights shed light on social trauma and stop misguidedly shedding light on itself?

Questions that do not allow definitive answers because theatre exists and endures thanks to unanswered questions.

Questions triggered by Dionysus, passing through his birthplace, the orchestra of the ancient theatre, and continuing his silent refugee journey through landscapes of war, today, on World Theatre Day.

Let us look into the eyes of Dionysus, the ecstatic god of theatre and Myth who unites the past, the present, and the future; the child of two births, by Zeus and Semele; expresser of fluid identities, female and male, angry and kind, divine and animal; on the verge between madness and reason, order and chaos; an acrobat on the borderline between life and death. Dionysus poses a fundamental ontological question: What is it all about? A question that drives the creator towards an ever-deeper investigation into the root of myth and the multiple dimensions of the human enigma.

We need new narrative ways aimed at cultivating memory and shaping a new moral and political responsibility to emerge from the multiform dictatorship of the present-day Middle Ages.



## Theodoros Terzopoulos



Theatre Director, Educator, Author, Founder, and Artistic Director of the Attis Theatre Company; Inspirator of Theatre Olympics and Chairman of the International Committee of Theatre Olympics.

Theodoros Terzopoulos, an internationally acclaimed theatre director, was born in 1945 in Makrygialos village in the Pieria area of Northern

Greece. He was trained at Kostis Michailidis School of Dramatic Art (Athens, 1965–1967) and completed his studies at the Berliner Ensemble (Berlin, 1973–1976) while he worked as assistant director, close to his mentor Heiner Müller, Manfred Wekwerth, Ruth Berghaus, and Ekkehart Schall. He served as the Director of the Drama School of the National Theatre of Northern Greece (1981–1983) and the Artistic Director of the International Meetings of Ancient Drama in Delphi (for about 15 years, starting in 1985), inviting many leading figures of the international theatre scene. He was the founder and artistic director of the International Meetings of Ancient Drama in Sikyon (2005–2011) and has been a founding member of the International Institute of Mediterranean Theatre (comprising 18 Mediterranean countries) since 1990.

Since 1985, when Attis Theatre Group was founded, and with the trailblazing performance of Euripides' *The Bacchae* in 1986, he has radically transformed the way ancient Greek tragedy has been presented, introducing elements of extreme physicality and ritual.

Theodoros Terzopoulos creates a theatre concept with techniques of Dionysian ecstasy to reveal the invisible and the unfathomable. His approach gives prominence to the tragic dimensions, giving voice to a theatre born from the depths. It is an unusual approach that, in defiance of any academic categorisation, maintains its self-existence. He applies his method not only to ancient Greek tragedy but also to heterogeneous poetic texts. Travelling for over forty years around the world, he keeps searching for human visions and their history, being a humanist who focuses on the encounter with the Other—in whom he recognises himself.

Over the past forty years, Terzopoulos and Attis Theatre have presented 2,300 performances at some of the most prestigious international festivals and theatres abroad. He directed, both in Greece and abroad, tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, operas, as well as contemporary plays by leading European playwrights such as B. Brecht, F. G. Lorca, H. Müller, S. Beckett, H. Ibsen, A. Strindberg, and contemporary Greek writers.

His two latest productions stand out as highlights of his research and work: *Waiting for Godot* (production: Emilia Romagna Teatro/Teatro Nazionale, Fondazione Teatro di Napoli Bellini, Italy, 2023) has been appreciated as a groundbreaking performance and at the same time completely faithful to Beckett's philosophical reflection, while Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (production:

National Theatre of Greece, 2024), is already considered historical, a point of reference for the performance of ancient tragedy, due to the exemplary restoration of the role and function of the Chorus and for its relevancy to the present.

Terzopoulos has conceived and established a unique acting method that consists of a sequence of physical and vocal exercises aimed at cultivating the fundamentals of acting practice. His method and approach to ancient Greek tragedy are taught in more than thirty drama academies, institutes, and departments of classical studies worldwide. The director leads many workshops and lectures worldwide while also serving as a professor emeritus at international academies and universities. Since 2013, he has been leading the annual international summer workshop "The Method of Theodoros Terzopoulos – The Return of Dionysus" for young actors and directors from all over the world.

His method and work have been thoroughly studied by eminent theatre researchers, while books have been published in Greek, English, German, Chinese, Turkish, Russian, Polish, Korean, Mandarin, Italian, French, Hungarian Georgian, Spanish and Arabic. The book of his method titled "The Return of Dionysus" was published in 2015 and ever since has been translated into 15 languages. Many conferences have been held worldwide as Honorary Tributes to Theodoros Terzopoulos in countries such as China, Poland, Italy, Russia, Colombia, Germany, Greece, Austria, Spain, the U.S.A. and Cyprus.

The Theatre Olympics were founded in 1994 in Delphi by an International Committee that was led by Theodoros Terzopoulos and included - as founding members - such luminaries as Tadashi Suzuki, Heiner Muller, Robert Wilson, Nuria Espert, Yuri Lyubimov and Tony Harrison. From 1993 to today, he has served as the Chairman of the International Committee of Theatre Olympics. In 1995, as the Artistic Director of the 1st Theatre Olympics in Delphi (Greece), titled "Crossing Millennia," he invited notable international performances and artists. The following editions of Theatre Olympics were in Shizuoka, Japan (1999), Moscow, Russia (2001), Istanbul, Turkey (2006), Seoul, South Korea (2010), Beijing, China (2014), Wroclaw, Poland (2016), India (17 cities across India, 2018), Toga, Japan, and Saint Petersburg, Russia (2019), and Budapest, Hungary (2023).

As an outstanding theatre personality who has received local and international acclaim both for his inspiring artistic and constantly evolving educational work as well as for his promotion of interculturality, Terzopoulos has received a multitude of awards including the Lorca Award (Spain, 1986), Stanislavski Award for Best Direction (Russia, 1993), Honorary Theatre Award (Turkey, 2006), Best Direction Award (Festival of Nations, Seoul, 1994), Best Assemble Acting (Beijing, 2011), Yuri Lyubimov International Theatre Award (2020), Sibiu Walk of Fame Star (Sibiu, Romania, 2024), and the Grand Theatre Award of the Hellenic Association of Theatre Critics and Performing Arts (Greece, 2024).

More info at [HYPERLINK](#)

(Translation: Yiola Klitou / Cyprus Centre of ITI)

## KABUKI



Onoe Kikunosuke as Masaoka in *Meiboku Sendai hagi* (*Precious Incense and the Bush-clover of Sendai*), Kabuki-za, May 2024. ©Shochiku

**[Kabuki]**

## Generational change; National Theatre reconstruction stalls

Yanai Kenji

### Generational change continues apace

2024 was a year in which generational change continued apace in the world of kabuki, as one after another actors born in the 1970s took on major roles and leapt to the fore.



Nakamura Kankuro assumed some of the roles that his predecessors enjoyed success with, performing strongly as Sano Jirozaemon in [\*Kagotsurube sato no eizame\* \(\*The Courtesan Yatsushashi and Sano Jirozaemon\*\)](#) at the Kabuki-za in February, in his first attempt at Shinza in [\*Kamiyui Shinza\* \(\*Shinza, the Barber\*\)](#) at the same theatre in August, and as Komagata Mohe in [\*Ippon gatana dohyo iri\* \(\*The Sword and the Sumo Ring\*\)](#) at the Meiji-za in November. In the November run at the Meiji-za, he also performed the role of Sasaki Takatsuna in [\*Kamakura sandaiki\* \(\*Chronicles of Three Generations at Kamakura\*\)](#), bringing to his performance precisely the combination of power and strangeness that a history play requires. His acting differs considerably from that of his father Nakamura Kankuro XVIII in its broadness and acute angles, but he was outstanding in each of these roles.

Nakamura Shichinosuke partnered with Kankuro, playing Yatsushashi in [\*Kagotsurube sato no eizame\*](#) and Otsuta in [\*Ippon gatana dohyo iri\*](#). In the latter in particular he used unforced technique to skilfully express the desperation and loneliness of an unfortunate woman. In the November run at the Meiji-za he also put in a vibrant show of the seven quick-change roles in [\*Osome Hisamatsu ukina no\*](#)



Nakamura Kankuro as Mohe (lower-left) and Nakamura Shichinosuke as Otsuta (upper-right) in *Ippon gatana dohyo iri* (*The Sword and the Sumo Ring*), Meiji-za, November 2024. ©Shochiku

*yomiuri* (*The Scandalous Love of Osome and Hisamatsu*), a speciality of Bando Tamasaburo.

Onoe Kikunosuke took on some major onnagata roles, including Masaoka in *Meiboku Sendai hagi* (*Precious Incense and the Bush-clover of Sendai*) at the Kabuki-za in May, and Tamate Gozen in *Sesshu Gappo ga Tsuji* (*Gappo's Daughter Tsuji*) in September. His acting is reminiscent of that of his grandfather, Onoe Baiko VII, in the way he uses precise, correct technique to suggest hidden passions. He also took on three favourite roles of his father-in-law, Nakamura Kichiemon II: Kajiwaru in *Ishikiri Kajiwaru* (*Kajiwaru, the Stone Cutter*) at the Playhouse at the New National Theatre, Matsuomaru in *Terakoya* (*The Village School*) at the Kabuki-za in March, and the eponymous *Shunkan* at the Kabuki-za in October. I felt his unusually strong interest in the transmission of art. It has since been announced that Kikunosuke will take the name Kikugoro VIII and Onoe Ushinosuke will become Kikunosuke VI in 2025. The current Kikugoro will continue to be known as Kikugoro VII so, unusually, we will have two actors with the same name active at the same time.

Onoe Shoroku played the supporting role of Tsurigane Gonpachi in *Kagotsurube sato no eizame* in the February show at the Kabuki-za, skilfully capturing the character's menace and hatefulness. In *Kisen* (*The Poet Priest Kisen*) in March at the same theatre, he brought a taste of balmy spring and



Onoe Shoroku in *Kisen* (*The Poet Priest Kisen*), Kabuki-za, March 2024. ©Shochiku

showcased his considerable dancing skills to their fullest. He was also able to embody excitement and scale in his portrayal of two characters in a history play: in June at the Kabuki-za he played Fukashichi in the *Mikasayama Palace* scene from [\*Imoseyama onna teikin \(Exemplary Tales of Womanhood at Mt. Imo and Mt. Se\)\*](#), and in September at the same theatre he played Daihanji Kiyozumi in the *Yoshinogawa* scene from [\*the same play\*](#). He also took on some contemporary life roles that his grandfather had enjoyed great success with. In May he tackled Tomizo from [\*Shisenryo koban no umenoha \(Four Thousand Gold Coins\)\*](#), and in December Dogen from [\*Mekura nagaya umegatobi \(The Firemen of Kaga\)\*](#), both at the Kabuki-za.

Meanwhile, Kataoka Ainosuke put in strong performances as Yoshikata and Sanemori in the *Death of Yoshikata*, *Excursion to Chikubushima*, and the *Tale of Sanemori* scenes from [\*Genpei nunobiki no taki \(The Genji and the Heike at Nunobiki Falls\)\*](#) at the Osaka Shochiku-za in February. In April at the Kabuki-za, he performed the two roles of Danshichi and Otatsu in [\*Natsu matsuri Naniwa kagami \(The Summer Festival in Old Osaka\)\*](#). He brought a sense of youthful impulsiveness and power to the role of Danshichi in this Kamigata-style production, and the rich atmosphere of urban Osaka that he conjured up was vital to the play's impact.

Nakamura Baishi gave us a glimpse of his individuality and technique in his



Kataoka Ainosuke as Danshichi in *Nagamachi ura (The Back Alley at Nagamachi)* scene from *Natsu matsuri Naniwa kagami (The Summer Festival in Old Osaka)*, Kabuki-za, April 2024. ©Shochiku



appropriately densely dramatic embodiments of female characters from two history plays. In January at the New National Theatre's Playhouse auditorium he played Kuzunoha from [\*Ashiya Doman ouchi kagami \(A Courtly Mirror of Ashiya Doman\)\*](#), and in February at the Kabuki-za he played Osato in the *sushi shop* scene from [\*Yoshitsune senbon zakura \(Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees\)\*](#). He also brought a great sense of coquettishness and eroticism to his performance as Okaji in [\*Kisen\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in March. At the same theatre in June, Baishi acceded to the name Nakamura Tokizo VI while his father Nakamura Tokizo V took the name Nakamura Manju I. To celebrate the name change, the new Tokizo took the role of Omiwa in the *Mikasayama Palace* scene from [\*Imoseyama onna teikin\*](#). His portrayal was a great success as he switched skilfully between Omiwa's vivacious girlishness and her ominously violent jealousy.

Impressive performances were also supplied by Nakamura Kazutaro and Onoe Ukon, who switched the lead role in [\*Kyoganoko musume Dojoji \(The Maiden at Dojoji Temple\)\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in January; and by Bando Hikosaburo in the role of Danshichi in [\*Natsu matsuri Naniwa kagami\*](#) at the Playhouse at the New National Theatre in September. Ukon also demonstrated



Nakamura Baishi as Omiwa in the *Mikasayama Palace* scene from *Imoseyama onna teikin* (Exemplary Tales of Womanhood at Mt. Imo and Mt. Se), Kabuki-za, June 2024. ©Shochiku

the growing breadth of his art in his performances as Tamate Gozen in [\*Sesshu Gappo ga tsuji\*](#) at his independently-produced Ken no Kai shows in August and September, and in the three roles of Oiwa, Kohei, and Yomoshichi in [\*Tokaido Yotsuya kaidan \(The Ghosts of Yotsuya\)\*](#) at the Hakata-za in June.

### Younger actors exhibit growth as veterans reach maturity

The next generation of young stars are each demonstrating steady growth in their art and I feel a growing sense of optimism for kabuki's future. Amongst the names to watch out for are Bando Minosuke, who performed in the [\*Dontsuku\*](#) dance scene from [\*Kagurauta kumoi no kyokumari \(A Street Performance by Dontsuku\)\*](#) at the Asakusa Public Hall in January, and as Miuranosuke in [\*Kamakura sandaiki\*](#) at the Meiji-za in November; Nakamura Yonekichi, who played Princess Yaegaki in [\*Jishuko \(The Ten Types of Incense\)\*](#) at the Asakusa Public Hall in January; Nakamura Kasho, who played Kumagai in [\*Kumagai jinya \(Kumagai's Battle Camp\)\*](#) at the same show; Ichikawa Somegoro, who brought a sense of life to [\*Musuko \(The Son\)\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in January; and Nakamura Hayato



Kataoka Nizaemon as Hayase Chikara (R) and Bando Tamasaburo as Otsuta (L) in *Onna keizu (The Genealogy of Women)*, Kabuki-za, October 2024. ©Shochiku

and Ichikawa Danko, who alternated the title role in in the Super Kabuki production of [\*Yamato Takeru\*](#). Danko also brought a sense of freshness to his role as Zushonosuke in [\*Tenshu monogatari \(The Tale of a Castle Keep\)\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in December. Other performances that remain in my memory are Onoe Sakon as Hinadori in the *Yoshinogawa* scene from [\*Imoseyama onna teikin\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in September; Nakamura Takanosuke's display of his dancing skills at the [\*Sho no Kai\*](#) independent performance at the National Noh Theatre in August; and Nakamura Tsurumatsu's strong performance as Omitsu in [\*Nozakimura \(Nozaki Village\)\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in February, which continued to repay his selection into the ranks of kabuki actors.

Amongst the veteran stars, Kataoka Nizaemon and Bando Tamasaburo both amply demonstrated the rich maturity of their art. In March at the Kabuki-za, Nizaemon took on one of his most acclaimed roles, Lord Tsunatoyo in the *Ohama Estate* scene from [\*Genroku chushingura \(The Loyal 47 Ronin of the Genroku Era\)\*](#). To his usual generosity and intelligent dignity, he added a crystal clear sense of a statesman agonizing between the competing demands of politics and justice. In April at the Kabuki-za, we were treated to Nizaemon as Kimon no Kihei and Tamasaburo as Dote no Oroku in [\*Osome Hisamatsu ukina no yomiuri\*](#). From the skilful evocation of everyday life in the naturalness of their delivery, to their audacious attempt at blackmail and the subtle charm they created in its failure, once again we were reminded of just how engaging these two actors can be together. The sensuality they invested in their roles of the firefighter chief and geisha in [\*Kanda matsuri \(The Kanda Festival\)\*](#) on the same bill will linger equally long in the memories of the audience.

In [\*Onna keizu \(The Genealogy of Women\)\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in October, Nizaemon brought a surprising youthfulness to the role of Hayase Chikara. When he related his story to a pickpocket, the skill of his delivery brought the



emotions of the scene to life. Likewise, the transparent innocence and strength of will that Tamasaburo displayed as Otsuta highlighted the characteristic plaintiveness of [\*shimpa\*](#) melodrama. Tamasaburo appeared again at the Kabuki-za in December in one of his signature roles, Princess Tomi in [\*Tenshu monogatari\*](#), demonstrating the generosity and flexibility of his art.

Nakamura Karoku has come to occupy a key role in productions, providing solid and reliable performances that knit productions together. This year I enjoyed his Midaroku in [\*Kumagai jinya\*](#) at the Asakusa Public Hall in January, his Yazaemon in the *sushi shop* scene from [\*Yoshitsune senbon zakura\*](#) in February at the Kabuki-za, and his Gappo Doshin in [\*Sesshu Gappo ga Tsuji\*](#) in September also at the Kabuki-za.

Notable recognition this year came to Takemoto Aodayu, the first kabuki chanter to be awarded the Medal with Purple Ribbon. In this year's [\*Yomiuri Theater Awards\*](#), Matsumoto Hakuo was given an artistic honorary award for his many years of contributions to Japan's theatre scene. Much discussed in the media was the special judges' prize awarded to Nakamura Shinobu for his roles in [\*Final Fantasy X\*](#) in March and April 2023 at IHI Stage Around Tokyo and in [\*Mahabharata senki \(The War Chronicles of the Mahabharata\)\*](#) at the Kabuki-za in November 2023.

## Reconstruction of the National Theatre stalls

The setbacks in the reconstruction plans for the National Theatre have received wide coverage in the media. Since the theatre closed in October 2023, both rounds of the tendering process for the contract have ended in failure. At the time of writing in December 2024, there is currently no estimated date for the theatre's reopening, originally scheduled for autumn 2029. Since the closure, kabuki performances have had to be staged in theatres that lack the requisite stage features: in the Playhouse auditorium at the New National Theatre in

January and September, at Sunpearl Arakawa in June, and at Tiara Koto and Chofu City Green Hall in July. Other traditional performing arts including bunraku and buyo are facing the same reduced situation.

A joint press conference was held at the Japan National Press Club in February where many theatre professionals expressed their plights. Various organisations have issued petitions and statements of concern about the crisis, including one from [the Japanese Centre of the International Theatre Institute](#) in April and another from [Geidankyo \(Japan Council of Performers Rights & Performing Arts Organizations\)](#) in May. In June the Agency for Cultural Affairs' Project Team for the Reconstruction of the National Theatre issued a [document](#) about their plans for the steps towards revising the reconstruction plan. In March, the Japan Arts Council, which manages the National Theatre, established a review committee on the reconstruction, and then in July they announced a joint venture with the travel agency H.I.S. to make use of the theatre's facilities during the closure. Another [official report](#) on the National Theatre's current situation and its reconstruction was published by the Japan Arts Council in November, but still no concrete plan for the way forward has been announced. All of these delays in reconstruction are having a grave impact upon the transmission and creativity of all of Japan's traditional performing arts, not just kabuki. The lack of urgency on the part of the ministries and agencies concerned serves only to demonstrate just how superficial their understanding of traditional performing arts actually is.

## Obituaries

Ichikawa Danzo IX passed away on November 19. He studied under Onoe Shoroku II, and was widely known for his work together with Onoe Matsusuke VI. He excelled in lead male roles with bite to them and in antagonist roles like Benkei in the *Daimotsu Bay* scene from *Yoshitsune senbon zakura*,



Yatsurugi Genba from *Kenuki* (*The Whisker Tweezers*), Kitamura Daizen from *Kouchiyama*, Yatagoro Genshichi from *Kamiyui Shinza*, and Kurayami no Ushimatsu from *Yuki no yube Iriya no azemichi* (*Love Story of Michitose and Naojiro*). He was a key member of the Onoe Kikugoro Troupe, and also worked as one of the teachers in the Kabuki Training Programme at the National Theatre.

### Yanai, Kenji

Following a period at the National Theatre, he currently teaches at Meiji University. He holds a doctorate in literature and specializes in the history of Japanese performing arts, with a focus on kabuki. His books include *Meiji kiwamono kabuki: Sora tobu godaime Kikugoro* (*Sensational Meiji-period Kabuki: Kikugoro V Flying Through the Air*, Hakusuisha Publishing), and *Chabudaigaeshi no kabuki nyumon* (*An Introduction to Kabuki Shocking Enough to Overturn the Dinner Table*, Shinchosha Publishing). He regularly reviews kabuki for the Tokyo Shimbun newspaper.

(Translation: Alan Cummings)

## BUNRAKU

They know that the bell  
tolling seven times at  
dawn means  
4 am.



Yoshida Tamasuke as Tokubei (L) and Yoshida Minoshiro as Tenmaya Okaru in the *Forest by the Tenjin Shrine* scene from *Sonezaki Shinju* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*), October 3, Japan Society, N.Y.  
Photo provided by the National Theatre

**[Bunraku]**

## The future of bunraku: The rise of new mid-level performers and innovative programming

Kameoka Noriko

2024 will long remain in the memories of bunraku fans, for this was the year in which we lost two of the contemporary theatre's greatest stars. In late January came the news of the sudden death of chanter and Living National Treasure Toyotake Sakitayu. The year then drew to a close with the death of another Living National Treasure, puppeteer Yoshida Minosuke, during the November run of performances in Osaka. On the other hand, there were some happier moments too. We saw Toyotake Rodayu accede to the prestigious name of Toyotake Wakatayu XI in April, and later the puppeteer Yoshida Kazuo gain official recognition as a Person of Cultural Merit.



Yoshida Kazuo as Masaoka in the *Palace scene* from *Meiboku sendai hagi* (*The Troubles in the Date Clan*), New Year Bunraku performance. Photo provided by the National Bunraku Theatre

In 2023 bunraku struggled to attract back the audiences it had lost during the pandemic. A second blow came with the closure for rebuilding of the National Theatre in Tokyo, meaning that bunraku lost its long-term home in the



capital and was forced into different theatres for each performance. It is fair to say that bunraku now faces a period of upheaval, in many different senses of the word.

Still, let's look first at the positives. The greatest of them last year was without doubt the accession of the new Toyotake Wakatayu XI. The origins of the Wakatayu line are located in the Tokugawa period. In 1703, Takemoto Uneme, a senior apprentice to the puppet theatre's founder, Takemoto Gidayu, broke away from his teacher to set up his own theatre, the Toyotake-za, and took the new name Toyotake Wakatayu. The Toyotake line has continued into the modern era and because Wakatayu I was the first to bear the Toyotake surname, Wakatayu is a name of storied and historical significance for bunraku. In fact, it has been 57 years since bunraku last had a Wakatayu. The last chanter to carry the name was the current Wakatayu's grandfather, who is remembered for overcoming blindness and continuing to give stirring and emotional performances into old age, finally being named a Living National



*Kojo (Stage Announcement); Commemorating Toyotake Rodayu taking the name of Toyotake Wakatayū XI.*  
Photo provided by the National Bunraku Theatre

Treasure. Our new Wakatayu had already passed 76 years old at the time of his accession to the name, which would normally be thought rather old, but he remains ambitious and has declared his intention to polish his art on into eighties. Celebratory *shumei hiro* name-taking performances were held in April at the [National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka](#) and in May at [Theatre1010 in Tokyo](#). Wakatayu performed *Wadakassen onna maizuru* (*The Battles of Wada and the Woman with the Dancing Crane Crests*), the same piece that his grandfather performed when he acceded to the name. In his choosing to take on this very complex and somewhat unpopular play, we can glimpse some of the new Wakatayu's mettle. Later in the year, Wakatayu continued to channel his energies into his performances, for example in the *Teshimaya Oil Shop* scene from [Onnagoroshi abura jigoku](#) (*The Woman Killer and the Hell of Oil*) during the summer vacation performance, and in the *Enya Hangan Suicide* scene from [Kanadehon chushingura](#) (*The Treasury of 47 Loyal*



Yoshida Tamasuke as Kawachiya Yohei (L) and Yoshida Ichisuke as Okichi (R) in the *Teshimaya Oil Shop* scene from *Onnagoroshi abura jigoku* (*The Woman Killer and the Hell of Oil*), summer vacation Bunraku performance. Photo provided by the National Bunraku Theatre

[\*Retainers\*](#) in November. Following the death of Sakitayu, Wakatayu is now the top chanter in bunraku and we must hope that he will redouble his efforts as the new face of bunraku.

Remaining with the chanters, it was also a good year for Takemoto Chitosedayu, who was awarded the [\*Medal with Purple Ribbon\*](#) for his efforts in promoting bunraku and in furthering his own art. Some of his performances in recent years have been spectacular. He excels in the portrayal of his characters' emotions and this year we saw the anguish and pain he brought to the role of Masaoka in the *Palace* scene from [\*Meiboku sendai hagi \(The Troubles in the Date Clan\)\*](#) in January, the conviction and lamentation of Takechi Mitsuhide in the *Amagasaki* scene from [\*Ehon taikoki \(A Picture Book of the Taiko Hideyoshi\)\*](#) in April, and the courage and eroticism of Oboshi Yuranosuke in the *Ichiriki Teahouse* scene from [\*Kanadehon chushingura\*](#) in November. With performances like these, it really feels as if his art is reaching a new peak of maturity.

On the other hand, Yoshida Kazuo's nomination as a Person of Cultural Merit will provide a great boost to the promotion of bunraku. In recent years, the only puppeteers to be granted this honour were Yoshida Tamao I and Yoshida Minosuke III. Before them, we have to look back to the era of Yoshida Bungoro III and Kiritake Monjuro II in the 1950s and 1960s respectively. At the press conference Yoshida modestly expressed his doubts about his suitability for the award. However, while his art may not be showy, his gifts are brought to the fore in characters who possess a core of courage, with anguished, major female roles like Tonase and Masaoka, or with dignified older female characters like Kakuju in *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy)* or Koshiji in *Shinshu Kawanakajima kassen (Battles of Kawanakajima)*. He often takes on challenging key roles, bringing a richness and depth to the bunraku stage.



Amongst this year's regular performances, the one that made the strongest impression was the November production at the National Bunraku Theatre of acts one through seven from *Kanadehon chushingura*. Although the pandemic has made full productions of the theatre's masterpieces ever more challenging, this production presented an impressive marshalling of all of contemporary bunraku's resources. As with the 2023 production of *Sugawara denju tenarai kagami*, split across two performances but the first full production of the play in fifty years, one is left with the impression that it is in these kinds of complete productions that the essence of bunraku can be best experienced. In *Kanadehon chushingura*, for example, it became possible to experience the twists in fate that afflict Okaru, as she moves from a lady in waiting to a wife to a sex worker, and we can see how the desire for revenge that Enya Hangan entrusts to Yuranosuke in act four leads to the emotions and actions that buffet Yuranosuke and the others from act seven onwards. One hears that fewer of the younger generation today are aware of the historical events of the revenge of the forty-seven ronin. Here too, a full performance of the play can provide important lessons.

Amidst all of the casting decisions for *Kanadehon chushingura*, those for the *Ichiriki Teahouse* scene were particularly apposite. Chitosedayu naturally provided a clear sense of Yuranosuke's personality in his chanting, and excellent support was provided by Toyotake Rosetayu as Okaru and Takemoto Oritayu as Heiemon, and by Tsuruzawa Enza and Toyozawa Tomisuke on shamisen. The puppets were handled with equal perfection, with Yoshida Tamao as Yuranosuke, Yoshida Ichisuke as Okaru, and Yoshida Tamasuke as Heiemon. The chanting and manipulation of Yuranosuke were of course both excellent, but there was also a rare sense of life-threatening tension in the exchanges between Okaru and Heiemon which had the audience straining forward out of their seats.

Yoshida Ichisuke as Okaru (L), Yoshida Tamasuke as Teraoka Heiemon (C) and Yoshida Tamao as Oboshi Yuranosuke (R) in the *Ichiriki Teahouse* scene from *Kanadehon chushingura*. Photo provided by the National Bunraku Theatre



Oritayu, who chanted the role of Heiemon, brings a sense of human emotion to the stage and has in recent years frequently had to stand in for his teacher Sakitayu. There is always something of interest in his performances. This quality was apparent not just in his portrayal of Heiemon, but also in his chanting in the *Kikaigashima* scene from [\*Heike nyogo no shima \(The Heike and the Island of Women\)\*](#) in January and in the comical *Laughing Medicine at Shimada Inn* scene from [\*Shoutsushi asagao banashi \(The Tale of the Morning Glory\)\*](#) in the special summer vacation show.

With Oritayu in its vanguard, we are currently witnessing the maturing of a new generation of mid-level performers who, until recently, we had thought of as the younger performers. Now their years of study are beginning to pay off and it is promising to see the quality emerging in this group of chanters, puppeteers, and shamisen players.

Amongst the younger generation of chanters, two names to keep an eye on are Toyotake Yoshihodayu and Toyotake Yasutayu. The former has teamed



up with shamisen player Nozawa Kinshi in the regular scheduled shows to create performances of palpable emotion, while the latter is enthusiastic about mounting his own independent shows and his chanting combines power with savour. Amongst the younger shamisen players, Tsuruzawa Seishiro brings an impressively keen edge to his playing.

For the puppeteers, let me return to Tamasuke and Ichisuke. In recent years, both of them have been given more opportunities to work together and to take on lead roles in regular scheduled performances. In addition to their portrayal of Heiemon and Okaru in *Kanadehon chushingura*, they also appeared together the special summer vacation show in Osaka, where they portrayed Yohei (Tamasuke) and Okichi (Ichisuke) in the strikingly vivid murder scene in [\*Onnagoroshi abura jigoku\*](#). They are at an excellent point in terms of their age and career, and both possess ample beauty and technique. It is a happy synchronicity that they have found each other in the same profession at the same time. One is reminded of the pairings of Yoshida Tamao I and Yoshida Minosuke III, and the current Tamao and Kanjuro. These kinds of puppeteer pairings are crucial, as they allow performers to further polish and improve their art. In the generation below Tamasuke and Ichisuke, Yoshida Minoshiro brought some fascinating and eyecatching twists to his portrayals of characters like Sagisaka Bannai in *Kanadehon chushingura*.

I must say something about the great performers we lost last year. Toyotake Sakitayu was the top-ranking chanter in bunraku, garlanded with multiple awards including recognition as a Living National Treasure, a Person of Cultural Merit, and a member of The Japan Art Academy. His sudden passing is a source of deep sadness in the bunraku world, leaving a particularly acute sense of absence. He was also probably the last chanter to have experienced the rigours of the traditional training process. His chanting possessed a distinctive character, he was blessed with a rich expressive range and deep

interpretative powers, and he enjoyed both a broad knowledge of all the traditional performing arts and a wide number of performer acquaintances. In his later years, illness often led to him having to miss performances, but now I feel even more keenly that his was an art perfect for *yoruri*: grand in scale, while being simultaneously sensitive and dramatic. His chanting of the classic *Yuranosuke's Retirement Home in Yamashina* scene from *Kanadehon chushin-gura* still lingers in my mind.

Toyotake Sakitayu I (1944 – 2024) Photo provided by the National Bunraku Theatre



Yoshida Minosuke III (1933 - 2024) as Yaegakihime in *Jushuko* (*The Incense Burning*) scene from *Honcho Nijushiko* (*The Japanese Twenty-Four Examples of Filial Piety*), November Bunraku performance, 2005. Photo provided by the National Bunraku Theatre

Sakitayu was also rich in human spirit and he will be hugely missed.

Yoshida Minosuke was a puppeteer who built a whole era in bunraku. His performances of female characters were peerless in their evocation of eroticism, charm and beauty. I cannot keep count of the number of people who became bunraku fans after witnessing one of his performances. His art was truly capable of captivating everyone, from those seeing bunraku for the first time to long-time aficionados. It also transcended borders, ethnicity, and religion in its visceral appeal. At the peak of his powers he collapsed with a brain haemorrhage, losing some of his powers of speech, but he pushed himself with unbending will through a painful rehabilitation process and returned phoenix-like to the stage. The glory of his art remained undimmed until his decision to retire in 2021. He lived a remarkable life spanning 91 years.

As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, the bunraku theatre saw some new initiatives. September and October saw the first [National Theatre-produced tour of the United States](#), with performances in five cities including New York and Los Angeles. The pieces performed were the classical *Fire Watchtower* scene from *Date musume koi no higanoko* (Oshichi, *The Greengrocer's Daughter*), and the *Forest by the Tenjin Shrine* scene from *Sonezaki shinju* (*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*). The latter created a dreamlike atmosphere through its use of an animated backdrop based on images created by Oga Kazuo, who worked on *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke*. This collaboration between the traditional art of bunraku and the globally acclaimed Japanese animation industry will surely open up many new possibilities for bunraku in the future.

October in Osaka saw a collaborative performance with the [Yoshimoto Shinkigeki comedy troupe](#). I had been nervous about how these two arts could work together, but witnessing the performance at the SS Hall in Osaka Castle park put my mind at rest. There was abundant respect between the



two groups of stage performers, and the bunraku puppets and chanting were skilfully incorporated into the comedy. The puppets' delicate movements were greeted with gasps of surprise and delight from the audience, many of whom were doubtless seeing bunraku for the first time. The theatre really must begin to cultivate new audiences and I hope we will see more of these bold experiments.

On the other hand, performances in Tokyo were held at multiple different venues: in February at the [Nippon Seinenkan in Shinjuku City](#), in March at [Yurakucho Yomiuri Hall in Chiyoda City \(Bunraku 1st session\)](#), in May at [Theatre1010 in Adachi City](#), in September at the New National Theatre's [The Pit in Shibuya](#), and in December at the [Koto City Cultural Center](#) and [Kanagawa Prefectural Youth Center](#). For the sake of both fans and performers, I hope that a way forward can be identified as soon as possible.

The pandemic has had a huge impact on the performing arts. Traditional performing arts like bunraku have a higher percentage of elderly fans and so it is taking longer than expected for audiences to return to their pre-pandemic levels. If the theatre is to build a future for itself, now is the time for bunraku to dig deep on all its artistic and production powers.

### Kameoka, Noriko

Special reporter of the Osaka head office of the Sankei Shimbun newspaper, responsible for coverage of Japanese traditional performing arts including bunraku and kabuki. Writes the ongoing column *Riken no ken* (*Seeing Yourself from the Outside*). Joined the newspaper in 1990. Part-time lecturer at Kyoto University of the Arts. She has published several books, including *Bunraku zanmai* (*Devoted to Bunraku*) and *Yume: Heisei no Tojuro Tanjo* (*A Dream: The Birth of a Heisei Tojuro*).

(Translation: Alan Cummings)

## MUSICALS



Come From Away Horipro Inc. Photo: Tanaka Aki courtesy of Horipro Inc.

### [Musicals]

## The Light and Shadow of a Booming Market: Time to Face Up to Reality

Nakamura Masako

Japan's musical scene was back on track in 2024 after a rugged ride through the COVID-19 pandemic, delivering a load of impressive shows imported from abroad as well as original shows produced in Japan, many of which were created through international collaborations. Tickets often sold out thanks to



enthusiastic fans of star performers. However, production companies also faced issues—such as building larger audiences and discovering new creators to further expand the market—that remain urgent.

## Ambitious Original Shows

Shiki Theatre Company staged [\*The Ghost & the Lady\*](#), its first original musical in two years. Based on a popular comic book (*The Black Museum: The Ghost and the Lady*) by Fujita Kazuhiro, the show tells the story of a romantic spiritual bond between Florence Nightingale (Flo), who laid the foundation of modern nursing, and a theater-loving ghost named Gray.

Director Scott Schwartz created a spectacular show with elaborate back projections and startling illusions (Chris Fisher). Shiki had earlier collaborated with Schwartz on [\*The Hunchback of Notre Dame\*](#), which was a critical and commercial success. The book and lyrics were by Takahashi Chikae and the music by Fuuki Harumi. The two worked together on Shiki's [\*The Boy and\*](#)

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The Ghost & the Lady Shiki Theatre Company Photo: Takashi Uehara

[\*the Beast\*](#), which premiered in 2022.

In *The Ghost & the Lady*, Flo faces hardships as she tries to establish her career as a nurse, while Gray, whose childhood was a harsh, trying time, has haunted Theatre Royal Drury Lane since losing a duel. The two share their pain and compassion, and the play impressively portrays their unwavering bond in a theatric play within a play. Flo was played by Tanihara Shion and Manase Haruka, and Gray was played by Hagiwara Takamasa and Kanemoto Taijun.

Since Japan's declining birthrate will eventually bring down the country's theater-going population, production companies are eager to create original shows that can be staged overseas. With further refinements, *The Ghost & the Lady* has a chance for international appeal.

Watanabe Entertainment Co. staged [\*Isabeau\*](#), a musical. The work explores the life of Isabeau de Bavière, the daughter of Duke Stephen III of Bavaria-Ingolstadt, who married Charles VI and later became Queen of France. It was the first show in Watanabe Entertainment's new project, dubbed

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Isabeau Watanabe Entertainment Co., Ltd. Photo: Eri Iwata

“Musicals of Japan Origin Project.” Suemitsu Ken’ichi, the creator of stage adaptations of popular online game series [“Touken Ranbu,”](#) wrote the book from scratch with a focus on the love and anguish that Isabeau experienced through her marriage to Charles VI.

The music was written by Wada Shunsuke, stage sets designed by Matsui Rumi, and costumes done by Maeda Ayako. Former Takarazuka star Futo Nozomi portrayed the dramatic life of “the worst queen in French history” with nuanced acting and vocal prowess. Star actors like Kai Shoma, Uehara Rio, Nakagauchi Masataka, and Kamikawa Kazuya filled supporting roles to tell the story of a queen whom Japanese audiences were largely unfamiliar with.

Japan’s original musicals are often based on other countries’ histories, novels, and movies, but [In this Corner of the World](#) is a story of ordinary people in Japan during WWII. Based on a comic book by Kouno Fumiyo, which has already been adapted into TV dramas and an animated film, the

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In this Corner of the World Toho Co., Ltd. ©Fumiyo Kouno/Coa Mix • Toho Co., Ltd.



show follows the recollections of Suzu, an innocent girl who loves to draw. Stage set designer Futamura Shusaku created a notebook-like stage set that served as the backdrop for projections of Suzu's illustrations, and popular singer-songwriter Angela Aki, who studied musical composition in the United States, wrote beautiful songs that fit the Japanese language and emotions perfectly.

### International Collaborations

Imports of popular works from abroad continue to abound, and collaborations with foreign creative teams are now becoming the norm. One example is [\*Come From Away\*](#), a heartwarming Broadway musical based on a true story related to the 9.11 terrorist attacks in New York. It takes place in a small Canadian town in Newfoundland, where 38 planes carrying 7,000 passengers were ordered to land after US airspace was closed down following the attacks.

The musical portrays how the local community and the stranded travelers responded to the incident, showing compassion and tolerance to overcome differences of race, religion, and values.

Directing the Japanese production was Christopher Ashley, who also led the original Broadway show. The cast featured 12 star performers who played 100 different characters, including local townspeople, by switching from one role to another like ensemble players. The players also moved around chairs and tables to change scenes in precisely choreographed movements.

A revival of [\*RENT\*](#), a hit Broadway show depicting aspiring young artists during the AIDS epidemic, brought a unique multinational cast together for an English-language production. Yamamoto Koji, who played video artist Mark in the Japan premiere in 1998, played the same role after 26 years, this time in English. Trey Ellett, who played Mark on Broadway, directed the show in a rendering that was largely faithful to Michael Greif's original

Broadway direction. There were subtle changes in some scenes, of course, to reflect evolving perception of AIDS as a more manageable condition than it once was.

Another notable show was [\*tick, tick...BOOM!\*](#), a biographical musical about *RENT* creator Jonathan Larson, who unexpectedly passed away just before the production's previews began. It was directed by Andy Señor Jr., who played the role of Angel in *RENT* on Broadway and served as an associate director for the Off-Broadway revival in 2011. His experience with *RENT* helped capture the aspirations of the legendary creator and the feel of living in New York in the 1990s, ushering young audiences in Japan into that dynamic.

### More Waves of Korean Musicals

The wave of Korean musicals became more prominent in 2024. One part of that growing presence was *The Three Musketeers*, based on a Korean remake of a show originally created in the Czech Republic in 2004. The musical, about the historical adventure of chivalrous French swordsmen famously known for their “All for one, one for all” slogan, was brushed up for the Japanese audience with stylish costumes and stage sets under the direction of Philip WM. McKinley, known for Broadway shows like [\*Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark\*](#) and [\*The Boy from Oz\*](#).

There was also a staging of [\*Navillera\*](#), an adaptation of a Korean web comic that tells the story of a friendship between a young ballet dancer and a 70-year-old man with dementia who once dreamed of learning ballet as a little boy. Miura Hiroki, once a ballet dancer himself, fit his role perfectly, as did Kabira Jay in his portrayal of an endearing old man trying to pursue his old dream.

Aside from these musicals with universal appeal, there were also shows



that involved historical incidents and tension between Japan and Korea, creating the need for background information and context. [L'art Reste](#) portrayed the life of Korean artist and writer Kim Hyang-an through her relationships with her first husband, Yi Sang (a Korean poet and novelist during times of Japanese occupation), and her second husband, Kim Whan-ki (a renowned twentieth-century Korean artist). Sonim, a third-generation Korean resident in Japan, took part in the translation of some of the lyrics to help Japanese audiences connect with the characters and story.

In [Fan Letter](#), a musical set in Kaeseong, Korea (now Seoul), under Japanese colonial rule, a young aspiring writer sends a star novelist enthusiastic fan letters that eventually lead to a serious incident. The performance tells the story from a Korean point of view, which may posed a challenge for some theatergoers.

The stage performance of *Crash Landing on You* was an adaptation of a hit Korean TV drama series. After a touring [Korean production performed in](#)

[Japan in July](#), Takarazuka Revue Company put on a [Japanese-language version](#) at the end of the year. In the years to come, there will likely be more and more Korean-made musicals hitting the stage in Japan.

## Expanding the Audience for Musical

In November, [Endless SHOCK](#), an original musical starring popular star Domoto Koichi, closed after a run of 2,128 performances since 2000.

Focusing on aspiring performers pursuing show-business dreams in New York, the show featured spectacular scenes with Domoto swinging across the theatre on wire work and tumbling down the staircase on the stage. Domoto kept refreshing the show with new scenes and songs, developing it into a more story-oriented musical. Full of dynamic dance sequences by skilled choreographers like Travis Payne and scenes featuring Japanese dance and drum performances, the show is sure to go down in the history of Japanese musicals thanks to Domoto's devotion and accomplishments.

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Endless SHOCK Toho Co., Ltd. Photo courtesy of Toho Theatrical Division



[The Imperial Theatre](#), which was home to *Endless SHOCK* and other large-scale musicals that nurtured Japan's musical scene, closed for reconstruction in February 2025. The final show was [Les Misérables](#), which premiered in Japan in 1987 at the renowned playhouse. It was followed by a festive two-week concert commemorating the venue's history as Japan's leading theater for musicals, with star actors singing songs from 53 shows dating back to its opening in 1966. Scheduled for completion by the end of March 2031, the new theatre will have as many as 1,800 seats, as its predecessor did, and the latest stage equipment to accommodate a wide variety of shows. Until then, Toho Co., Ltd., which runs the theater, will stage its shows at [Meijiza Theater](#) and other theaters and halls around Tokyo and neighboring areas.

While tickets for productions with famous stars were hard to get, some shows—even critical darlings—saw plenty of vacant seats. One example was the revival of [Billy Elliot](#), the story of an eleven-year-old boy who grew up in a desolate coal-mining town and tries to pursue a career in ballet. The show, which premiered in London in 2005, opened on Broadway in 2008 and won 10 Tonys, including Best Musical. It also garnered accolades in Japan when it premiered in 2017, but ticket sales for the 2024 revival, which ran for a total of four months in Tokyo and Osaka, were slow.

This suggested that, in addition to Japan's musical industry still depending heavily on repeat customers and star power, musical theater is still relatively unfamiliar to the general public. Soaring ticket prices also constrained ticket sales.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, shows were often canceled when cast members were feeling sick. In order to keep shows running, Japanese production companies started casting off-stage swing performers who would step in to cover roles played by incapacitated ensemble members. Unlike an understudy, who is an ensemble member assigned to back up a specific principal

role, a swing is responsible for learning a number of ensemble roles in order to step in when an ensemble member is unable to perform or an understudy needs to cover a principal. Names of swing performers now appear on theater programs, and the systematic substitution system common in Broadway and West End productions will eventually take stronger root in Japan as well.

From a creative point of view, the musical theater world needs talented newcomers like Angela Aki, who wrote songs for *In this Corner of the World*, along with writers and directors who have experience in the field. It also merits mention that the rise of Korean musicals has stemmed from supportive cultural policies on the part of the South Korean government. Similar support would help Japan's musical industry take a step forward, as the country has a veritable treasure box of comics, animated series, and other content fit for the trade.

### **Nakamura, Masako**

Jiji Press staff writer Nakamura Masako is a graduate of Osaka University of Foreign Studies and holds an MA from the University of Illinois. She joined Jiji Press, a Japanese news agency, in 1988 as an English news writer. She was later assigned to the Cultural News Section to cover areas in lifestyle and theater, including traditional performing arts. She is a member of the planning committee of the Japan National Press Club and also a member of the selection committee for the Tsuruya Namboku Drama Award.

(Translation by the author)

## CONTEMPORARY THEATRE



*Love in Action* (London production), NODA MAP Photo: Alex Brenner

### [Contemporary Theatre]

## Listening to the Past, Looking Squarely at the Present

Yamaguchi Hiroko

### That Day in Nagasaki, Depicted by Noda Hideki

The 2024 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo (Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations), which has long told the world about the inhumanity of nuclear weapons and called for their abolition.

The view expressed by Hibakusha (atomic bomb victims) that “nuclear weapons and humankind cannot coexist” has met with increasing sympathy, while at the same time leaders in various parts of the world are using menacing language about nuclear weapons. On the “Doomsday Clock,” the time remaining until human extinction was moved to 89 seconds, the shortest ever, in January 2025.

Noda Hideki, born in Nagasaki in 1955, dealt with the crimes of nuclear weapons development and use in NODA MAP's [\*Love in Action \(Seisankaku kankei\)\*](#), which he wrote, directed, and acted in. The setting is Nagasaki in 1945. Loosely based on Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, the play tells the story of the three Karamatsu brothers—Tomitaro, a fireworks maker, Iwan, a physicist, and Ariyoshi, who works in the church. The audience members' eyes and ears were dazzled by the thrilling plot revolving around the trial of the eldest brother, who is accused of the father's murder; the charismatic lead cast including Matsumoto Jun, Nagasawa Masami, and Nagayama Eita; the ensemble's dynamic physical expression; and staging elements such as the sketching of various settings using tape and fabric—and in the final act they collectively gasped at the depiction of the instantaneous devastation by fire of Nagasaki and its people in the atomic bombing.

Tomitaro, who survives, says: “Ariyoshi, Iwan, everyone was killed equally and the same. And only I was left alive. Is there meaning in that? Your honor! If there's such a thing as divine judgment, it's wartime and this has ended the war, so it's certain this vast number of murders won't be judged, ever...the defendant is not guilty...is this a wilderness of faith? [...] A wilderness covered in black snow—this is the day of my beginning—me, who was left alive in a world that ended.” (translated from the original Japanese-language play, published in the September 2024 issue of *Shincho* magazine)

A story line in which Iwan had been developing a nuclear weapon adds



another layer of complexity, and the idea that Japan might have become a perpetrator makes us think that much more deeply. The play was also performed in London and streamed worldwide, under the title [\*Love in Action\*](#).

### Considering the “Now” in History

Many outstanding works made us think about what “war” and “postwar” mean in a time when people live with the consciousness of ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East.

The New National Theatre, Tokyo, production of [\*The White Guard\*](#), by the Ukraine-born writer Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940) (translated into Japanese from the English script by Andrew Upton), was directed by Kamimura Satoshi. Set in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, in 1918, it vividly portrayed people living amid the three-way battle between the Bolsheviks, who assumed power in the revolution, the White Guard, who opposed them, and the Ukrainian People’s Army, who declared independence, as well as the political situation

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*The White Guard*, New National Theatre, Tokyo Photo: Miyakawa Maiko

involving Germany. The play conveyed a strong sense that “now” is a “point” in world history.

Office Cottone presented [\*The Soldier Tanaka\*](#) in a production developed by producer Watanuki Rin, who died in 2022, and directed by Gonohe Marie. In this 1940 play, dramatist Georg Kaiser (1878–1945) depicted the Japanese Army—the Emperor’s Army—and Japanese society through the character of a young man from a poor farming family. The work’s sharpness and precision were astonishing. The play [\*Andorra \(Andorra—juniba kara naru gikyoku\)\*](#), presented by Bungakuza Atelier no Kai with direction by Nishimoto Yuka, was written in 1961 by the Swiss dramatist Max Frisch (1911–1991). The portrayal of people living in between two fictitious neighboring countries reflected today’s world with eerie accuracy.

The plays of Inoue Hisashi (1934–2010) also continue to pose questions to contemporary Japan. Two Komatsuza productions that left weighty impressions were [\*Tears of the Dream \(Yume no namida\)\*](#) (premiered in 2003), which deals with the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, and [\*Blow the Flute, Beat the Drums \(Taiko tataite fue fuite\)\*](#) (premiered in 2002), which looks at the life of writer Hayashi Fumiko in the wartime and postwar periods. Both plays were directed by Kuriyama Tamiya.

New works included [\*Our Mountain Home \(Toge no wagaya\)\*](#), produced by M&Oplays and written and directed by Iwamatsu Ryo, which depicted the restlessness and sensuality lurking in everyday life, with war lying beneath it all like a river transformed into an underground channel. In [\*Bones and Contempt \(Hone to keibetsu\)\*](#), written and directed by Keralino Sandorovich and presented by Toho and CUBE, seven celebrated actresses including Miyazawa Rie, Suzuki Anne, and Koike Eiko portrayed with cynical humor people living in a country in a state of civil war. Another persuasive production was [\*Katabui, 1995\*](#). Written and directed by Naito Yuko and

co-produced by ACO Okinawa and Office Natori, the play takes an honest look at people in Okinawa who are dealing with the presence of numerous United States military bases. Furukawa Takeshi, who continues to take on works covering aspects of modern history, wrote [\*Investigation from Failures, Nomonhan 1939 \(Shippai no kenkyu—Nomonhan 1939\)\*](#) for *Seinen Theater* (directed by Hitoshi Uyama); and, with Chocolate Cake Theater, of which he is a member, presented [\*White Mountain \(Shirokiyama\)\*](#) and [\*Moon Shadow \(Tsukikage\)\*](#), which consider the poet Saito Mokichi's postwar period (both directed by Hisawa Yusuke).

### 100 Years Since the Launch of Tsukiji Shogekijo

It has been 100 years since the launch of Tsukiji Shogekijo, Japan's first theatre dedicated to Shingeki ("new drama"). Numerous symposia were organized to consider the future while looking at the origins of modern theatre and tracing predecessors' footprints, and many theatre companies focusing on Shingeki presented diverse plays under the heading "Tsukiji 100 years."

Haiyuza Theatre Company, which marked its 80th anniversary in 2024, presented productions such as Ibsen's [\*The Wild Duck\*](#), directed by Manabe Takashi; [\*The Good Person of Szechwan\*](#), which boldly adapted the second half of Brecht's play (adapted and directed by Tanaka Sotaro); and [\*Wailing Lear \(Dokoku no Lear\)\*](#). The latter, inspired by Shakespeare's *King Lear*, was adapted and directed by Higashi Kenji and starred Iwasaki Kaneko, an actress whose name is synonymous with Haiyuza. Seinenza Theater Company, which celebrated the 70th anniversary of its founding, performed ambitious new works such as [\*Little Grebe, Ito Noe Has Gone Back Home \(Keetsuburo yo, Ito Noe tadaima kiseichu\)\*](#), written by Makino Nozomi and directed by Miyata Keiko, and [\*A Darned Perfect World \(Bocchiriba no sekai\)\*](#), written by Takeda Momoko and directed by Isomura Jun. Tokyo Engeki Ensemble, which also celebrated



its 70th anniversary, presented the world premiere of *[Ms. Yamamoto Is Still Here \(Yamamoto-san wa mada iru\)](#)*, by German dramatist Dea Loher (directed by Koke Yoshinori). Bungakuza, with its outstanding roster of directors and actors, clearly depicted the universal love and folly of human beings in Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, directed by Uyama Hitoshi and starring Yokota Eiji in the lead role. Bungakuza also presented *[Washing Stones \(Ishi o arau\)](#)*, a new work written by Nagayama Tomoyuki, a dramatist based in Miyazaki Prefecture, and directed by Gonohe Marie. The play is realistic in its depiction of contemporary Japan while also being fantastical, and the story was vividly told through acting rooted in a sense of everyday life.

Other powerful performances included Mingei Theater Company's repeat production of *[A Japanese Named Otto \(Otto to yobareru nihonjin\)](#)* (written by Kinoshita Junji and directed by Tanno Ikumi), a play that could be called the company's treasure, Theatre Toen's *[The Lion's Dream—Theatre People who Lived in the Disaster of War \(Shishi no mita yume—senka ni ikita](#)*



*Washing Stones*, Bungakuza Photo: Miyakawa Maiko



[\*engekijintachi\*](#) (written by Shirai Keita based on the book by Horikawa Keiko, and directed by Matsumoto Yuko), and Gekidan Bunkaza's new work [\*Flowers and Dragons \(Hana to ryu\)\*](#), written by Higashi Kenji (based on the novel by Hino Ashihei) and directed by Uyama Hitoshi.

There was some sad news, too. [\*Haiyuza Theatre\*](#) in Roppongi, Tokyo, which opened in 1954 and was one of the bases of Shingeki ("new drama"), will be closing its doors in April 2025.

### Kara Juro, Angura's Departed Standard-bearer

In the 1960s—the golden age of Shingeki—"Angura" ("underground") theatre rebelled against ready-made productions and gained the enthusiastic support of the younger generation. In 2024, Kara Juro, one of that movement's representative figures, died at the age of 84. The leader of Jokyo Gekijo (Situation Theatre) and [\*Kara-gumi \(Kara Group\)\*](#), Kara was a playwright, director, and actor who deployed his group's fluttering "red tent" theatre in locations in Japan and overseas. Though he was unable to write or act after sustaining a serious head injury in a fall in 2012, he attended Kara-gumi performances and maintained his connection with the red tent throughout his life. He passed away the day before one of his representative later works, [\*Muddy Mermaid \(Doro ningyo\)\*](#), which premiered in 2003 and was directed by Kuboi Ken and Kara, was to open at Hanazono Shrine in Shinjuku, Tokyo—Kara's home ground.

With his outlaw energy and unmatched charm, Kara was beloved by a host of colleagues as well as members of the younger generation. He left many outstanding plays that, through the power of his freewheeling imagination, created a vast "other world" inside the small tent. Just after Kara's death, Shinjuku Ryozanpaku, the theatre company led by Kim Sujin (formerly a member of Situation Theatre), presented Kara's play [\*Mary Poppins with her\*](#)



*Upside-down Umbrella (Ochoko no kasa motsu Mary Poppins*, premiered in 1976). Directed by Kim, the production featured splendid guest performances by actors such as Nakamura Kankuro and Terajima Shinobu. Gekidan Kara-zemi, a theatre group created by Kara's former students from his time as a professor at Yokohama National University, performed *The Virgin's Mask (Shojo Kamen*, premiered in 1969), with direction by Nakano Atsushi. More and more young audience members are seen in the red tent of Kara-gumi, which continues its performances. Thus, Kara's theatrical legacy is being carried on into the future.

Sato Makoto and Kushida Kazuyoshi, contemporaries of Kara who were active in the Black Tent Theatre, departed from their respective long-held posts as artistic directors of public theatres and are engaged in new activities. Sato presented *Theatre Island—Learning from Zeami's The Book of the Golden Island and William Shakespeare's The Tempest (Engekijima—Zeami Kintoshō William Shakespeare Tempest ni narau)*, which he organized, directed, and

designed, along with various related projects. Kushida actively presented plays at his Flying Theatre Jiyu Gekijo, including *On that summer solstice night, the surviving homo sapiens had a dream that never ended* (*Ano geshi no ban ikinokori no homo sapiens wa owaranai yume o mita*) (inspired by Shakespeare's play), with adaptation, direction, and design by Kushida; and *Oedipus Under the Guard—Solving the Sphinx's Riddle* (*Gado-shita no Oedipus—sphinx no nazotoki*) (writing, direction, and design by Kushida).

### Pointed Depictions of Contemporary Society's Disarray

Nitosha Theatre Company, led by Nagai Ai, performed Nagai's plays *Part-Timer Akiko*, which premiered in 2003, and *Good Evening, Dad* (*Kombanwa, otosan*), premiered in 2012 (both of which Nagai directed). Nagai's play *Women in a Holy Mess* (*Katazuketai onnatachi*), premiered in 2004, was produced by Mixzone, with direction by Hosaka Megumi. The three Nagai plays were performed with all new casts. The respective settings were a dreary

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*Part-timer Akiko*, Nitosha Theatre Company Photo: Honma Nobuhiko



supermarket staff room, an abandoned small factory, and a condominium unit turned “trash house.” Why is it that the settings of utterly ordinary people’s lives are in such disarray? The reasons can be found in the issues facing modern society, as well as in people’s self-preservation mechanisms and desires, and the dishonesty that makes them avert their eyes from the true nature of things. The accumulation of small, ordinary “evils,” which is depicted in comedic form, looms a great deal closer now than at the time of the plays’ premieres.

Contemporary plays planned and produced by Bunkamura sharply revealed societal distortion in the form of entertainment. New works included [\*The Transitional Period \(Hazakaiki\)\*](#), written and directed by Miura Daisuke, which depicted in a grotesque way the tendency to harshly condemn other people’s missteps, and the “ritual apologies” offered to avert such attacks. [\*Typhoon No. 23 \(Taifu nijusango\)\*](#), written and directed by Akahori Masaaki, was an ensemble drama permeated with a small town’s sense of stagnation and the frustration of the workers who support the lives of its people. Matsuo Suzuki, artistic director of Bunkamura Theatre Cocoon, achieved impressive results with [\*Fukusuke 2024—Kabukicho Apocalypse \(Fukusuke 2024—Kabukicho mokushiroku\)\*](#), an adaptation of one of his best-known works. (Matsuo wrote, directed, and appeared in the production.) Centered around a boy who was born with an extraordinarily large head due to a pharmaceutical injury, the play portrays a chaotic world jumbled up with a bizarre religious cult and underworld leaders, as well as ominously but beautifully radiant love. Though it premiered in 1991, this outstanding work was surprisingly fresh.

### Results of Steadfast Effort

Public theatres showed their strength through projects that took substantial time and effort.



The New National Theatre, Tokyo, presented [\*Thebes\*](#), a reframing of Greek tragedies. Organized, scripted, and directed by Funaiwa Yuta, the play was born of the theatre's [\*Kotsu-Kotsu Project\*](#), in which extended periods of time are devoted to individual works. The theatre's production of [\*Dekalog\*](#) ([\*Dekalog 1-10\*](#)) was a stage adaptation of the Polish film director Krzysztof Kieślowski's drama series, scripted by Sugai Ei. The ten episodes were performed over a three-month period, with artistic director Ogawa Eriko and director Kamimura Satoshi each directing five episodes.

Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre undertook the monumental work [\*The Inheritance\*](#) (written by Matthew Lopez and directed by Kumabayashi Hirotaka), which portrays the gay community in the United States. The play was performed in two parts, with a total time of six and a half hours. Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT) presented [\*Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey\*](#) ([\*Shinagawa zaru no kokuhaku\*](#)), which it has been creating since 2022 along with the British theatre company [\*Vanishing Point\*](#). Based on a work by Murakami Haruki, the play was conceived, staged, and directed by Matthew Lenton. Setagaya Public Theatre's

*The Inheritance*, Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre Photo: Hikiji Nobuhiko



*Confessions of a Shinagawa Monkey*, Kanagawa Arts Theatre (KAAT) & *Vanishing Point* Photo: Hosono Shinji

carefully crafted production of Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, directed by Shirai Akira, was memorable as well.

"Sainokuni" Saitama Arts Theater launched "Sainokuni Shakespeare Series 2nd" under the leadership of Yoshida Kotaro. The first play in the series, *Hamlet*, was directed and scripted by Yoshida, who was also a cast member. Kakizawa Hayato gave a remarkable performance in the lead role.

Kakizawa also appeared in the new Horipro production *Odessa*, written and directed by Mitani Koki. The three-person mystery-style play is set in a regional city in the United States. In this quirky comedy, with its swirling mixture of standard Japanese, Kagoshima dialect, and English, Kakizawa gave a superb performance, clearly conveying a young man's interior conflict and maturation while deftly switching among the three languages.

Endeavors in taking Japanese works (including musicals) overseas have

*The Good Person of Szechwan*, Setagaya Public Theatre  
Photo: Hosono Shinji



*Hamlet*, Horipro & Saitama Arts Theater  
Photo: Miyakawa Maiko, courtesy of Horipro

continued. From April to August, Toho presented the stage adaptation (premiered in 2022) of director Miyazaki Hayao's animated film *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi*) in London in a collaboration with a British production. Adapted and directed by John Caird and

co-adapted by Imai Maoko, the play was performed in Japanese and drew about 300,000 theatregoers to the 2,300-seat London Coliseum.

Umeda Arts Theater partnered with London's Charing Cross Theatre in presenting English-language performances of two works by young dramatists: *One Small Step*, written and directed by Kato Takuya, followed by *Tattooer* (*Irezumi*), written by Kaneshima Takuya (based on a story by Tanizaki Junichiro) and directed by Kawai Hogara.

Another new movement is the increase in production sites that are mindful of harassment prevention. In May, the Japan Performing Arts Solidarity Network issued the *Guidebook for the Prevention of Harassment in the Performing Arts (ver 1.0)*. It is becoming standard practice to bring in an expert and carry out prevention training at the start of rehearsals.

Komaba Agora Theater, which opened in Meguro-ku, Tokyo, in 1984 and launched many talents from its small, 60-seat space, closed its doors at the end of May. As its artistic director, playwright/director Hirata Oriza made Agora the creative home of his theatre company, Seinendan. At the same time, the theatre achieved impressive results in a range of activities, such as personnel training and network-building with theatre companies and theatres

Odessa, Horipro Photo: Miyakawa Maiko, courtesy of Horipro



throughout Japan. Komaba Agora Theater closed due to factors including Hirata and Seinendan's move to the city of Toyooka (in Hyogo Prefecture). Many people were reluctant to part with this *agora* (public square) unlike any other in Tokyo.

### Yamaguchi, Hiroko

Reporter for the Asahi Shimbun. Born in 1960, Yamaguchi joined the Asahi Shimbun newspaper in 1983. In the course of her career, she has worked in its Tokyo, West Japan (Fukuoka), and Osaka offices as a reviewer and reporter in the field of cultural news, with a particular focus on theatre. She has also served on the newspaper's editorial board and as a culture and media editorialist. Yamaguchi is a part-time instructor at Musashino Art University. She is co-author of *The Work of Ninagawa Yukio* (*Ninagawa Yukio no shigoto*) (Shinchosha, 2015).

(Translation: Valerie Frasier)



## CONTEMPORARY DANCE and BUTOH



*Shut Up Womb*, Shimojima Reisa (Kedagoro) and Korean National Contemporary Dance Company

Photo: Daido Hiroyasu

### [Contemporary Dance and Butoh]

## A Public Theatre Winter? Hopes for Transnational Platforms

Tsutsumi Hiroshi

The aging, repurposing, and closing of public halls across Japan has emerged as a problem in recent years. One prominent example is the ongoing saga of the National Theatre of Japan, which has been closed since October 2023, the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) process chosen to select a contractor to rebuild

the ageing structure having failed to attract a single bidder. With neoliberal currents intensifying the trend toward entrusting the operation of theatres entirely to the private sector, some have voiced concerns that we are entering a “public theatre winter.” The world of dance is in a similar situation.

### Dance Programs at Public Theatres

Noism Company Niigata, which is led by artistic director Kanamori Jo and has a permanent residency at Ryutopia Niigata City Performing Arts Center, celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2024. The commemorative piece *Amomentof* was imbued with the sense of twenty years passing in an instant and a conception of dance involving devotion to instantaneous gestures. Iseki Sachiko, the company’s sole remaining dancer from its founding membership, was central among a cast that included all twenty-five of the company’s performers, and the symbolic depiction of Noism’s history and its first encounters with and final partings from past members was deeply moving.

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*Amomentof*, Noism Company Niigata Photo: Matsuhashi Shoko

Noism0/Noism1 [“Enkan”](#) was a triple bill evoking the circle (*en*—or “fateful connections,” also pronounced *en*) of time. It included the new work [ningenshikaku](#), the company’s first collaboration with guest choreographer Kondo Ryohei in 19 years; [Suspended Garden](#), a new work by Kanamori welcoming back former members Miyagawa Aiichiro and Nakagawa Satoshi; and a revival of [As Time Goes By \(Sugiyuku toki no naka de\)](#) acutely conscious of the roughly 160 members to have been involved with Noism over the decades.

Kanamori founded Noism as the first step in a “Hundred-Year Conception of Theatre Culture” meant to change the situation of dance first in Niigata and then across Japan, but other municipal governments and public theatres have yet to follow his lead.

At the Saitama Arts Theater, where renovations to counter the effects of ageing were recently completed, the Condors, led by artistic director Kondo Ryohei, performed the new piece [Here Comes the Sun](#). This work made full use of stage mechanisms, energizing audiences with liberated performances lit by mirror balls that glittered with a rainbow of colors.

Kondo also continued to pursue his Saitama Kaiyu project, roaming the prefecture unearthing its cultural resources. The open theatre event [“Born on a Planet with Dance 2024” \(Dansu no aru hoshi ni umarete 2024\)](#) won praise for its diverse, family-friendly program which included segments like “Body Championship” (Karada de senshuken) and “Time Travel: Children’s Disco” (Taimu toraberu: Kodomo disuko). New initiatives included Company Grande, a theatre group which held open auditions for members in time to celebrate the Saitama Arts Theater’s thirtieth anniversary, and Dance Redirection, a program meant to cultivate a new generation of artists. This is an impressive list of achievements, but some uneasiness is still warranted:



"Time Travel: Children's Disco" from "Born on a Planet with Dance 2024" at the Saitama Arts Theater  
 Photo: Daido Hiroyasu



Saitama prefecture announced an open call for applications to act as designated administrator from fiscal 2025, once the theatre's renovation is completed. It is possible that the Saitama Arts Foundation, which has managed and operated the theater since its opening in 1994, will be removed from its administration.

At the Aichi Prefectural Art Theater, Teshigawara Saburo concluded his term as artistic director, which began in fiscal 2020. His successor Karatsu Eri was formerly executive producer at the same theatre. Karatsu was hired as Japan's first dance curator by the Aichi Arts Center upon its opening, and simultaneously serves as artistic director of Dance Base Yokohama (DaBY), opened in 2020 in the eponymous city. In 2024, she helped ensure a successful tour of Japan by the [Nederland Dans Theater \(NDT\)](#) jointly sponsored by the Aichi Prefectural Art Theater and DaBY.

Another collaborative presentation was [Performing Arts Selection 2024](#),



which featured artists registered with DaBY. In Okuda Toshiki and Sakai Hana's *Giselle: A Summary (Jizeru no arasuji)*, Sakai roused the audience with her portrayal of a YouTuber offering, through words and dance, explanations of classical ballet alongside tales of mistakes during her time in the National Ballet of Japan at the New National Theatre, Tokyo. The event featured many other works performed by elite artists, including Shimaji Yasutake, Kogure Kaho, Hara Saori, Suzuki Ryu, Okamoto Yu, and Kakizaki Mariko. The Aichi Prefectural Art Theater has announced the adoption of a concession model, in which the municipality will retain ownership of the facility but grant management rights to a private operator, but its dance offerings continue to be highly favorably received.

The city of Itami in Hyogo Prefecture finalized its decision to close the Ai Hall municipal theatre at the end of fiscal 2025. The hall opened in 1988 as a base for the performing arts in Kansai, and has nurtured generations of new artists through its youth support programs over the decades. In 2024, some

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*Giselle: A Summary*, Okada Toshiki and Sakai Hana Photo: Yulia Skogoreva

Ai Hall alumni drew much attention for their artistic activities.

Bushman, led by Kurosu Ikumi, premiered the new work [2024÷1984](#), which was based on George Orwell's novel *1984* and raised questions about our contemporary surveillance society. Higashino Yoko of ANTIBODIES Collective made her presence felt in a gripping guest performance.

At the Matsumoto Performing Arts Centre, Kurata Midori began her term as artistic director, with her company akakilike unveiling [House of Hope \(Kibo no ie\)](#). This new work depicted marriage as the foundation of life, with Kori Gen delivering a dazzling guest performance as the wedding ceremony's groom.

Both Higashino and Kori had previously led companies selected for inclusion in an Ai Hall project—BABY-Q in Higashino's case, and dots in Kori's.



2024÷1984, Bushman Photo: Haru

## Public Theatres Without Planning or Production Capabilities

Public theatres under a designated administrator system lack the capacity to plan or produce their own projects. Such matters are left entirely to external artists, which turns many such theatres into, essentially, venues for rent. Shirai Akira, artistic director of the Setagaya Public Theatre, has long been critical of the lack of authority over budget and personnel matters that hinder the artistic directors of Japan's public theatres. This year, Shirai commissioned a new work from energetic young choreographer Hashimoto Romance.

The result, *Symposion*, takes Plato's *Symposium* as its theme. Deeply unsettled by the grotesqueness of the "love" debated in this work from the perspective of the values of men in the privileged class, Hashimoto asked a new question: If a similar symposium were held in Tokyo in 2024, who would speak, and of what kind of love? Is it possible to speak of love safely? Seven highly individual artists performed scenes set in places like living rooms and offices, with harassment of various kinds creating an atmosphere of gloom. When actor Nosaka Hiromu took the stage, he spoke of the exclusion he experienced after his acts of protest based on PACBI, the Palestinian campaign for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel.<sup>1</sup> About to continue by saying that ignoring people's suffering is hell, Nosaka was interrupted by the sound of cymbals and his microphone was cut; he began to speak in his natural voice, but then gunshots rang out and he bent over

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*Symposion*, Hashimoto Romance Photo: Daido Hiroyasu

and was still. This poignantly depicted the harsh reality that befalls minorities, whose positions are ignored and who are subjected to unjustifiable circumstances. There was then an unrestrained dance in front of a wall bearing graffiti such as “FREE GAZA” and “LIBERATION.” The piece showed a means of fighting in which dissidence is statically declared rather than loudly declaimed.

Hashimoto’s *Symposion* may have attracted notice as a work of art in dialogue with its time, but other public theatres lack the ability to create original work. In other words, repeat performances were highly visible, from Japanese productions of works premiered at overseas festivals to remakes of works that were delayed or cancelled due to the pandemic.

Sakamoto Ryuichi and Takatani Shiro’s [\*TIME\*](#) was an example of the former, receiving its Japanese premiere in 2024 after being first staged at the 2021 Holland Festival in Amsterdam. *TIME* featured Tanaka Min, symbolizing humanity, attempting to cross the flooded stage by laying down bricks; meanwhile, Miyata Mayumi, symbolizing nature, crossed the stage without a ripple while playing the *sho*. The work was a depiction of human mortality and eternal time.

[\*Metamorphosis of a Living Room \(Ribingu rumu no metamorufoshisu\)\*](#), by chelfitsch and Fujikura Dai with Ensemble Nomad was also staged for the first time in Japan in 2024, following its global premiere at the 2023 Wiener Festwochen in Austria. With a backstory involving a suspicious figure entering a family home that has received an eviction notice amid pouring rain, the dance-like performances evoked the cruelty of the destruction floods can wreak.

Suzuki Yukio staged a new and different version of his existing work *With the Scenery (Fukeyi to tomo ni)* at [Strange Seed Shizuoka 2024](#). In the



*With the Scenery*, Yukio Suzuki Projects Photo courtesy of Yukio Suzuki projects



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work, fifty dancers recruited from the public moved in a group through Sumpu Castle Park, reacting to encounters with the scenery by performing a site-specific dance. The audience was also free to participate in the open dance, which ended in a grassy green plaza under blue skies with a paean to coexistence. In “Vanish: Steps for Disappearance” (Vanish: Shoshitsu no tame no suteppu), a triple bill including *With the Scenery* was presented as a stage work.

Nakamura Yo unveiled [\*Kuniko Rhapsody \(Kuniko kyoshikyoku: Kuniko rapusodii\)\*](#), a double-bill dance adaptation of work by Mukoda Kuniko. This included a scaled-up and restaged version of *The Name of the Flower (Hana no namae)*, premiered in 2022, and the new work *Good and Bad Luck Are Like the Twisted Strands of a Rope (Kafuku wa azanaeru nawa no gotoshi)* performed by dancers Shimaji Yasutake and Nishiyama Yuki.

Yamada Un presented [\*I haven't passed through here yet \(Mada koko toot-tenai\)\*](#), a collaboration with ALife researcher Ikegami Takashi. It was the third entry in a collaborative series that began in 2022, and its dancers performed alongside cutting-edge technology like AI, drones, and VR in pursuit of the essence of life.

Kedagoro, a dance company led by Shimojima Reisa, revived [\*Shut Up Womb \(Damare, shikyu\)\*](#), a work commissioned in 2021 by the Korean National Contemporary Dance Company. This work took the shock and wavering energy of being diagnosed as wombless at the age of eighteen and turned it into a preposterous spectacle and object of laughter for Shimojima herself. In the new work [\*yogakimi berobero Cerberus \(Yogakimi/Bero bero/Keruberosu\)\*](#), Shimojima considered Japan's history of creating fictional monsters to confront the absurd, depicting a theory of national polity through physical bodies.

Hara Saori has been pursuing her *P wave* project since 2021, but 2024 was the first time she staged it as a [\*completed work\*](#). Based on the concept of the first microtremors of an earthquake, the work explored mental and physical attitudes in earthquake-prone Japan.

Independent activities are the mainstream in Japan's dance world, but open auditions used by public theatres as outreach activities are increasingly common, as are strategic public performances to bring in audiences.

Onodera Shuji's Company Derashinera revived a revised version of its [\*Points and Lines \(Ten to sen\)\*](#), which premiered in 2009. Based on a novel by Matsumoto Seicho, the work was presented by a cast that included extras recruited from the citizenry, becoming physical theatre that blended and remixed objectivity and inner life. The new work [\*the sun\*](#), which took Camus's unfinished autobiographical novel and several other works as motifs, was a silent play depicting individual dignity, pride, and family with an absurd touch.

OrganWorks, led by Hirahara Shintaro, celebrated its tenth anniversary with the premiere of [\*Bright Court and Collapsed Floor — my telling was nothing — \(Kotei to hotei — my telling was nothing —\)\*](#). This work depicted the inner world of a Japanese army leader wavering between life and death after attempting suicide immediately following the end of World War II. The new work [\*World: A moment with the wondering age. \(Sekai: A moment with the wondering age.\)\*](#) adopted theatrical elements like dialogue in a piece of physical theatre jointly created by some 30 performers, including participants recruited through open auditions.

### Toward Transnational Dance Platforms

The year 2024 also saw high-profile cases of overseas companies invited to present significant works in Japan. Examples include the NDT's Japan tour, [\*The Rite of Spring\*](#) as performed by [Pina Bausch Foundation](#) and [Africa's École des Sables](#), and Dance Reflections by [Van Clef & Arpels](#), held for the first time in Japan. Considering the field of dance alone, this could be called an adverse trade balance of cultural content.

By contrast, few initiatives in Japan had their sights set beyond the nation's borders. Yokohama Dance Collection 2024 hosted the HOTPOT platform, a collaborative effort by festivals in three East Asian cities (Hong Kong, Seoul, and Yokohama). The selections for Yokohama included a host of revivals of excellent works meant to be seen by the overseas producers in Japan for the Yokohama International Performing Arts Meeting (YPAM), which was held during the same period.

Takeuchi Azusa's [\*kara-da-kara\*](#) shared the intimacy and bodily sensation of a changing light installation with the audience.

Neji Pijin's [\*Stream \(Sutoriimu\)\*](#) contrasted a child conceived during the



pandemic with the work of garbage collection, sketching the flow of life with voice, narration, and bodily movement.

team chiipro (Matsumoto Nanako/Nishimoto Kengo)'s [\*Kyoto Imaginary Waltz \(Kyoto imaginarii warutsu\)\*](#) was based on research on the geiko and maiko of Gion, Kyoto, who learned ballroom dancing to entertain guests during the modernization and Westernization of the Meiji period. It depicted dancing that grappled with its time.

Yokoyama Ayano's *lal banshees* presented [\*Yu-Kei\*](#), which had specially composed live music by alternative rock band SuiseiNoboAz. This overwhelming performance evoked shamanism and ritual through the vivid



*Yu-Kei*, Yokoyama Ayano (*lal banshees*) Photo: Daido Hiroyasu



movements of hip-hop–style contemporary dance.

HOTPOT is modeled on [Ice Hot](#), a dance platform that travels between five Nordic countries. Organizers say they hope to pursue transnational development not limited to East Asia. Being nonverbal, dance is doubtless easier to export than theatre.

### Why Did Butoh Spread Around the World?

Butoh cannot be excluded from any discussion of arts that arose in Japan. The year 2024 saw the passing of several members of the generation who knew Butoh's originator Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986), inviting remembrance of their towering achievements.

Theatrical director Kara Juro died at the age of 84. Under the influence of Hijikata, Kara led a backlash against the existing tradition of *shingeki* (modern realist) theatre, which emphasized literary qualities. He formed the Situation Group in 1963 (renamed Jokyo Gekijo, "Situation Theatre," in 1964), and led the underground (Angura) theatre movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Kara's "theory of the privileged body," which sought to restore the body to primacy, was inspired by Maro Akaji, a founding member of Situation Theatre who was also a Butoh artist and had studied under Hijikata. Maro later left Situation Theatre, founding the Butoh company Dairakudakan in 1972.

The Butoh artist Amagatsu Ushio died at the age of 74. After meeting Hijikata and the Butoh artist Ono Kazuo, Amagatsu was involved in the founding of Dairakudakan before founding the [Sankai Juku](#) in 1975. In 1980, he embarked on his first world tour, with acclaim for his performances in France leading to invitations to perform elsewhere in Europe. Amagatsu established a creative base at the [Théâtre de la Ville, Paris](#), in 1982, and went on to perform in over 700 cities in 48 countries around the world. Searching, in light of cultural differences, for a universality shared by all humankind,

Amagatsu saw dance as a “dialogue with gravity” derived from the bodily movements common to all animals in the course of evolution. His style saw male Butoh dancers with shaved heads and white-painted, enervated bodies quietly confront on-stage spaces imbued with a tranquil aesthetic and move with concealed energy. It was acclaimed as a profound and subtle expression of the Japanese aesthetic.

While many others present at the founding of Butoh passed in 2024, including photographer Hosoe Eiko, dancer Ohara (née Zushi) Akiko, and dancer and choreographer Nakajima Natsu, artists who remain active became even more visible.

Kasai Akira's post-Butoh [\*The Magic Flute \(Mateki\)\*](#) is a dance adaptation of Mozart's opera. Tracing the process of initiation into the secrets of Freemasonry in reverse, the work begins from the choral finale and proceeds to what was originally the overture. The black-suited ensemble (Moriyama

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*The Magic Flute*, Kasai Akira/Post-Butoh-ha Photo: bozzo

Mirai, Tsujimoto Tomohiko, Sugawara Koharu, Shimaji Yasutake, Oue Shintaro) do not reach the privileged ranks of the secret society, but are freed from the authority of Kasai's Sarastro, recovering their selves and being reborn as new humans equipped with friendship. The finale features a *tsurane*<sup>2</sup> that would put the Kabuki play *The Five Thieves* (*Shiranami Gonin Otoko*) to shame, performed while holding Japanese-style umbrellas, that drew thunderous applause.

*A Rabbit Slipping Across a Field, A Lizard Sliding Down a Hot Stone* (*Hatake no naka no nousagi no kasso, ippiki no tokage ga yaketa ishi no ue o yogitta*) was inspired by the book of the same name by Kasai's wife Hisako. Female dancers (KAi MiWA, Kawamura Mikiko, and Ogura Emi) costumed as rabbits and a lizard portrayed by Kasai danced. Noisily remixed music and convulsive punkish movements filled the air with a sense of world-ending foreboding, and the spoken texts of the final section, which touched on the United Red Army, a radical leftist organization rocked by infighting in the 1970s, and Red Army member Nagata Hiroko, were delivered in *warizerifu* style.<sup>3</sup> The work embodied a philosophy of the individual body as synonymous with society, the world, and the universe, reminding audiences of the reality in Ukraine and Gaza, where protecting even one's own body is difficult.

Dairakudakan Temptenshiki premiered *Brain (No)*. A vast human form was depicted in the scenery, and scenes developed like neurons connecting. A brain-shaped paper prop was toyed with by each of the dancers, and when unfolded it became a newspaper equal in area to the cerebral cortex, which the dancers then raised and began to read. Eventually they started trembling, pulling the newspaper over their heads and tying red cords around their necks. They then began marching in single file until a machine gun rang out and everyone fell to the floor, stirring memories of the Japanese people's





history of being deceived by announcements from Imperial headquarters and reports from media subordinate to authority. Maro's grotesque fantasy positioning the brain as both creator and destroyer of the world was a call to contemplation on the audience's part.

Why did Butoh spread across the world? Before his death, Amagatsu Ushio used to say that his company would not have been sustainable had there been no national cultural frameworks or schemes for supporting artists during his first year in France.

It is to be hoped that transnational schemes will be expanded to allow repertory to tour different regions and other countries, rather than ending as one-off performances within Japan's borders. Even if the platforms change, there is little doubt that artists will always be required to have the passion and creative ambition to propel themselves forward.



## Notes

- 1) The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI) was launched in April 2004 by a group of Palestinian scholars and intellectuals. It leads the global “Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions” (BDS) movement meant to shape and intensify political and economic pressure in order to put a stop to actions by Israel viewed as contrary to international law.
- 2) A *tsurane* is a long speech with musical phrasing stringing together plays on words known as *kakekotoba*, performed by *aragoto* leads in Kabuki. In *The Five Thieves*, the term is used for a scene in which the five main characters speak in quick succession, like waves crashing on the shore.
- 3) *Warizerifu* (“divided lines”) is a technique in which multiple actors independently recite parts of a single long line of dialogue.

### Tsutsumi, Hiroshi

Born in 1966 in Kawasaki. Graduated in theatre studies at the Department of Literature at Bunka Gakuin. Worked as an editor of *Art Vision* art magazine, *Apo* entertainment information magazine, *Engeki Bukku* (Theater Book) theater magazine, and *Serifu no Jidai* playwright magazine, and as a publisher of *Bacchus* performing arts magazine, before going freelance. Has covered a wide range of performing art genres, including small theatre, *shingeki*-style (modern realism) theatre, underground (Angura) theatre, commercial theatre, traditional theatre, and dance scenes, and produced many special features. Edited *The Flying Dangoro Party in the Sky: “Rebirth of Acharaka”* (*Sora tobu kumo no ue Dangoro ichiza: “Acharaka saitanjo”*), *Performing Arts in Germany Today*, and *Peter Brook’s The Road to “Battlefield,”* among other works.

(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)

## TELEVISION DRAMAS

## [Television Dramas]

# Past to Future, Terrestrial to Streaming: How Do We Live Our Lives amid Changing Times?

Kimata Fuyu

## *“Futehodo (Extremely Inappropriate!)” vs. “Hate? (Huh?)”*

At the end of every year, [the U-Can New Words and Buzzwords Awards \(U-Can Shingo Ryukogo Taisho\)](#) announces Japan’s top trending terms from the last twelve months. Launched in 1984, this contest’s stated aim is, according to its website, to choose—from among the diverse array of words and phrases generated over a year—the new words and buzzwords that have enlivened the eyes, lips and ears of the general public by offering expressions and nuances that wittily capture some aspect of society, and to provide an annual celebration of the individuals and groups closely involved in their coinage. The “U-Can” element of its name was added in 2004. The overall winner in 2024, when the awards marked the milestone of their fortieth anniversary, was “*futehodo*,” a word originating in the TBS television drama [Extremely Inappropriate! \(Futekisetu nimo hodo ga aru!\)](#) (written by Kudo Kankuro, produced by Isoyama Aki and directed by Kaneko Fuminori, among others). “*Futehodo*” is simply an abbreviation of the program’s title. Buzzwords from two other small-screen dramas were also nominated. Making it into the top ten was the line “*mo ee desho*” (“Isn’t this enough?”), the catchphrase of Pierre Taki’s character in the Netflix show [Tokyo Swindlers \(Jimenshitachi\)](#) (from a novel written by Shinjo Ko, written and directed by One Hitoshi, and produced by Yoshida Kenichi and Miyake Harue). The other was “*hate?*” (“Huh?”),

a verbal tic of Tomoko (Ito Sairi), the heroine of NHK morning drama *The Tiger and Her Wings (Tora ni tsubasa)* (written by Yoshida Erika, produced by Osaki Hirokazu and directed by Nagikawa Yoshiro, among others). While there has long been talk of a shift away from television, with drama viewership falling year by year, it seems that television dramas have not yet entirely lost their powers of influence.

*Extremely Inappropriate!* revolves around Ichiro (Abe Sadao), a junior high school teacher born in 1935 who time-travels to the present day from 1986. The comedy explores the way he gradually learns to fit into the Reiwa era through being chastised for all kinds of inappropriate conduct that was acceptable back in Showa days, including Spartan education, smoking and sexist views. Although its efforts to strike a balance by hearing out both Showa and Reiwa generations as they voice their grievances are apt to make it feel like a morality piece, it drew attention for its success in elevating the tale into the realms of entertainment by presenting it as a musical.

The word “*futehodo*” is never actually used in the show, and the production team revealed at the buzzwords award ceremony that they had never uttered it themselves, either. My guess is that the prize recognizes the hidden potential for this nickname spontaneously coined by viewers to become a neologism. Quite a few people these days feel uncomfortable about being subject to increasing constraints on the grounds of certain words and deeds being deemed inappropriate. The ability to sum all this up in the phrase “extremely inappropriate!” may well have helped viewers to let off steam.

Just like “*futehodo*,” “*hate?*” also serves as a means of voicing the feeling of not wanting to go with the flow. The central character is modeled on Mibuchi Yoshiko, one of Japan’s first female lawyers, who served as a judge in a lawsuit brought by victims of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. While the show spans the Taisho and Showa eras, starting in the 1910s,



it features a heroine with Reiwa sensibilities, who voices her doubts with the word “Huh?”, such as when faced with the then-commonplace expectation that a woman, once married, would devote herself to homemaking and change her family name to her husband’s. By daring to mold the main character into a person with modern-day values, this drama gained the support of contemporary young people and viewers with an interest in women’s issues and social issues alike. The program even generally found favor among elderly male viewers, who had been the driving force of the patriarchal society criticized in the drama. This fact can be attributed to the sense of realism provided by its incorporation of real-life issues, including a lawsuit brought by atomic bomb victims and a patricide case. Media coverage of these cases was provided by Kiyonaga Satoshi, a senior commentator at NHK who has also written books on legal affairs.

### How Do We Convey History?

In October 2024, shortly after the final episode of *The Tiger and Her Wings* and its depiction of the atomic bomb lawsuit, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Nihon Hidankyo (Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations). Although coincidental, it is a striking connection. Several dramas looking back on history went into production in the run-up to 2025, which marks the eightieth anniversary of the war’s end. The time-travel theme employed in *Extremely Inappropriate!* is a good way to examine how Japan used to be and how it has changed today, and to pose the question of whether or not the nation is fine as it is. The show’s screenwriter, Kudo Kankuro, was also responsible for another time-travel drama. TV Asahi’s [\*The Town We Saw at the End \(Owari ni mita machi\)\*](#) (from a novel written by Yamada Taichi, script written by Kudo Kankuro, produced by Nakagome Takuya, among others, and directed by Katayama Osamu) is a remake of a

drama first adapted by Yamada Taichi in 1982 and redramatized in 2005. Along with his wife and children, the main character (Oizumi Yo) travels back in time from the present day to wartime Japan. While the protagonist himself struggles to hold at bay the harm caused by war, his Reiwa-generation children progressively become infected by militaristic values. *The Town We Saw at the End* unfolds in a somber tone to reach a grim denouement, whereas *Extremely Inappropriate!* seeks to depict mutual understanding between the past and the future. Together, these two dramas could be viewed as complementary pieces.

In the TBS Sunday Theater slot, [\*The Diamond Sleeping in the Sea \(Umi ni nemuru daiamondo\)\*](#) (written by Nogi Akiko, produced by Arai Junko and directed by Tsukahara Ayuko, among others) juxtaposes a tale of the inhabitants of Nagasaki's Hashima Island (a UNESCO World Heritage Site commonly known as Gunkanjima) in 1955, during Japan's period of high postwar growth, with the story of people living in Tokyo in 2018. The 1955 strand depicts how Japan was still carrying the scars of war, including people who had survived the atomic bombing of Nagasaki.

In the 2018 timeline, unsuccessful nightclub host Reo (Kamiki Ryunosuke) is living a desolate life when he gets to know an elderly lady called Izumi (Miyamoto Nobuko). Reo is the spitting image of Izumi's childhood friend from her hometown of Hashima, Teppei (played also by Kamiki Ryunosuke). While listening to her memories of Teppei, Reo comes to identify with the people of the island. And, influenced by those who lived through the postwar years, he takes a fresh look at his own way of life.

The present is a continuation of the past—whether we are talking about a century or a millennium ago, it is all connected. Set in the Heian period, NHK's historical taiga drama [\*Dear Radiance \(Hikaru kimi e\)\*](#) (written by Oishi Shizuka, produced by Uchida Yuki and directed by Nakajima Yuki, among

others) attracted audience support, overturning initial expectations that it might face an uphill battle given the overwhelming popularity of taiga dramas dealing with the Warring States period. It succeeded in connecting the past to the present day through nature in the form of the moon and the emotion of love. One scene, which portrayed powerful eleventh-century statesman Fujiwara no Michinaga (Emoto Tasuku) composing his famous poem celebrating the full moon, *Mochizuki no uta*, in 1018, just happened to be broadcast on a night just over a thousand years later in 2024 when the moon was in the same phase. This phenomenon undoubtedly helped viewers to tune into the past.

The heroine, Mahiro (Yoshitaka Yuriko) is based on the author of *The Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*), Murasaki Shikibu, whose life has been liberally reimagined by Oishi Shizuka, because hardly any historical records of her have survived. As *The Tale of Genji* is also a story of illicit affairs, the idea that a secret relationship between Mahiro and Michinaga had produced a daughter, Katako, was a particularly audacious stroke. While the prevailing view is that Katako was Murasaki Shikibu's daughter by her husband, Fujiwara no Nobutaka (Sasaki Kuranosuke), the drama posits that she was actually Michinaga's daughter and that Nobutaka acknowledged and accepted this fact. Just as the moon begins to wane as soon as it reaches fullness, nobody is able to preserve happiness unaltered in their lives—it will always shift and change shape. Oishi Shizuka—the author of this tale, with its basso continuo of the emptiness of life and the waxing and waning of the moon—was awarded the 2024 [Kikuchi Kan Prize](#).

### How Do We Live Our Lives in Increasingly Difficult Times?

In Japanese, the word “*takuran*” (brood parasitism, literally “entrusting an egg”) is used to describe a situation in which a woman has a child fathered by

a man other than her husband, but raises it with her spouse. It refers to practices found in avian ecosystems, as typified by the cuckoo, which lays its eggs in another bird's nest and leaves the nest's owner to hatch the egg and raise the chick. *Dear Radiance* featured exactly that, with the heroine's husband raising another man's child. Dramas depicting cuckoos in the nest were prominent among 2024's televisual offerings. One was NHK's [\*Swallows \(Tsubame wa modotte konai\)\*](#) (from a novel written by Kirino Natsuo, written by Osada Ikue, produced by Shimizu Takuya and Iso Tomoaki, and directed by Tanaka Kenji, among others), while the other was Fuji TV's [\*My Treasure \(Watashi no takaramono\)\*](#) (written by Ichikawa Takayuki, produced by Mikasa Reiko and directed by Mitsuhashi Toshiyuki, among others). *Swallows* is based on the novel *The Swallows Don't Return* by Kirino Natsuo, who has won both the Yoshikawa Eiji Prize and the Mainichi Art Award. Poverty-stricken heroine Riki (Ishibashi Shizuka) agrees to become a surrogate in order to cover her living costs, but even though she has been paid a large sum of money, she conceives a child fathered by a man other than the client. With an astute gaze, this series portrays the situation of a woman driven by poverty to choose surrogate motherhood, depicting a young person somewhat lacking in morals and common sense, who is overwhelmed by circumstance. The show won an Excellence Award for Series Drama in [the Tokyo Drama Award 2024](#).

In *My Treasure*, the heroine, Miwa (Matsumoto Wakana), is struggling under the burden of harassment by her husband (Tanaka Kei) when she encounters an old flame (Fukazawa Tatsuya) and becomes pregnant by him. She decides to have the child and raise it as her husband's. Why has this human version of brood parasitism become a topic right now? Only women can become pregnant, and they are expected to have children in order to continue the family line and humanity itself. However, the fall in birth rates shows no sign of stopping. This is because childbirth places a significant



physical and economic burden on women. It feels as though depictions of cuckoos in human form are being used as a device to question anew the significance of childbirth and raising children.

While life is hard for women, a growing number of single middle-aged men are also encountering difficulties. Winner of the monthly Galaxy Award for May 2024 was NHK's late-night drama [\*An Older Guy's VR First Love \(VR ojisan no hatsukoi\)\*](#) (from a manga by Violence Tomoko, written by Morino Mash, produced by Kuwano Tomohiro and directed by Yoshida Teruyuki, among others). It centers on a lonely middle-aged man (Nomaguchi Toru) who enters the virtual reality world disguised as a female high school student (Kurasawa Anna) and falls in love with the avatar of a beautiful girl (Igeta Hiroe). Based on a manga, it was an outstanding portrayal of an emotional tale tinged with bitterness that confronts social issues in the form of the growing number of single people, sexual diversity, and virtual reality. Also gracing screens was TV Tokyo's buddy drama centered on young assassins, [\*Baby Walkure Everyday! \(Beibi warukyure eburidei!\)\*](#) (written and directed by Sakamoto Yugo and produced by Kase Mina, among others), which humorously depicts the disconnect between the tough profession of assassin and the lax attitudes to daily life of the young people engaged in it. I would go so far as to say that the portrayals of these two young women (Takaishi Akari and Izawa Saori) called to mind young people in modern society who cannot avoid drifting into crime through illegal part-time jobs and the like.

### The Age of Streaming

While I mentioned the shift away from television earlier, streaming drama is thriving to an equivalent degree. *Tokyo Swindlers*, from which the aforementioned top ten buzzword “*mo ee desho*” emerged, is crime entertainment centered on fraudsters who swindle people out of vast sums of money in real

estate scams in which they use impostors to pose as landowners offering land for sale. Inspired by an actual 2017 case in which construction company Sekisui House fell prey to a scam of this nature, the drama proved to be a powerful draw for viewers, who found themselves compulsively watching one episode after another.

*Tokyo Swindlers* was just one of a number of outstanding dramas put out in quick succession by Netflix in 2024, including real-life tale of women's professional wrestling [\*The Queen of Villains \(Gokuaku joou\)\*](#) and [\*Beyond Goodbye \(Sayonara no tsuzuki\)\*](#), a love story revolving around a heart transplant. Given the favorable conditions offered by streaming platforms, including ample budgets, fewer constraints than terrestrial broadcasting and the ability to broaden viewership to audiences overseas, quite a few creators are shifting the focus of their activities from terrestrial to streaming. Emmy and Grammy award-winning series [\*Shogun\*](#) is an American production that Japanese actor Sanada Hiroyuki not only starred in, but also produced. Lamentably, one does have to wonder why it could not have been made in Japan, but *Shogun* might yet trigger a return to period drama in Japan as well.

Either way, the number of productions on both terrestrial channels and streaming platforms is growing, while the number watched by everyone simultaneously, as in the old days, is falling. With drama-watching tending to be more segmented by individual preferences, cases in which shows become the source of buzzwords among the public look set to decline. Due to the influence of dramas from overseas, more home-grown dramas now involve a team of several scriptwriters. Winner of the monthly Galaxy Award for November 2024, NHK's [\*30,000,000 Yen \(Sanzenman\)\*](#) (written by Yashige Sakiko, Naka Tomomi, Yamaguchi Tomoyuki and Matsui Shu, produced by Ueda Akiko, Nakayama Hideo and Okubo Atsushi, and directed by Hosaka Keita, among others) depicted a couple who become embroiled in illegal

part-time work. The high quality of this drama was the result of two years of effort put into assembling a team of scriptwriters and developing the script. I hear that this show, too, was created with an eye to streaming overseas. From now on, there will be a need to make dramas that are worth broadcasting to the world.

### Kimata, Fuyu

Reports on and reviews dramas, films and plays, among others, as well as writing novelizations. Author of books including *The Net and Morning Dramas* (*Netto to asadora*), *Morning Dramas for Everyone* (*Minna no asadora*), *Unsolved Cases, SPEC, Decoded* (*Keizoku, SPEC, kaidoku*) and *Challengers: Top Actors' Reportage* (*Chosensha-tachi Toppu akutazu rporutaju*), and the novelizations *Natsuzora: The Serial TV Novel* (*Renzoku terebi shosetsu Natsuzora*) and *What Will You Do, Ieyasu?* (*Taiga dorama do suru Ieyasu*). Has also edited books including *Firsthand Accounts from Ninagawa Yukio's Rehearsal Room* (*Ninagawa Yukio no keikoba kara*) and *Ninagawa Yukio: Narrative of the Body* (*Ninagawa Yukio shintaiteki monogatiriron*). Will mark ten years of publishing daily reviews of morning dramas in [the online magazine Cinemas+](#) in March 2025. Member of the Japan P.E.N. Club.

(Translation: Eleanor Goldsmith)

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※一部の携帯電話・IP電話等からはご利用いただけません。

宝塚歌劇公式ホームページ

<https://kageki.hankyu.co.jp/>

夢と感動のステージへ…

**宝塚友の会**がご案内します！

一般前売に先がけてチケットをお買い求めいただけます。  
入会申込書のご請求・お問い合わせは

**Tel.0570-00-8739**

(10:00~17:00 / 月曜定休)

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TAKARAZUKA REVUE





The National Theatre presents  
the traditional performing arts of Japan:  
Kabuki, Bunraku, Buyo, Hogaku, Noh, Engei, etc.



# NATIONAL THEATRE

Closure at the end of October 2023.  
After closing, organised performances will be held at various theatres.

Telephone reservation : 03-3230-3000 (Box Office)

URL: <https://www.ntj.jac.go.jp/> Tel.03-3265-7411

## NATIONAL NOH THEATRE

4-18-1 Sendagaya, Shibuya-ku,  
Tokyo 151-0051  
Tel.03-3423-1331

## NATIONAL BUNRAKU THEATRE

1-12-10 Nipponbashi, Chuo-ku,  
Osaka 542-0073  
Tel.06-6212-2531

## NATIONAL THEATRE OKINAWA

4-14-1 Jitchaku, Urasoe City,  
Okinawa 901-2122  
Tel.098-871-3311

# **A REAL THEATER OF THE PEOPLE BY THE PEOPLE FOR THE PEOPLE in TOKYO:**

## **TOMIN GEKIJO**

### **WHAT MAKES UP A THEATER?**

Playhouses, performers and the audience. But what is indispensable?  
TOMIN GEKIJO thinks that people are.

TOMIN GEKIJO has no playhouse or troupe of actors, but does possess a permanent audience, the number of its members amounting to about 10 thousand today.

### **EACH HAS HIS OWN TASTE**

TOMIN GEKIJO organizes 3 series: ENGEKI, KABUKI and SHINGEKI.  
Their programs are selected by project committees composed of well known specialists and representatives among the members. Particularly in the theater series, members can choose among about 60 different plays a year according to their own tastes.

### **TOO EXPENSIVE OR NOT, THAT IS THE QUESTION**

Once having paid membership fee, which costs 1000 Yen for an individual member, members can enjoy many programs with season tickets discounted 20 or 30%

### **HEAVEN CREATES A MAN NEITHER ABOVE NOR UNDER A MAN**

said an ancient opinion leader Yukichi FUKUZAWA. TOMIN GEKIJO has succeeded in keeping this principal by establishing an audience system which consists in distributing booked seats by a rotation system.

### **WHAT DOES TOMIN GEKIJO MEAN?**

TOMIN means a citizen of Tokyo and GEKIJO a theater. Under the generous support of the Tokyo Government and the Japan Theater Promoters Guild, it also makes possible "Theater going at half-price" for Tokyoites.

TOMIN GEKIJO, a new audience organization, aims at an open theater and actively seeks contacts with foreign theaters.

**TOMIN GEKIJO:** 5-1-7 Ginza Chuo-ku Tokyo 104-8077 Japan Phone : 03-3572-4311