

The future of Japanese theater lies in individuality

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

In April 2010, Junnosuke Tada became Japan's youngest-ever artistic director of a public theater when, at age 33, he was appointed by the Kirari Fujimi Theater in Fujimi, Saitama Prefecture.

Such meteoric progress (in Japanese terms) was an emphatic vindication of Tada's decision to concentrate on creating live theater with his fellow students rather than on his film course at Nihon University College of Art. He chose the stage, he said, because he realized it was easier to be creative sooner and more cheaply through theater than film. So, after he graduated in 2001, he founded his Tokyo Death Lock (TDL) theater company with his friends.

Two years later, while still working with TDL, Tada reached a turning point when he also joined leading dramatist Oriza Hirata's Tokyo-based Seinenand company. At Seinenand, he was given the opportunity to direct more experienced actors and learn about business and how subsidies are awarded. Then in 2005, Tada added a third string to his bow when he started working part-time with the sound staff at the Kirari Fujimi theater — where TDL was awarded a three-year contract as its resident company in 2008.

When Tada applied for the post of artistic director at Kirari Fujimi, he beat 25 other applicants, and since his appointment he has actively reached out to involve the people of suburban Fujimi, as well as hosted companies from Fukushima and Aomori prefectures and even one from France.

With TDL about to embark on a nine-stop tour with his acclaimed 2006 play "Saisei" ("Rebirth") — which examines death through group suicides — Tada, now 34, made time last week to share some of his insights and exciting ideas.

You have said that on this tour you will adapt "Saisei" differently for each place. Why is that, and what will be different?

Well, I'm in pretty close contact with many regional theater people, and the idea is to work with them on permutations from

three versions of presenting the play. Those are TDL's version: a workshop related to the play with local people; and an original, new performance, based on "Saisei," with local actors. In some places we'll do two of the approaches, and in others just one — but we will always strive to be flexible enough to create different productions suited each area.

Most young dramatists concentrate on making their names in Tokyo. Why is it you are so interested in these different regions?

I strongly believe that if we want to stimulate Japanese theater overall, we shouldn't just concentrate on Tokyo. We have to raise theater's profile and standards nationwide, because there are many cultures and viewpoints across the country.

In fact, I think that one of the main missions of us dramatists in our 30s and 40s is to forge liaisons with regional theaters. We need to communicate both ways between big cities and local areas and pass on the fruits of that to the next generation.

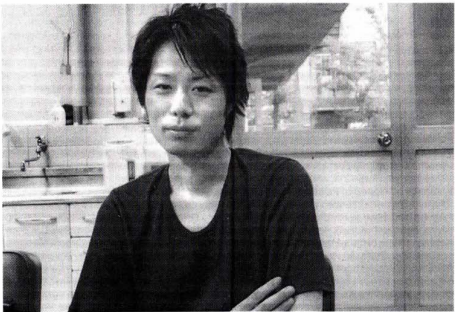
Why is it that Japan doesn't have a rich theater culture comparable to those of Britain or the United States?
Up till now, I think most Japanese people didn't care much about culture other than traditional culture. I've always found that strange, but, like many modern cultural issues in this country, I think it's related to Japan having lost the war.

Although the postwar leaders of the U.S. Occupation wanted Japan to become rich economically so that its people would be great consumers, I don't think they were interested in them being culturally mature citizens. After all, a new modern culture would be likely to foster an open-minded, liberal outlook that would have complicated Japan's relationship as a passive partner of the United States.

But I think things are starting to change.

What do you regard as the main role of a public theater?

The most important thing is to appeal to and attract a local audience. Kirari Fujimi is a community center as well as a theater



Bringing about change:
Junnosuke Tada, the youngest-ever artistic director of a public theater in Japan, says young dramatists need to establish a liaison between local and city theaters and pass on the fruits of that relationship to the next generation.
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venue, so we have lots of exhibitions and events organized by local people. I hope our theater is a place where such people can connect with each other — and that it will make them more interested in our stagings, too. Overall, the theater can help to make links between people and expand their artistic activities.

Nowadays, some people drop in just to say hello to me when they are near the theater. Quite recently, a young woman who joined my workshop a few years ago came and asked me to read a play she'd written. So I read it and gave her some advice. It's really fun for me to work as the artistic director.

We especially attach importance to creating children's workshops, because it's easier to be an influence on youngsters than adults. It would be great if some of the kids end up loving theater and it becomes part of their lives.

Do the children's reactions make you optimistic about the future of theater in Japan?

Well, art often makes people confront who they are, but many Japanese — maybe because of our education system — believe we should all react to everything the same

way and all arrive at the same conclusions and be looking in the same direction.

But an artwork comes into being from everybody being different and reacting differently to it, which is not compatible with typical Japanese thinking.

In my workshops, for instance, I find people of all ages don't like to be individual about things because they are told that nails that stand up get hammered down. I encourage the youngsters in particular to have their own opinions and ideas. It's simple, but it's very important, because if they abandon the rich culture of live theater and just relate to each other through social network sites, etc., there will be more and more people unable to really communicate with each other in everyday life.

"Saisei" ("Rebirth") runs from July 16-24 at the ST Spot, an 8-min. walk from JR Yokohama Station. It then tours (in varying versions) to Kyoto, Fukuroi in Shizuoka, Seoul, Fukuoka, Kita-Kyushu, Aomori and Fujimi in Saitama. For more details, call Tokyo Death Lock at (080) 3360-2180 or visit <http://deathlock.specters.net> (Japanese only).