stage

Arts Council Tokyo sets its sights high

Nobuko Tanaka
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

"For decades, many people involved in the arts — including producers, creators, administrators and academics — were pointing to the need for an overall arts-policy body in Tokyo, and finally Arts Council Tokyo came into being in November 2012," its program director, Yuko Ishiwata, noted with some satisfaction.

But in a recent chat in her cozy office next to the Ryogoku Sumo Hall in downtown Tokyo, Ishiwata went on to explain, "In Japan it had almost always been bureaucrats — who were obviously not art experts — who used to evaluate projects and award funds. Now, ACT is staffed by specialists hired for the job, so it's far better than that even though we are part of the Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture, a public service corporation under the Tokyo Metropolitan Government."

Though ACT isn't the entirely independent, so-called arm's-length body many had wished for, as far as the leading playwright and director Oriza Hirata is concerned it's still a great leap forward.

Interviewed by phone this week, Hirata — a professor at Tokyo University of the Arts and founder of the Tokyo-based Seinendan theater company — hailed the creation of ACT, saying, "The arts have traditionally been supported privately in Japan, but since the 1990s they have been receiving more public money. Consequently, there obviously needed to be an organization to evaluate proposals with a specialist perspective and allocate tax money effectively for the public's benefit in the way most Western countries have been doing for ages."

For Ishiwata, though, this is just the start of ACT's journey — one in which all those involved "are going to adjust and grope for the most suitable and effective way ahead."

However, addressing those who had longed for an entirely arm's-length body, she continued, "I think this new ACT system — though not in the independent, stand-alone mold of Arts Council England, for example — can still work as a great stepping stone between bureaucrats in the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and all the artists and creators themselves. We can be an excellent interpreter for the arts and forge good relationships between two groups who normally hardly ever speak the same language."

In practical terms, Ishiwata explained that ACT currently engages in support programs, pilot programs and strategic programs — while a core aim is to support young artists and art managers as a means to nurture the future of the arts in Japan.

Yuko Ishiwata NOBUKO TANAKA

"Already we have organized several performances and projects as pilot programs, and in Tokyo there's such a wonderful diversity, from ancient traditional arts to the digital-era creativity characteristic of areas such as Electric City in Akihabara. So, for example, we've already run an event based on geisha culture, and an open seminar about the vocaloid virtual idol Miku Hatsune. So we very much aim to involve non-regular arts participants in order to develop potential audiences."

Meanwhile, as its other main pilot-program strand, ACT has launched an Arts Academy for talented young people — something that particularly appeals to Sho Ryuzanji, the acclaimed globe-trotting director and founder of the Tokyo-based Ryuzanji Company, who said he "especially hopes it will foster an atmosphere in which to raise the next generation of art managers and producers."

At present, the Arts Academy is providing financial and practical support for seven upcoming artists, producers and administrators for up to two years so they can concentrate on their research or studies in their fields — including theater, traditional arts, visual arts and music.

Fostering developing talent is a key element of ACT's support program, too. As Ishiwata explained, "We particularly want to support and subsidize young artists — even unknowns — and back them up to perform abroad. Then through them we want to make firm links with foreign organizations to build on in the future."

In pursuing that aim, ACT is also hoping to further a strategic program to bolster Japan's competitiveness in the burgeoning international arts market. For instance, South Korea — whose current Arts Council has its roots back in 1973 — has found a huge overseas market for K-pop and K-musicals. Singapore, too — where a National Arts Council was set up in 1991 — now notably hosts the Singapore Arts Festival, one of Asia's biggest arts events.

In that vein, from this year ACT will oversee Japan's biggest annual performing arts event, Festival/Tokyo in place of Tokyo Metropolitan Government. With Festival/Tokyo already having a superb cutting-edge reputation both at home and internationally under its mainly youthful leadership, the handover will surely be a litmus test of ACT's all-round caliber.

Then there's the 2020 Summer Olympics, which could be Tokyo's biggest-ever boost for the arts, and which offer an unparalleled opportunity for ACT to promote Japan's capital to the top global league of cultural hubs. Hence as one of its strategic programs, in February ACT held an open forum with the British Council titled "Sharing the legacy — from London 2012 to Tokyo 2020," with speakers including Ruth Mackenzie, director of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad and London 2012 Festival.

Though Ishiwata repeated there that the structure ACT and its English sister, ACE, are currently so different, she was adamant this would not impinge on ACT's Olympian task. And with Osaka and Okinawa having also recently set up arts bodies akin to ACT, the dramatist and academic Hirata echoed Ishiwata's positive outlook, saying, "By its nature art has an invisible future and artists are used to starting from zero and bringing forth something nobody has ever seen before. So the possibilities now are enormous if we all give our wholehearted, positive support."

That way, Tokyo's, Osaka's and Okinawa's arts bodies, and others yet to emerge, may one day morph into a wondrous national organization — one with lavish public finance but its own arm's-length arts policy.

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Making waves: A portable shrine created by Tokyo University of the Arts students under an ACT pilot program is paraded on the Sumida River near Tokyo SkyTree in the city's downtown during an evening-sun festival in October 2013. © SHIHO KITO

Could England's lead cultural agency be a long-standing template for Japan as a whole?

Akiko Yanagisawa
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Arts Council England, generally referred to as the Arts Council, is a national agency which, in its own words, "champions, develops and invests in artistic and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives."

To pursue this mission, it supports a range of activities in England "across the arts, museums and libraries — from theatre to digital art, reading to dance, music to literature, and crafts and collections."

With a history now spanning more than 70 years, the Arts Council has its roots in the Committee for Encouragement of Music and the Arts set up in 1940 and chaired in those dark days of World War II by the celebrated economist John Maynard Keynes.

During the next 50 years — which saw the creation of a national government minister for the arts in 1964 — the Arts Council went through various revisions. However, its current form dates from 2003, when England's 10 regional arts boards were merged into the one centrally funded body that was allocated an impressive £2.4 billion (¥408.7 billion) between 2011–15. Of that total, £1.4 billion (¥238.5 billion) came from taxpayers and £1 billion (¥170.3 billion) from funds required to be channeled from the proceeds of a hugely popular National Lottery introduced in 1993. Over the years, with resources on this scale consistently available to it, the Arts Council has been able to steadily increase its role in transforming the cultural landscape of the nation.

In practice, this ongoing process is primarily achieved through Arts Council sponsorship of a very broad spectrum of artistic endeavour. In particular, as it made clear in "Great Art and Culture for Everyone," its core vision for the coming decade published last year, it encourages new, contemporary and experimental arts — and also undertakes a broader responsibility for museums and libraries.

Specifically, that vision also detailed the Arts Council's fivefold mission as being: To promote excellence; to be for everyone; to develop sustainable and resilient art forms; to encourage diversity and skills; and to ensure that children and young people are not ignored in the provision of the arts.

One of the chief ways in which the organization turns this theory into practice is via "national portfolio organizations" — currently comprising some 696 arts groups it is supporting to varying degrees, with the funding provided from 2012–15 — a timespan which allows recipients to plan their activities with some security.

Meanwhile, a program titled Grants for the Arts is primarily aimed at assisting and nurturing fresh talent and individual artists and supporting community projects. This program sets rolling deadlines and its accessibility is greatly enhanced by the fact that the interval between it receiving an application for a grant, and its awarding of one, is typically only six to 12 weeks.

However, the Arts Council isn't just a rubber-stamping body. One of its great features is how it develops relationships with arts organizations and artists -- regarding them as partners rather than mere recipients of grants. For example, it employs what are known as relationship managers, who specialize in specific art forms and work closely with artists and arts and cultural groupings to help them achieve their objectives. Staff are also frequently present at arts and cultural events.

One appreciative recipient of such close support has been Farooq Chaudhry, a producer with the world-renowned London-based Akram Khan contemporary dance company, which has received Arts Council support since 2002. Interviewed recently for The Japan Times, he said, "I believe the relationship between artists and the Arts Council is one of cultural 'investment.' What we give in return are artistic risk-taking, excellence and access. Our mutual expectations are to enrich the cultural fabric of the nation and to ensure that all we do is inspiring, invigorating and innovative.

"On the whole, it is a very positive partnership. We have always invited them to rehearsals and we have always contributed to shaping their policy. It's been very collaborative."

Altogether, it appears that the professionals and arts lovers who comprise Arts Council England are going a long way toward delivering on the ambitious aims they have set for themselves and their nation's well-being.

Akiko Yanagisawa is a London-based cultural coordinator and founding head of mu:arts (www.muarts.org.uk).

Noh master Gensho appears to know no bounds on stage

Ayako Takahashi
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Noh is a performing art originally developed by and for the samurai class that has continued without a break for 700 years — a mighty span through which Umewaka Rokuro Gensho, as the 56th-generation head of the Rokuro Umewaka family, can trace his lineage.

One of noh's most famous lead actors (*shite-kata*) of his generation, for many years Rokuro Gensho was known as Rokuro Umewaka VXVI. However, in 2008 he revived the name of Gensho, the patriarch of the Umewaka family, and began styling himself anew to retain its useage.

What really sets this artist apart, though, is the way he has long striven to revive near-forgotten works in this classical form of traditional theater and also to create unique new ones. Among the latter are a noh play based on the ballet "Giselle," one titled "Shiranui" ("Sea Fire") about Minamata Disease and another based on "Kurenai Tennyo" (literally, "Red Heavenly Maiden"), a popular manga. Meanwhile, the boundary-bending maestro has even shared a stage with the revered Russian ballerina Maya Plisetskaya.

By way of his next exploration, however, Gensho will shortly premiere "Shinban Tensyu Monogatari" ("New Production Tensyu Monogatari") his adaptation of a work by the playwright and author Kyoka Izumi (1873–1939).

"I've seen Kyoka's plays many times and have been fascinated by them and I've long wanted to make one into a noh work," Gensho explained in a recent interview for The Japan Times. "He was well versed in noh and the way he depicts mysterious shape-shifting ghosts — and also how he uses just the right few words to communicate simply instead of weaving complicated plots or wordplay into the dialogue — are strong noh-like elements."

In "Tensyu Monogatari," a beautiful ghost named Tomihime who lives in a castle tower falls in love with a falconer named Zushonosuke who turns up looking for one of his birds that has escaped. Soon afterward, they are blinded by soldiers hunting for them who poke out their eyes as they hide beneath a ceremonial cape — only to have their sight restored by a mysterious old sculptor named Ominojo Toroku. It's as if, just as in so many myths and legends the world over, they have crossed a taboo line between worlds and must have their souls purified anew.

In the new version, though, the real-life role of the author Kyoka, played by character actor Hiroshi Mikani, has been added to the plot, while Tomihime is played by Yuhi Ozora, a former top otokoyaku (male-role actress) with the all-female Takarazuka Revue, and the talented Takamasa Suga plays Zushonosuke. With it also featuring several kabuki and *kyogen* (traditional comic theater) actors in the cast, this isn't a pure noh play — yet it seems there will be noh-like elements at every turn.

As its author explained, "I think that Tomihime of the spirit world, and Zushonosuke of the human world, initially don't feel the other's sentiment so much as witness it — and at first their romance is perhaps a passion of the flesh. To enter a new state of mind they had to go blind and then have their eyes opened once more — and the person who shows them the way is Toroku, whose role is similar to the monk who sometimes causes the shite-yaku's ghost to appear in a noh play."

In his wide-ranging love of the stage, Gensho — who confided that "noh is a world where you express techniques that have been thoroughly beaten into you" — is following in the footsteps of his noh-actor father, Umewaka Rokuro VXV, who sometimes performed in kabuki under Eno Ichikawa I. Like his father, too, Gensho, who is now in his 60s, can command a noh stage in roles as diverse as a warlord or a lovely young girl — highlighting not only his own skill, but also the magic of noh.

Clearly, there's a lot more in store from this great artist — but a lot more of just *what* will that be?

"Shinban Tensyu Monogatari" will premiere April 23 at Festival Hall, Osaka. For details, call 06-6231-2221 or visit www.festivalhall.jp. It will then be staged at Bunkamura's Orchard Hall in Shibuya, Tokyo, on April 26 and 27. For details, call 0570-00-3337 or visit www.bunkamura.co.jp. This article was written for The Japan Times in Japanese and translated by Claire Tanaka.

Man of many parts: Umewaka Rokuro Gensho is the 56th-generation head of his family of noh actors, but his love of the stage extends far and wide.

STAGE LISTINGS

Ticket Services

Pia	Ticket pia	0570-02-9999
E+	E Plus	http://eplus.jp
	customer service	0570-06-9911
CN	CN Play Guide	0570-08-9999
NBS	NBS Ticket Center	03-3791-8888
La	Lawson Ticket	
	Kanto	0570-084-003
	Kansai	0570-084-005
Ja	Japan Arts pia	03-5774-3040
Ko	Korakusha	050-3776-6184
Hs	Hanshin Play Guide	
	Umeda	06-6347-6510
	Sannomiya	078-221-0120

*Unless otherwise stated, performances will be in Japanese.
*When start times vary, please check call or check online to confirm.

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