

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2016**

Plenary 3: New Thinking for International Exchange

The mission of the Japan Arts Council toward the Cultural Olympiad

Speech by Mr Shokichi Hirabayashi, Executive Director of Japan Arts Council

Thank you, Mr Chairman. As Dr. Wong has just said, I am Shokichi Hirabayashi, an Executive Director at the Japan Arts Council. We were also invited to the first meetings in 2013 when Mr Mogi, our President participated. I am very grateful to have been invited to such a significant gathering.

I am sure you are already aware that the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games will be held in Tokyo. It goes without saying that the Olympics are the most important international sporting event and, as is stated in the Olympic Charter, Olympism blends sport with culture and education, giving the Games the additional aspect of a cultural festival. The London Olympics 4 years ago are still fresh in your memory with respect to the cultural programmes that were implemented on a scale and with contents that we have never seen before. Four year programmes were commenced from the end of the 2008 Beijing games and over 12 weeks directly before and during the London Games, an intensive large-scale cultural event, the London Festival 2012, was held. I have heard that a total of 180,000 events were held, over 43 million people took part and total operating costs amounted to over 126.6 million pounds.

I would be grateful to Ms Park from Arts Council Korea if she has any comments in relation to the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics.

In Japan, everyone involved has united, using the achievements of the London Games as a reference and planning to implement cultural programmes in which visitors to Japan in the period directly after the Rio Games up until the start of the 2020 Tokyo Games will be able to freely experience the attraction of Japan. Using the Games as an opportunity, along with familiarizing many foreign visitors with historical buildings and landmarks and public entertainment such as festivals and all kinds of cultural events not only in Tokyo but in all areas of Japan, we hope to promote international exchange through culture even further and to create new value.

The Japan Arts Council is planning to hold public performances of traditional arts in theatres all over the country including the National Theatre as one of the main pillars of activities involved in cultural programmes.

Japan has many traditional arts that have been passed down through the generations, some of which are included on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. You may have seen some of them such as Nogaku theatre, Bunraku puppet theatre, Kabuki theatre and Gagaku, court music. Theatres run

by the Japan Arts Council including the National Theatre are actively involved in these public performances.

We would first of all like international visitors to see and feel the value of these traditional Japanese arts. We would then like them to talk about these with their friends and family once they return to their home countries so that Japan comes to be recognised as a country of culture. Today I am talking about our aims for international exchange but I would also like to tell you about an example of a public performance for foreign visitors that was held last year as pre-planning for our cultural programmes as well as future plans for international exchange. But before that, I would like to tell you a little about the theatres that we run.

The Japan Arts Council currently holds public performances of traditional arts and modern performing arts as well as fostering cultural and artistic activities but, in the beginning, it was set up with the aim of establishing and running the National Theatre.

The National Theatre opened in 1966 and will celebrate its 50th anniversary this year. One of the concepts behind establishing the National Theatre was to spread traditional Japanese arts far and wide. From 1967, the year after it opened, the National theatre began Kabuki appreciation plays for junior and senior high school students. In the same way as opera, it takes quite a long time to perform a Kabuki play from beginning to end. This performance format is not appropriate for our modern day in which there is diversity in entertainment. Therefore, these days we usually either edit the stories down to half or less of their original length or only perform a combination of major scenes from a number of works. However, even that will take from 3 to 4 hours and it is a bit difficult to ask young people who have never seen any Kabuki before to concentrate on and enjoy such a long performance straight away.

Therefore, we planned a public performance in the form of an appreciation play performed by selecting a programme of stories that are easily understood even by the younger generation with a comparatively short span of around 90 minutes, in addition to explanations about how to appreciate Kabuki from performing actors. As Kabuki is performed in Edo Period Japanese of the 18th and 19th centuries, we have been working hard on innovations such as distributing free explanatory pamphlets at appreciation plays to make it easier for modern audiences to understand and providing earphone audio guides and subtitle devices in order to encourage the younger generation, in particular junior and senior high school students, to be interested in traditional arts. This plan was well-received and has been implemented for two months every year since 1978, reaching over 5.5 million participants in 2014. Since then we have been working on continually expanding audiences focusing on the younger generation by implementing appreciation plays in genres other than kabuki such as Bunraku, Nogaku and Kumiodori, traditional Okinawan musical theatre.

Based on our experience of continuing to diffuse traditional arts to the youth in Japan who are not used to them, last year we implemented an event called Discover KABUKI consisting of kabuki performances with the aim of communicating traditional Japanese arts to foreigners who have had no previous experience of them.

This involved implementing kabuki appreciation plays for foreigners with contents

specific to them. Normally the information we provide is only in English and Japan but as a trial, we distributed explanatory pamphlets in 4 languages, adding Korean and Chinese, prepared audio guides in all these languages and made it possible for to the audience to listen along with the play.

Kabuki performers are all men. Female roles are played by “*onnagata* (女方)” and male actors are made up to look feminine and dressed in women’s clothing. This tradition dates from the Edo Period and is one of the special characteristics of Kabuki. We appointed a TV personality fluent in English as facilitator to explain along with the kabuki actor. First-time kabuki audiences watched with great interest as the kabuki actor transformed into a woman before their very eyes through the application of make-up.

On the day, many overseas students who were living in Japan came to the performance as well as many tourists and people from various embassies. The 1,500-seat venue was full and the performance was a great success. The results of a survey taken showed that many people had understood the performance very well and that they had found it interesting. As a preparatory plan for cultural programmes to communicate the attraction of traditional Japanese arts, it can be said that it was pretty successful.

Using this experience we will sequentially implement public performances with specific contents for foreign audiences as cultural programmes for traditional Japanese arts other than kabuki that represent Japan from this year. First of all, we will be holding bunraku appreciation plays, Discover BUNRAKU, in May and June, then plays for kabuki and nogaku in June and plays for kumiodori in November. Based on last year’s results, we are conducting diligent analysis of contents and performances so that the audience will enjoy them even more and so that traditional Japanese arts leave a lasting impression. Foreign embassies in Japan will be informed of some of these performances and we will make the case for traditional Japanese arts to be experienced by a wide range of people.

The highest ever number of visitors to Japan, 19,730,000, was recorded last year. This is one and a half times more than the previous year and the number is expected to further increase in the run-up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. As the Japan Arts Council has accumulated experience in the theatres that we own and in the 50 years since the National Theatre was opened, we hope to make good use of this. If a lot of visitors to Japan see performances of the traditional arts of which we are proud, they will surely understand their charm through this experience. After these visitors return to their home countries, they will tell the people around them about the attraction of traditional Japanese arts and by furthering understanding of Japanese traditional arts among the many people who hear about them, we believe that this will contribute to international exchange through culture.

The Japan Arts Council also fosters cultural and artistic activities based on the Japan Arts Fund and subsidiaries from the government. We hope to support various cultural events held by arts organisations all over Japan, to develop nationwide cultural programmes and to help with international exchange through culture.

Thank you for your attention.

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