

Four Interviews

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Theatre makers who are dedicated to bringing theatre to English and Japanese audiences in Japan have plenty to offer English-language educators and students. Between March and July (2018) I interviewed members of four theatre companies to learn more about their background, training, influences, experiences and reasons for creating theatre in Japan. James Sutherland, artistic director of Center of International Theater Arts (CITA), gives in-depth insight into the challenges of finding an identity for his company and attracting audiences. Saya Suetsugu and Brian Berdanier, president and vice-president of Tokyo International Players (TIP), reveal what it is like to head the longest-running English-speaking theatre group in Tokyo (since 1888). Justin Davis, writer and actor of Black Stripe Theater (BST), shares his experiences of bringing adaptations of classic stories to international schools and Japanese universities and talks about his life as a working actor. Finally, Andrew Woolner, artistic director of Yokohama Theatre Group (YTG), discusses how his company has evolved over the last decade, working with interns, and creating theater on a shoestring budget. One thing they all have in common is a love of theater and a passion to pursue it whatever the cost.

As English-language educators, an appreciation of the communicative arts can be beneficial. I frequently arrange trips with my university students to see productions by these groups, and students have found the experiences entertaining, educational and enlightening. Understanding and reflecting upon the work of these theater makers can influence students in a positive way. For most people a job in theatre is not an ordinary experience and for each of the

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interviewees it is something very different but equally affecting. Theatre, for all of them, is a way of life and a labor of love, yet worthwhile in the rewards it brings – personal satisfaction and fulfilment and collective nurturing and enrichment. In today's cut-throat and ruthless society, it is important to pay attention to the efforts of those dedicated not necessarily to financial gain but to more meaningful ones. I have a theatre background, I have attended workshops and productions by all the interviewees, so the opportunity to discuss theatre with all these practitioners was both rewarding and fun. Each interviewee provides a realistic account of the working situation in Japan and takes us onstage and behind-the-scenes in sharing the highs and lows of staging theatre shows in Tokyo.

James Sutherland, founder of International Center for Theater Arts, interviewed March 17th.

What is your medium?

I grew up wanting to be an actor, so that was my passion, performing, and then as I was going through my university study, I ended up being inducted into a Masters in directing course. That was after I directed Heiner Muller's *Hamletmachine* in my undergraduate year and I got a very high marks for it, so I thought, I like this, this is interesting, creative control was something that appealed at the time, so I did a Masters in directing, and then moved into that area. Those are my strongest areas, but I also enjoy writing and dramaturgy, because I think those kinds of things inform you as a director.

Tell us something about your influences

I was a really big fan of Bruce Lee as a kid. One of the things I found fascinating about him was that he did not exist inside one style. He was not indoctrinated into one way of doing. He was looking at how to train the inequalities which shape a technique. By inequalities I mean coordination, focus, timing, rhythm - all things that are necessary in creating a good piece of theatre as well. The technique that he would eventually use would be defined

by his opponent. For me that has got crossover into theatre making because what is most important at first is the story and second is the technique that frames the story you want to tell. Then it was Stanislavsky. I wanted to integrate my love of movement and martial arts, and I realized his Physical Actions. Then I learned about Eugenia Barba, who runs the International School of Theater Anthropology and that was all physical, so I was thinking here we go, and then someone introduced me to Meyerhold, who was Stanislavsky's number one student, and arguably Stanislavsky's only heir to his work.

What is great about Meyerhold's work?

He was looking at a way of performing that first came from the outside - the space outside of the performer would then influence the space inside of the performer. It's what Peter Brook calls "outside-in, inside-out" acting. Stanislavsky and Meyerhold were working from different standpoints.

Why are you doing theatre here in Tokyo?

My wife is Japanese. When we were about to have our first child while we were in England, I was running a physical theatre course at East 15. Professionally I was satisfied but I was not happy, and we were deciding where we were going to raise our child and we weren't particularly comfortable with where we were living at that time, and we felt we didn't have a very big support network, so we decided we were going to move back to Japan. I had a couple of good experiences while living in England, and most of them were overseas, I was working in Iran and Korea, and I was creating, making things. In the physical theatre course, you are making with the students, but essentially managing, administrating, delivering teaching but you don't really feel like a full-fledged artist inside of that environment, so I needed to fulfill this need. So, it began with conversations with a guy from Tadashi Suzuki's company and from there we formed this nameless idea which was an acronym for the International Center for Theatre Arts (CITA).

What are you drawn to a director?

I'm drawn to collaborative creation, I'm drawn to - something I've found very difficult in this country - periods of generating material and research. And this is shared, so we're all giving a shared understanding of the world of the work we are about to get in. But it's always been the most difficult thing to ask actors to come in and offer something. I think the culture of working here is very different from the culture I have brought with me.

You've just finished your production of *Emoto* (2018). What was the process like?

The process was generating material together as quickly as possible because we had a very short amount of time to do the show. We had a new element, a sound designer, who we wanted working with us like a writer would, in the rehearsal room and building sound and riffing off us as we were improvising. It wasn't quite the case, but the great thing about that experience was that it was our first time having someone design sound for us. That was a learning process. We were often in the room not being able to use sound, but we needed sound to move to. Essentially the first phase was building small phrases of movement. We had a script and we worked loosely with it, but we knew the story wasn't going to be text driven. We had to be able to move for forty minutes, almost non-stop, and there were only two performers. You can't do very simple things for a long period of time, you have to keep changing what they are doing. We had to find layers of complexity that were not just how they were moving. It had to be other theatre devices - use of mask, use of manual light, projection design, sound. The first projection in the show was the double exposure images. Tatsuya made that. He had to teach himself how to do that for those 90 seconds. We had to source all the material, but he had to learn how to do it. That's not easy. If we want to do something, first we ask people to help, but if no one helps, we have to do it ourselves.

You've worked a lot with Tatsuya. How has your relationship changed over the time you have worked together?

He was a student of mine in England (at East 15) for a short period of time. I thought here's someone who is going to understand what it is we want to be doing, and the way in which we want to be doing it. We occasionally have personality clashes. He's an extremely talented young man as performer, as a puppet-maker, and at editing and design. It is great to have someone on board with an understanding of all the elements of theatre-making and can do a lot of those things. We're still building and growing our relationship as collaborators.

In your show *The Nose* (2016), you directed yourself as a performer. What difficulties did you experience?

Not having a second eye. Not being able to step back from the project and to look in. I loved the experience, but I appreciated afterwards in hindsight the difficulty of doing that. I'd like to do that more as I really enjoy performing but you need to have a particular set-up from the beginning to look and step back from your work constantly and assess it.

As a director, do you treat the actors the same way as you would treat yourself?

I'm equally hard on myself and them. I expect nothing out of them that I could not do myself. I give them a lot of space to come up with ideas but if they don't then I have to take over. That sounds very militaristic, but it's very important for me to have them contributing. One is it gives them ownership of the work, it makes them responsible. Then when you perform you are fighting, you are up onstage defending your work. It's about creative ownership, and, for want of a better expression, it's about resource management. If you got three or four ideas from different people coming through to you, you don't know what's going to happen in that situation, you could be incredibly inspired by what someone gives you and then you can start bouncing off each other. If it all comes from one person, at some point you are just going to be

drained. So, when someone offers a picture, a line from poem, or they do a movement, I think wow, I never would of thought that, that's the most thrilling thing for me.

Where does your work fit in the Japanese theatrical landscape?

We want to create a theatre we are not seeing. Without a doubt, there is a contemporary European flavor to it. It's heavily influenced by pioneers in Europe from the twentieth century. People pay to watch that kind of thing but only if it is imported into the country for a short amount of time - very expensive to see and then it goes. I felt that there was really a lack of technical ability in the actors when I first got here. It seemed to be an apprenticeship training style. Actors go into the company and do the spear carrier for three years and go slowly up the ranks. It is a business model - incredibly deadly and dangerous. We are trying to create artists who have voices and tools to implement what it is they want to say, not an army of followers.

For somebody wanting to join your group, what qualities are required?

We choose people who come through our workshops rather than holding a conventional audition process. That's how we found Kana. She was a regular a year ago in coming to our workshops, and we felt we could work with her. Hiroko was the same. Your company should look like life - tall, short, fat, thin people. I don't want a company of sixteen 20-year old men as that doesn't reflect life. Having Hiroko allows us to have an older character onstage. Hiroko is very well organized. She helps with the infrastructure and the planning, and both Hiroko and Tatsuya delivered elements of teaching in the last workshop at the Satoh Sakichi Festival in March. So, we're trying to give them opportunities to develop as teachers and makers inside of a company.

How do you go about reaching an audience?

We are trying to do all the things that you do in Japan. Going to college sites and sending social media invites. Word of mouth is the best publicity. I think it is just going to take time for people to come to the shows and then talk

about it. In Japan I heard you need to have a signature for your work, a particular style. Our style would be something that changes, would be its unpredictability.

Do you consider the audience in the different countries you perform?

Yes, that's why we place less of a primacy on text and more of a primacy on movement. Everyone understands movement. Language is particular to a place in time. I believe there is a universal theatrical language. Everyone understands that the horizontal is a place of rest and the vertical is a place of standing. Those things are not argued in other cultures. Everyone has two arms, two legs and a head on their shoulders.

How has your teaching affected your work?

I think the teaching helps you to understand where people are with their bodies. It helps you to read a little more about what's going on and make subtle suggestions about things they can change and possibly improve, and that can be a fantastic transposition into directing. A director, like a teacher, must wear many hats. You're the confidante, the provocateur, the midwife saying "push, push...breathe".

What do you think about English theatre in Tokyo?

It serves its purpose. But it's pretty self-serving. If I was in the position they (Tokyo International Players) were in, we'd be creating much bolder projects. With the support that they have, the infrastructure, and the amount of people, they should be riskier with what they decide to do. They also have a very particular audience which they build projects for. To their credit, they are aiming for their target market and hitting it. But it seems to me to be unnecessarily fractured. There is that theatre over there for foreigners, and there is that theatre over there for tourists or Japanese. What perturbs me the most is there is not enough cross fertilization, especially with the 2020 Olympics coming.

Would you consider collaborating with any of these groups?

It depends on the project and the people. I want to do things and say well if they don't work at least I learned things from my mistakes rather than tiptoeing softly through the years of my life. I'm not going to learn anything if I don't challenge myself and be prepared to fail. And that's something we should all embrace a little more. The danger is you do that and put that up, and people don't come back. But what may end up happening is people saying "I acknowledge the boldness of what you are doing, I see what you are trying to do, and I want you to continue doing what you are doing", and those are the people you want gravitating towards you, you want the risk takers coming towards you. You want the people who have bold ideas but nowhere to implement them yet, so we are going to have to think creatively how we are going to get that done.

Do you think that theatre in English can be a tool of learning?

For me, a big part of theatre making is being playful. Being playful when learning how to communicate in a second language is a good idea. You want to learn the culture as the culture is in the language. You throw a whole bunch of very shy Japanese students into a drama improvisation where they have to use a second language and you are putting too much pressure on them too fast. So, I have never been a big fan of saying "let's use drama as a way of trying to learn English". Let's use games and being playful, but let's not put it in a context where you have to have an argument with your wife in the kitchen.

What would you consider doing if you had the opportunity of putting something on with a group for 2020?

Ideally it would be nice to sit down first with those involved and decide *What would we like to do?* An important question would be: *What's happening now?* Can we reflect what is happening around us now through ways in which the audience can identify with? For example, everyone is doing *Richard the Third* again because of (Shinzo) Abe. It's incredibly topical. I think what is important for us is looking at stories that are rooted in the local community,

whether that be our municipality, our neighborhood or Japan, which also have universal themes. So, when we go overseas we are telling stories that have a strong Japanese flavor to them, a visual or a narrative flavor, but have themes people can understand or connect with.

What are your plans for the next project?

We've got a great magician, Tanba Tanba, who went on *Britain's Got Talent* last year. We want to do a solo show with him, use his magic to tell a great story. We also want to do an adaptation of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* in Colombia. We want to turn it into a modern commedia dell'arte with masks. Then we want to develop a show based on the themes of dementia, because one of the things I am interested in is mixing science and theatre. All those shows have something to do with us now in our time, in the place in which we live. *The Stranger* is not about us, but it is about someone who is an outsider, and I'm sure we can both relate to that one.

Do you feel you can work as you want in this country?

No. I think we have to do our best to play with the circumstances we are faced with. We applied for Saison Foundation funding this year, but we didn't get it. I was recommended to apply for it a year or two ago based on my resume. Nothing, absolutely nothing. Not even a hundred thousand yen. And you know what it is like booking a space for rehearsal, it's a lottery system, you are not working in a studio space, you are working in a lecture room with tables and whiteboards. The circumstances aren't great and then you got to think about how to get your show marketed. It's not fun at all a lot of the time.

How do you juggle life as a father and a theatre maker?

Terribly. I'm still learning about how to do that. It's not easy at all. If I was earning more money as a theatre maker I think it would be easier. But it's a lot of time away, and a lot of time to think and process what you are doing, and how to fix or develop something when you have got two little sprogs running around, so you have got to compartmentalize and at the same time they also

need someone who is their father and that's a bit tough. I'm still learning. That's a work in progress.

Saya Suetsugu and Brian Berdanier, president and vice president of Tokyo International Players, interviewed March 27th.

Can you tell me about your training?

Brian: My training was in classical voice and opera – so in another life I did quite a lot of classical singing. From there I segwayed into classical theatre. I have done some training courses mostly at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and with other smaller theatre companies along the west side of the United States. My degrees are not in theatre. I was doing opera studies for a while and did not have the discipline to continue as an opera singer. I was busy doing other things, so I considered options and it turns out that the closest thing for an opera singer to do if it's not going to be opera singing is foreign languages and linguistics, which is what I ended up doing.

Saya: I have a BA in Communications. Throughout my school years, I had taken a lot of drama and theatre classes. I went to ASIJ (American School in Japan), and then Pace University, and there I took all the theatre classes that a non-theatre major could take – that wasn't a lot, but I took as many as I could.

Brian: Pace University is where the Actors Studio is, right?

Saya: Yes, so you can line-up to see it for free.

What motivates you to do theatre in Tokyo?

Brian: I came to Japan on the JET program and was there for five years, not in Tokyo but in Saitama, and in 2007 I came to Tokyo to take my job at my current school, The International French School. I started with Tokyo International Players in 2009 in *Mrs Bob Cratchit Christmas Binge*. I really like to have the creative outlet and the opportunity to tell stories which is what

attracts me to theatre.

Saya: After graduation I spent a year in the States working in television. While I was in New York I spent all the money I had going to Broadway shows because that is what I enjoyed doing and I wanted to continue being involved in theatre. When I came back to Tokyo in 2009, I started searching for theatre in English and I found TIP. I had auditioned several times and didn't get in, and in 2013 I auditioned for *Avenue Q*, which was my first show.

You both have senior roles in Tokyo International Players. Can you tell us about your roles?

Saya: Since August of 2016 I have been president of TIP. Originally, I was an actor and then I started to help with translation. The first time we did an audio guide was *Night Must Fall* in 2013. For *Romeo and Juliet* (2014), I was one of the subtitle operators. I was then asked if I was interested in joining the board because I wanted to be a part of the decision-making process of the organization. When I first started TIP, like most people, you don't really know who the president is, you don't know that there's an organization behind it that makes all the decisions. It's all quite a mystery. So, I joined the board, and the year after that I ran for vice president, and the following year I ran for president. The board meets collectively once a month for a board meeting. Since 2016 we have divided the committees within the board into five key pillars – production, finance, fundraising, publicity and volunteer. Each board member heads one of these committees, and their job is to work on their respective committees, come back to the board the following month and share any updates. Apart from being president, I am also in charge of the fundraising committee and, by default, I am in all the committees. It's in our bylaws that the president is a part of all the committees, so I get to give my two cents into what decisions are being made.

Brian: I am currently the vice president. I started as an actor in 2009. From there I got recruited to be an advisor and created a little position for myself

called 'literary manager', handling script management and rights applications. On the production committee, I'm in charge of getting rights and booking theatres for those shows. As vice president, my job is to be the president's friend, and to back up the president at board meetings and in any decisions that need to be made at an executive level.

What difficulties have you experienced in your roles?

Saya: I think one of the biggest challenges is to make sure that everyone on the board is delegated a task that they are passionate about because there are jobs that people would not want to do but they take on because they are able to do it. One of the biggest jobs that we have is being the treasury. Not everyone wants to be accountable for all the money that TIP has. You make a lot of bank transfers and do a lot of administrative tasks. We also want to make sure that the productions are getting the type of support they need and to make sure we are still present for the production as well. Making sure that there is an open line of communication can be challenging.

How has TIP changed since you have become the management?

Brian: The social aspect of TIP has been a part of the company traditionally. Personally, I think we are moving away from the social club aspect. I think production values have gone up which is indicative of the leadership focusing more on that rather than the social aspect. We have also branched out in directions. We have TIP Youth. It is a separate entity, piggybacking on the TIP name because we are somewhat known in the international school community where they are trying to get their kids from. In terms of business and how they cooperate, TIP Youth is a profit organization, was developed to be a feeder for onstage and backstage talent for mainstage shows, but it has grown into its own thing. We also have Second Stage (small-scale shows), which is also its own entity. In theory, anyone who wants to come in and put up a Second Stage show can go ahead and do it.

Can you tell us about the number and type of plays you stage each year?

Brian: We have a season of three main stage plays and put on a variety of different productions. We do try to keep as many people happy as we can, so we have a tradition of a large-scale family musical that comes as our season-ending finale. In terms of getting bums on seats you need to have some sort of broad appeal that is going to fill a 250-seat theatre. We have tried to get student or school-friendly shows and classics – we have done Shakespeare plays two seasons in a row. There is a good chance we'll do named shows in the upcoming season, things that will get our audience involved.

Can you tell us a bit about your experience directing?

Brian: I directed a production of *Two Gentleman of Verona* for the Feb 2018 slot. It was my second show with TIP, the first one was *The Language Archive* in 2016. It went from being just an idea in my head to an idea out of my hands and in a bunch of other people's hands in the process of about a year. You start with just an idea after reading a script or seeing a review of a show and think that might be fun to do. I had this idea germinating and when I felt it was ready I presented my proposal to the production committee, and we went from there – building a team, holding auditions, getting actors, all the way through to production.

For those interested in directing for TIP, what would they have to do?

Saya: One of the pre-requisites is we ask that they have had a major role in a TIP production. Assistant director or stage manager is one of the roles we would expect them to have done. Then they have to submit a proposal that is put forward to the production committee. The proposal will entail their vision of the show, any challenges they foresee, and if they have any visual concept of the show already. You can be as detailed as you want or very simple. Those proposals get vetted by the production committee.

Brian: For example, for a show that opens our next season in October we would approve the show at least six months before and then talk about budget

and special things the show might need because our annual budget is approved over the summer at our annual general meeting. The director would need to think about how much time he or she would need for auditions and rehearsals, and about having early production meetings in the summer, June or July. Depending on the needs of the show, meetings with designers and acting rehearsals take place in August and September to be ready for production. Musicals take longer.

Saya: I think the way we've come into TIP is the most common. Someone would audition for a show, be cast in the show, and from there on they would build friendships and then they either want to be in the next show or work on the next show. For the crew, most of the time, it is different because they won't come into productions until one month before performance at earliest, whereas the core production team and cast are working on the show for about four months.

How do you develop a relationship with your audience?

Saya: I think we have become more proactive in advertising on social media. We have bilingual posts, and we are on FB, Instagram and Twitter – our publicity committee is putting a lot of work behind that instead of just handing out fliers. From there on, it goes through the way TIP have always grown their audiences which is through everyone who is involved.

Brian: There has always been some sort of language support, whether it is a synopsis in the program, but we have made a push in the last four years with real-time translation with earpieces, and a few shows have attempted surtitles (projected subtitles on a screen).

How does TIP benefit English learners?

Brian: This is a conversation that we have with our Japanese support team. We have to walk that fine, I mean, it is part of our mission statement that we are intending our productions to be for the English-speaking audiences, as that is

our core audience. Although there is no denying that there is a big market for English learners to come to foreign language productions. The famous example that we always talk about was in the Scottish play (*Macbeth*) we staged two years ago. Our translation team insisted that there needed to be a cue to explain Banquo had died offstage. But if you cannot tell that Banquo is dead from what we are doing onstage, then we are not doing our job. Yes, we are in Tokyo, and should have a connection with the non-native English-speaking audience around us. Though I am not sure if English language teaching is a part of our mission.

Saya: I agree. It is a fine line. We want to cater to our Japanese audience as much as we can in terms of making it accessible, but it is not a part of our mission to say, 'come socialize with English speakers' or 'if you join a TIP show, you become a better English speaker.'

What about the future? Are thinking about staging something for 2020?

Brian: We won't be the executive committee in 2020 because it is in the constitution that we cannot be in the position for more than two terms in a row. We haven't looked that far ahead. We are looking at theaters all the way until the end of 2018, and still trying to get through our current season.

Justin Davis, actor and writer for Black Stripe Theater, interviewed July 5th.

Why is theatre important to you?

It is just something I really enjoy doing. It's escapism for me. The chance to escape my own problems, escape real life and just become someone else and tell a story. I was raised on a council estate. I come from a single parent family. I think for me it was a chance to live an imaginary character and *play* – because I was a really shy kid and it was the only way that I could really express myself.

When did you decide to become an actor?

I think I decided very early on when I was three or four years old. However, my first production was not until I was eleven years old when I got involved in a local community theatre group. I auditioned just thinking I would get a small role and I got the role of Charlie in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. That was the first play I ever did.

Did you study Drama at high school and sixth form college?

Yes, I studied Drama in high school. I used to do something called the Norwich Theater Arts Course on Friday and Saturday nights. I also joined the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain and did their productions in summer.

Can you tell us a little bit about your professional experience?

I was born in America, but I was raised in the UK, and when I was 18 or 19 I decided to move back to America, just for life experience really. I wanted to take some time out to discover who I was and where I came from, but then I very quickly slipped back into the acting and became a kind of working actor doing lots of waiter jobs and various other jobs in between. A mixture of regional theatre, commercials, TV extra jobs – all kinds of stuff.

Is there any difference between acting styles in America and London?

The style is different. There is definitely an American-style based on Stanislavsky or The Method. I found the intensity was greater. On the business side, American actors are very good at promoting themselves, which is something I'm still not very good at doing.

Who are your influences?

Peter Sellers. I love the way he was able to play multiple characters. Philip Seymour Hoffman is one of my favourite all time actors. Gary Oldman, just because of his versatility. I watch a lot of Mel Brooks, Peter Sellers, Ben Elton – a lot of British comedy.

What brought you to Tokyo?

I had no plans to move here. I met my then girlfriend, she's now my wife, in a pub in London. I was writing a horror film at the time. I was commissioned by a production company to write a horror script, and I decided to base it on Japanese horror, so I went along to this event where they were going to be showing some Japanese films in the background. Anyway, this event was cancelled, there were only three or four people there, and my wife was one of them, and that's how we meet. A few years later I moved here, and we got married. I sort of accidentally moved here, I had no plans originally.

How did you get involved in theatre here?

The truth is I hadn't done theatre for a number of years. I had been in England and I must have toured for about three years in a row, and by the end of it I was sick of being on the road. I wanted to take some time out and focus on TV and film. But I kind of missed the buzz of being on stage, and when I heard about the audition for *Dealer's Choice* (by Patrick Marber staged by Black Stripe Theater in 2017) and read the script, I just loved the opening scene. That's what sold me, the opening scene between the characters Mugsy and Sweeney. And then I auditioned and was cast in the role of Mugsy. So that's how I got back into theatre. It was the first time in five years since I had been back onstage.

Do you have any difficulties living as a freelance actor here in Japan?

Not here. I work to survive. I do a mixture of acting and drama teaching and it is definitely enough to survive. When I was in America it could be a real struggle. You might get a job every two or three months. One year I was on fire, I kept getting these jobs, and then the following year: nothing - just one or two jobs. It was very much up and down, I was living on the edge, living on people's couches, and living the life of the struggling working actor.

Tell us about one of the jobs.

In America I did a job for a year, I signed a year contract with Renaissance

Theater. It was a medieval setting. They had stages with different shows – music, musicals, plays, dance, Shakespeare – and we had to rehearse for all these different shows. The place would open at ten in the morning and it would close at seven or eight. We were performing the whole day, you'd go from one to the other, and then in between the shows you interacted with the audience as a character. We even did a jousting show and there was sword fighting and people jumping off buildings. That was an amazing experience. I learnt a lot from that.

What about some of the work you have done in Tokyo?

I have done a lot of TV here, TV dramas playing cameo roles. I recently did an Amazon drama. And I used to have a reoccurring role on *Vocab Rider*, a Japanese comedy-drama. I have done a lot of TV, commercial and narration work.

What has been your favourite production to date?

A few years back, I did *The Wind in the Willows*, a regional theatre production. It was such a tight cast and well done. Everybody clicked. I played Mole which I really enjoyed, and I was able to apply a certain style to it and everyone was on the same page.

Have you had any bad experiences?

I have been involved in hundreds of productions. I have had four or five bad experiences. I was on tour once doing *Romeo and Juliet* and one actress, playing Juliet, didn't like the theatre company. There were a few problems and she wanted to write this snotty and aggressive letter to the office. There were three other actors on tour and they were all quite intimidated by this actress, and I told her it is better to go to the office and talk about the problem face to face and try to sort it out. She didn't want to do that, so she wrote this very nasty letter and I refused to sign it, but the problem was it was the beginning of a four-month tour and after receiving the letter the theatre company would only communicate through me, so I became the person in the middle who

everyone resented. It was a very uncomfortable experience. But as an actor you are thrown into these very intense situations together with some very strong personalities and you are not going to get on with everybody. I just believe if you are professional and you care about the work then it is going to be ok.

What is your role in Black Stripe Theater?

If I had to give myself a title I would say I am a 'co-artistic director', but I'm also the house writer and I design the posters and publicize the shows. I would say it is a group where everyone works together, and no one is above anyone - like a band.

What do you think of Black Stripe Theater's idea of taking shows into schools and universities?

I think it is a really great thing because theatre can really change people's lives and motivate them to do greater things. So, for me, it has been great fun to go in and try and inspire young people especially in the schools. And I love being on the road and touring as well. I got the feeling back to tour! Luckily for us students study English and schools like to bring in an English-speaking performance for their students. I have deliberately adapted books which students study on the syllabus.

Can you tell us about the *A Christmas Carol* tour of 2017?

Originally, I wrote the script for two actors, one person playing Scrooge and the other actor playing all the other roles. But then I adapted it for 4 actors. I think it works very well with that. When Dickens used to do it live he used to play all the characters himself with different voices, so it almost suits that style well, with actors playing multiple roles. We did eight or nine different schools. It was a really great experience. You'd turn up an hour before the show, set up very quickly, do the show - it was about an hour long - and then we'd take questions from the audience and do a workshop. We got great feedback, and I wish we had got to do more as several schools wanted to book

us, but we were unable to secure dates.

Have you picked up more gigs this year?

We have more drama workshops and shows, and we are taking shows to the US bases for the military families. We are also trying to target the Asian market by approaching schools in Hong Kong, Singapore and Indonesia. We'd like to expand and bring English-speaking theatre to people that don't always get the opportunity to experience it.

How do you approach a role?

It depends on the role. Sometimes I'm inspired by music. Sometimes the character might come from the words, or a prop - shoes or glasses or something like that. Sometimes I do use Stanislavsky, working with objectives, and I try to make it a matter of life or death, what or who is this character fighting for. *Hound of the Baskervilles* (2018) is a lot of fun, it's kind of a vaudeville pantomime, so the characters are a little bit over the top. Dr Mortimer just came from a voice, I just kept trying different voices. Barrymore came from a limp and a crunched over posture. Stapleton comes from a way of standing - straight and erect. It could be a voice, a movement, or just come from the script.

Are there any differences in the way you adapted *Hound of the Baskervilles* and *A Christmas Carol*.

When we did *A Christmas Carol*, which was our first tour, I was very true to the book, so a lot of my material came from the original source, and I tried to honor the book because Dickens's writing is so good. *Hound* is almost the opposite as I decided to abandon the book. I kept the same structure and plot, but it is original dialogue. I might have seen something on TV or film or an idea might have popped into my head for a comic moment. It's a collage of ideas. There is a lot of physicality in *Hound*. In one of the scenes an actor mimes riding a carriage. It really relies on the actors' reactions really selling where they are - this is Baskerville Hall, this is the moor - and bringing the

audience in. We have no set, it's very minimalistic. Costume changes are quick. I play Mr. and Mrs. Barrymore who both appear at the same time. Mr. Barrymore comes on and he's got a limp, a hump on his shoulder and a beard. When Mrs. Barrymore enters I just lift the beard up and go into character. We're trying to make it obvious to the audience that the same actor is playing multiple roles.

How does an awareness of an audience affect your work?

I don't think it makes that much of a difference, but you just have to be more defined and clearer because English is a second language. I think most of the time they do get it if the acting is strong enough, especially with *A Christmas Carol* because the characters are very distinct.

What do you think about English Theatre in Tokyo?

I think it is like a small community. Everyone seems to know everyone, and are friends, and they seem passionate about theatre and putting productions on. I have never worked with any other company. To be honest, it's too time-consuming, and sometimes it can be a mixed bag. You don't know who the director is or who the other actors are, so a script can be good, a character can be good, but it's a team effort and you can be let down by other elements. Too many times when I was young I was involved in productions that were a bit like that and it's a bit tiresome. I want to know what I am in is good or it has the potential to be good.

Do you think theatre is a tool of learning?

I think it can make something real and engaging, and it can inspire. I remember I always wanted to be an actor, but I was really intimidated by Shakespeare. I suffer from dyslexia, so I thought it was really complicated and scary. I remember in English class the teacher informed us we were going to have a drama lesson and perform the three witches' scenes in *Macbeth* and that we were going to get up and perform them. I fell in love with Shakespeare. When we read it off the page in class I was really intimidated by

it, but suddenly I realized how much fun it was to do Shakespeare. I did a lot of Shakespeare when I was a teenager. I've played Lysander and Flute in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, Edgar and Oswald in *King Lear*. I think of Shakespeare as a song, it has a certain structure to it. You must keep to the structure, but you can add variation.

What else do Black Stripe Theater have lined up for the future?

The next one I have adapted is *Macbeth* for the 2019 tour. *Macbeth* is to introduce students to Shakespeare. It's simplistic and short, only 40 minutes long, and hopefully it will inspire and make them realize Shakespeare is not as terrifying or hard as they might think. After that, there's talk of a play based on the Olympics for Tokyo 2020.

Andrew Woolner, artistic director of Yokohama Theatre Group, interviewed July 20th.

What first interested you in theatre?

Well, I think I must have realized around grade four or five that I was never going to be an astronaut because I couldn't go in that spinning thing without puking. Well, the next best thing is that I can play an astronaut on TV, which I never did. I played an astronaut in the theatre. So, yeah, initially I was really into acting and being an actor, and I was really focused on that, although I did study directing and playwrighting at school, basically because I got kicked out of the acting program.

What happened?

I was at York University in Toronto for their BFA Theater program. The first year wasn't streamed and you got streamed into a program in the second year, so I was in the acting program in the second year and then they made some adjustments to the program and decided to get rid of half of the class, and I was part of that half. Apparently, it was a rather contentious decision, and because of that I got offered a place in the directing program there. I am not

really interested in directing from an academic standpoint. I am interested in theater from an application standpoint. Not to say that I don't find some of the academic ideas interesting, but can they be applied is always the question. I don't think you can or should be a theatre maker with zero knowledge of the history of theatre. Partly because when you do something you should know that that thing is not new. You can put your take on something, but you are never going to make something new.

How was the directing program?

There was a strike at the end of my third year and I ended up presenting my final scene outside of the school. The teachers were very unwilling to come, it was not a teacher's strike – the teaching assistants and graduate students were on strike – and the main faculty didn't want to cross the picket line, so we found an alternate location. Actually, I rubbed all my directing teachers the wrong way. I have a problem with authority, so I was like now I'm in school and now is my time for making mistakes. I took big risks and made big mistakes. I think they were frustrated with me because I just wouldn't do anything straight. I wouldn't just take the easy way. I was also in the playwrighting program as it was a concurrent stream, and I wanted my final project, to combine both of those elements. I have never really been super interested in directing, I always been interested in making theatre and if that means I am the one who has to stand outside and direct others, then so be it.

What is your medium now?

I refer to myself as a theatre maker and I kind of do what is necessary. I have done shows where I am in a dramaturgy role, or as a director. I do a lot of play development, exclusively new play development, and I help other people develop their plays as well. I am probably not a performer, I am more of an outside eye. For the last show, *She Wolf* (2017), I basically had an actor who was devising stuff and I was the one who figured out how it fit together and what story we were telling and what order the scenes were going to be in. If I was working with someone who was more experienced then maybe they

would be doing a lot of that by themselves and I would coordinate with the production team to make sure they had what they needed in terms of costume, set and lights and stuff. I say theatre maker because it covers everything. I have designed lights on my own shows because lighting designers are so hard to come by in Tokyo. I also produce my work and do outreach to try to get us into festivals. I don't necessarily do these things very well but there is no one else to do them.

Who are your influences?

I have been very influenced by Robert Lepage, particularly *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. It wasn't so much the piece that I liked but the idea behind the development process. Lepage credited the other performers for creating the show. Ever since that I have been trying to make collective pieces. I like his interesting stage effects. In the *Anderson Project*, one of his solo shows, there's one scene where he is dressed as a woman and he walks behind a tree maybe 30-40 centimeters wide and when he comes out of the other side he is a man dressed in completely different clothes. He played every character in that show and you are never waiting for him to change costumes, he's always instantly changing from one character to another. It is not like the technology is there for show, it supports the work and it is part of the work. The essentialism of the stage effects is what is interesting to me. I try to follow his principles. I don't turn on a light if that light doesn't need to be there to tell the story. I really like Brecht. I am not a big fan of reading Brecht and I don't like all his plays – *Galileo* was a bore – but it was his approach to theatre and the idea that audience does not need to be put to sleep. Theatre does not necessarily have to be an aesthetic to your life, it can be a stimulant. Brecht was more important than any other 20th century theatre maker because he was the one who gave us unhidden lights and stage effects. Stopped it being an illusion. He realized we cannot compete with film. We have to be something different, we can do different things.

What brought you to Japan?

My wife is Japanese. We met in Canada and initially I was hoping she would move to Canada but there were some family things going on and she thought she needed to be here. I came here thinking I'd be here for a couple of years and I have been here now for fifteen years.

Why theatre in Japan?

I can't not do theatre, no matter where I am. The first two years I had a long two and half hour commute to work and didn't have any time. I'd heard about TIP, but it was so big and my experience with companies was that I was going to have to do a lot of the grunt work before I got to any level that was interesting to me. Having run a theatre company for five years in Toronto I didn't want to go through that again. So, I did a job interview and the IT guy there was a member of YTG, so I contacted them – there were only 2 active members at that time – and they were gearing up for a show which I signed on to produce. However, they had trouble casting the show, one of the members left the group and I was then offered the artistic directorship, which at the time was meaningless as there was no company. So, I immediately put together a compilation show called *This Is Shakespeare!* It was a remount of a show I did in Canada in 2002. In 2007 YTG was a club, but I wanted a professional theatre company. I thought we'd have an amateur and professional side and they can support each other in different ways. Professionals teach and train the amateurs and the amateurs help keep the enthusiasm for the group in the community going. After that show I did a second show *Ring Around the Moon* where I brought a director in. She ended up dropping out six weeks before production and I had to take over directing the show and replace one of the cast members, who dropped out at the last minute. I was playing an old woman, and I had to adapt the show by using a framing story to explain why there was a man with a beard playing an old woman and reading off the script because there was not enough time to learn it one week before we went up. After that experience I realized that perhaps the club and the group need not be together since none of the club members were coming to auditions or

giving financial support to the group. Also, I had complaints about the show. Someone actually said it was too professional, basically meaning people weren't forgetting their lines or walking into the scenery. There was no support at all. So, I thought screw this, I am going to do my own thing.

How has YTG changed over time?

The company went through two or three major stages. The first stage was to try and operate as a club, then I tried to set up co-productions with TIP – we staged *Richard the Third* and *Tartuffe*. We were still doing mostly scripted work. But in 2010 I did my own show, *39*, about an astronaut and I took that on a three-festival tour in Canada. The best part of that was I got to see forty or fifty shows and it made me ask myself, *What kind of theatre do I want to be doing? What kind of people do I want to work with?* It was at the point that I decided I wanted to do shows that were multilingual. I am never going to expand my audience if I'm relying on the foreign community to support this stuff. TIP have trouble breaking even and they have casts of fifteen. If I'm doing something with a cast of three and two of them are from outside of the country, the star of the show has to be the company and people have to come because they know we create interesting theatre. They cannot be intimidated by the fact that there is English in it.

Tell us about the interns you have worked with?

That started back when we did the very first show in 2007, when someone from Utrecht School of Arts contacted me out of the blue asking to intern with us over the summer. The experience kind of taught me about what I had to do to deal with an incoming intern. I have had students from Holland, Germany Norway, America and South East Asia. They are usually funded by their government or they raise money themselves by doing crowd-funding. Mainly I'm a stepping stone to get to Japan, and then they can put 'I did theatre in Japan' on their resume. I have had a relationship with the Japan Dance Studio building in Kawasaki, which own a bunch of guest houses. I help the interns arrange accommodation. The interns usually come to rehearsals document

things, hold a camera when we want to film something, contribute to the rehearsal process, and sometimes they may appear in the show.

How about your collaboration with other artists?

We have had guest directors coming to work with us. Tania Coke, from Tarinainanika, has directed 3 shows for us. One was a short 20-minute piece which was part of the 39 production. She directed *Touch Me Not* in 2016, and *The Other Show*, a piece we are remounting for a festival in Fukushima in two weeks. We are back at it with a different cast. *The Other Show* is a physical comedy. It stars me, an actress here and a guy from Colombia. I am trying to find another venue for us to perform it, so we are not just performing it once. I worked with 99roll, a Japanese shadow puppet theater group that stages large-scale productions with huge objects. I have also invited Mochnosha and the Wishes Mystical Puppet Company to support other shows we have had. They are a husband and wife team, he's from Canadian and she's from Japan. They do all kinds of puppetry and their shows win awards. I used to invite groups indiscriminately, but now I more interested in whether it fits with the shows that YTG does. I don't mind if it is all in English, but, in that case, we need subtitles, otherwise how is that going to appeal to our Japanese audience?

How is the rehearsal process for *The Other Show* going?

We're currently going over the video and changing it based on things we did not like about the original or because we have got new cast members and we are changing it to suit their skills. It is a very physical rehearsal, we don't do a lot of talking we just get into it. For *Ryouko* (Travel), a show we are staging for the Tokaido Arts Festival in September, we spent the first week just creating images – we blackout the room, put curtains up, position lights, play around with flashlights, hazer, a smoke machine, projectors and all that. We are creating little stories which we are trying to tie together, and we have a designer coming from Denmark who is sending us ideas on set, which will influence the stories we can tell. Obviously once you start putting objects on the stage and start figuring out where they can move, it starts to limit you in

what stories you can tell. We've been rehearsing twice a week since May. The show is weird, it's going to be a lot of shadows, physical objects, and projection mapping.

What about funding? What problems do you have getting funding?

At the moment I'm running an ongoing patron which provides about 400 US dollars per show. Shows don't make money. The only sustainable thing I do right now is I run Nerd Nite once a month, so that makes money which helps keep us in the black. Three speakers give talks about their areas of expertise, and there is a short Q and A after each one. That happens in Nagatacho at Grid, a building owned by GaiaX, the internet company, in their basement space. They invited us to do it there once they found out about our event which was at a venue which was too small for the people we had. People pay, drink, and we get the space for free. Our expenses are mainly equipment, but essentially the money raised goes into supporting YTG.

What about your day job?

I teach drama to students in the English department at Daito Bunka Daigaku. I was shocked on my first day about the low level in English of my students. I had written my syllabus, I came in with a big plan and in the first five minutes I realized I could not execute any of this. I was trying to run an actual acting class, but I realized that is not going to happen. I have got a really good group this year, so I do acting exercises with them and at the end of term we do a mini show. I teach them basic techniques – status and objectives and tactics. I see my classes now less as teaching drama and more as putting them in an environment where there is an English language speaker who is not going to talk like a textbook to them and they are going to have to learn how to listen and interact with me, because when they graduate with their four years of English language training they are going to enter a company and one day the people from the Australian branch are going to come over and the boss is going to say, 'Hey Suzuki san, you have an English-language degree, you deal with these guys'.

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Do you think you'll get more funding with the Olympics approaching?

The Japan Foundation is spending so much money on this right now, but the bottom will fall out. After 2020 everything is going to go away. Look, I'm never going to say no to money, but I am not looking in places which I know are going to dry up right away. I don't know what I am going to be doing in 2020, because I don't know who is going to be in town, so I cannot plan that far ahead. I will most certainly be doing a September show in 2020, unless I have to go back to working a full-time job.

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