



March. 26, 2010



## Artist Interview アーティスト・インタビュー

### Insights from international activities —The latest interview with Toshiki Okada

#### 海外進出で見えてきたもの 岡田利規の最新インタビュー

#### Profile

##### Toshiki Okada

Born in Yokohama, 1973. Graduated from Keio University, Faculty of Business and Commerce. In 1997, Okada began theater activities as the one-man unit “chelfitsch.” The name chelfitsch was created to represent a child’s mispronunciation of the English word selfish. In order to create “works with the potential to go further” Okada uses a methodology, but he makes a point of “not holding on to the methodology to the point where it holds back the work but quickly letting go of it,” which may be strange sort of methodology in itself for creating plays. With the release of the work *Karera no Kibo ni Mihare* in March of 2001, Okada changed to a style using “super real” Japanese language. This produces works that have a slow-moving and noisy physical aspect. The Yokohama ST Spot became the base for his theater activities.

In 2004, *Five Days in March* was the winner of the 49th Kishida Drama Award. The judges of this award praised Okada’s work for the strong sense of questioning it brings to the systems of theater and the fresh ideas he uses to turn that doubt into creative impetus. The work was also acclaimed for the skill with which it brings out the insubstantiality of present conditions in Japan. The physical presence and movement Okada brings out in his actors have also been recognized as dance, with his dance work *Cooler* being chosen as one of the finalists in the TOYOTA CHOREOGRAPHY AWARD 2005. In 2007, his play *Five Days in March* was invited to the Kunsten Festival des Arts in Belgium, which led to increased activities overseas.

In 2007, *Five Days in March* was performed in Brussels and Paris and in 2008 Okada created the work *Free Time* in a collaborative production with three international festivals (KUNSTENFESTIVALDESARTS/Brussels; Wiener Festwochen/Vienna; Festival d’AUTOMNE/Paris) In 2009 his overseas activities continued, including a performance tour to nine cities in North America.  
<http://chelfitsch.net/en/>

The performances of chelfitsch employ rambling dialogue that often sounds like private mutterings and a “noisy” style of physical expression that has also been recognized as contemporary dance, to depict the elusive and nondescript state of today’s young people in Japanese society. Since being invited to Belgium’s Kunsten Festival des Arts and coming to the attention of the world’s festival directors in 2007, chelfitsch has been increasingly active on the international scene. To date, its representative work, *Sangatsu no Itsukakan (Five Days in March)* has been performed in 14 cities in nine countries and its director Toshiki Okada and his group members have created new works jointly with international festivals and toured overseas. These efforts and opportunities have brought about a search for environments to enable further artistic experimentation. In this latest interview with Toshiki Okada, he talks about the insights that have come from performing overseas.

(Interviewer: Chiaki Soma, Program Director of the Festival/Tokyo)

This is your second interview for Performing Arts Network Japan (this website) and this time we would like to focus on your activities since beginning to work overseas. I would like to ask you in some detail about the types of environments and creative situations you have been working in. Could we begin by having you tell us how chelfitsch came to start performing and working overseas?

It all started when the director of Belgium’s Kunsten Festival des Arts, Christophe Slagmuylder, came to see a re-staging of *Sangatsu no Itsukakan (Five Days in March)* in March of 2006 and invited us to perform at his festival the coming year. After that we were fortunate enough to get offers from other festivals that took us to a number of other places. In 2008, we got offers from Kunsten Festival des Arts, the Vienna Art Week and Festival d’Automne à Paris to do a collaborative work, and that partnership led to the creation of *Free Time*. Last year, at the invitation of Berlin’s HAU theater we had the premiere performances of *Hot Pepper*, *Air Conditioner*, and *the Farewell Speech*, and, if I may speak honestly, it sold well (laughs) and our overseas activities have continued to increase.

All this has had great significance for us. First of all, it is helping us financially. It is true that our activities have gone international, but that doesn’t mean we are performing worldwide. It is almost exclusively in Europe. There is a high level of interest in the performing arts in Europe and, as a result, there are numerous high-level festivals presenting progressive, experimental works. That is where we are performing mainly.

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### Overseas Performances

*Five Days in March* performed in 14 cities in 9 countries (\*2010 performances scheduled for 4 cities in 4 countries)

*Free Time* (international collaborative production) performed in 3 cities in 3 countries

*Cooler* performed in 4 cities in 3 countries

*Hot Pepper, Air Conditioner, and the*

*Farewell Speech* performed in 2 cities in 2 countries (including preview) (\*2010 performances scheduled for 9 cities in 8 countries)

<http://chelfitsch.net/en/>

### Kunsten Festival des Arts

This festival is held every May in Brussels, Belgium. It is a contemporary arts festival focusing primarily on the performing arts. Known for its avant-garde program, it is recognized as one of the "antenna" festivals of the international contemporary arts scene. In contrast to France's Avignon Festival with its program of mainstream European theater, KFDA strives to present a program with more experimental works and a variety of artists reflecting the wider diversity of arts from around the world. With its own initiatives, the festival seeks to discover and support the production of works by young artists not only from Belgium but throughout Europe and also artists from developing countries that lack arts support systems. In addition to these many productions of young artists' works, KFDA works to encourage the careers of these artists from a long-term standpoint by involving them in multi-year collaborative production efforts. At the same time, the festival produces new works with established artists from Belgium and the rest of Europe and provides the venues for their world premieres. As one of the epicenters creating new trends in the world's performing arts, KFDA enjoys strong brand equity. More than 50% of the KFDA program consists of works produced by KFDA or created through KFDA-led collaborative efforts, and half of these will be world premieres in any given year. The founder of KFDA, Frie Leysen, retired as artistic director after the 2006 festival, after which the post was taken over by her assistant artistic director, Christophe Slagmuylder.

As of now, *Sangatsu no Itsukakan* (Five Days in March) has been performed in 14 cities in nine countries, *Cooler* in four cities in three countries and *Free Time* in three cities in three countries. After performing in all these countries, do you feel there have been any changes in your works or in you yourself?

Speaking first about my own creative work, the biggest change has been that it has now become a natural thing for me to be creating works for audiences that don't share much common cultural background with. *Five Days in March* is a work that was not created with the intention of showing to foreign audiences. Nonetheless, it seems to have communicated something despite that, and I feel that it has been accepted as such. I believe that can be attributed to the fact that the theme and motifs were in some sense universal; that war and sex and such are things that everyone can identify with.

From that point on there were a lot of difficulties and conflicts to overcome. For example, what should be our approach to using very local, Japanese subjects and motifs? Should we not use them because they will not communicate anything to overseas audiences? No. Isn't putting such self-imposed limits on ourselves a reversal of the natural order? Shouldn't we deliberately use them? I am the type who can't help but deliberate on questions like this. There are surely some people who can just go ahead without wasting time on such questions.

Looking back, I realize that *Free Time* is a work that was created in the depths of that questioning. But I feel that I have overcome that in the work *Hot Pepper, Air Conditioner, and the Farewell Speech* we did last year and the work *Who Knows We Are Not Injured Like the Others?* now running, and I feel that I'm in the clear now and free of that quandary. For the last two or three years I had been struggling, you might say, but it was not as if I was struggling against someone. It was just struggling with myself (laughs).

### What has changed for you as a company?

Stated simply, I believe we have grown a lot. First of all, because each of our works is now being performed numerous times, the actors have definitely acquired greater strength as performers. What they gain from repeated performance experiences and the increased number of performances that our overseas activities have provided compared to performing opportunities in Japan has definitely been significant. In the case of *Five Days in March*, the total of domestic and overseas performances was about 80.

Also, performing overseas involves frequent staging at different theater, which has helped strengthen the plays as well. For example, we did a re-staging of *Five Days in March* at the Super Deluxe in Roppongi, which is a space that I really like. But, of course, we can't take Super Deluxe with us when we tour, so we naturally have to stage the work at a number of different theaters. There are times when we are performing in theaters that seat 500, which is something that will never happen in Japan. That means that the actors have to project their voices much farther and we have to accommodate other changes case-by-case. I believe these experiences have definitely strengthened chelfitsch in the last three years or so. And, I think I have also gotten a little stronger as a writer and director (laughs).

I would like to ask you next about your collaborative projects overseas. In such proj-

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### *Who Knows We Are Not Injured like the Others?* (2010)

(Feb. 14 – 26, 2010 at ST Spot; Mar. 1 – 10, 2010 at Yokohama Museum of Art, Lecture Hall)

This play depicts events following the historic administration change from the Liberal Democratic Party's long decades in power to the forming of the new government by the Democratic Party of Japan following the Lower House elections of Aug. 30, 2009. The play unfolds with actors making their entrances and exits on a bare stage space with no set. What appears to be a normal, happily married couple who are about to move to their new high-rise condominium are spending time at home as usual. We see the planned visit of the wife's colleagues to the home. After they leave, the couple is alone again at night .... This ambitious work attempts to use the actors' physical presence and actions as a medium to communicate the "insecurity within happiness" or the "happiness within insecurity" lodged in the hearts and minds of the audience.



Photo: Kazuyuki Matsumoto

ects, the ones like Oriza Hirata do involving joint creation with overseas artists and there are also ones that involve collaboration on the production side.

In our case, we mostly engage in the latter type, in which we receive production funding from our partners. I do talk with them about the themes involved in the work, but they do not become involved in or influence the creation of the work itself. Our work *Free Time* was the product of a collaboration with three festivals, since we received funding from them, we naturally had performances in their localities/festivals, but the creation was done in Japan at the Steep Slope Studio (Kyunasaka Studio) in Yokohama.

I am interested in collaborations, but the idea of working outside of our chelfitsch context and creating a strong work is a bit daunting for me right now. So, I am not anxious to depart in that direction at this point. Rather, I am more interested now in placing works dealing with local Japanese issues in front of foreign audiences who don't know Japanese and have different cultural backgrounds and seeing what their reaction is. So, even without doing a creative collaboration, I think that is happening in such encounters with foreign audiences.

### What are the merits and demerits for your company in international collaboration projects?

There are no demerits. Of course there are some tiring aspects of touring overseas, but this is our job and we are simply happy to have so many opportunities to perform. And it also strengthens our works. Another big merit is the fact that we are able to spend more time in rehearsal working on the productions. In short, we are able to put rehearsal time on our budget with international collaborations and get paid to do it (laughs). That is something we can't do under the current Japanese arts aid system.

Thanks to this difference, we were able to spend quite a long period of time working on *Free Time*. With our new work we weren't able to spend quite as much time that way, but on the whole these collaborations have made it possible to work as I want without having to set up the production framework myself for each and every production. Or, you could say that the overall process has become much more linear for me. We owe it all to the strength of the euro (laughs). Or I could say that thanks to the European theater environment where there is such vitality in the field of stage art, working there has given me access to an excellent creative environment.

There seems to be a definitive difference in the system of work creation between Europe, where works are created in the theater context, and Japan, where the creative work is company-based. Last year you did several productions in succession at public theaters in Japan....

I have made a number of statements in the past about frustrations in working with [Japan's] public theaters. As you can clearly see from watching our chelfitsch works, the type of work I want to do, what I want to achieve as a director, can only be achieved through the actors. The level I work on is not one that involves concepts, or creating sets, or interpretation of plays or the roles involves. I can only exercise my abilities or worth as a director through the strength of the actors' performances themselves. So it is very difficult to bring out that kind of strength of performance I want from a new actor that the [public] theater has chosen for me to work with and in their short timetable. I should rather say that it is impossible.

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*Hot Pepper, Air Conditioner, and the Farewell Speech* (2009)

(Oct. 2009 at HAU/ Hebbel Am Ufer, Berlin)



©Dieter Hartwig

There is also the issue of the production span that these theaters want to work on. They are thinking that a work's lifespan will be just one month, or they may even think that a two-week span with 20 performances is enough. By nature, a work of theater becomes more mature through repeated performances. Furthermore, you can certainly say that a work with a longer lifespan and more performances should make it easier to recover the production costs. But, these theaters are trying to do it all in two weeks. Their whole production concept is based on the assumption that the work will be short-lived.

**Does that mean that the European system makes you better able to undertake the challenges you want?**

From now, I have to live for the rest of my lifetime, so I will be in trouble if I am “consumed” too quickly. I have to live in a way that that doesn't happen. So, I have to keep pursuing the things I want to do and create works that have real strength, and I have to keep doing that for the rest of my lifetime. Of course I may retire some time (laughs), but as long as I am living as an artist, that is what I have to do. So, I can't afford to let myself be “consumed” too easily. Still, there is always the fear that one will be consumed and left behind and I don't want to be in a position where I'm always in a race with my tires wearing down and having to ask myself, can I win this race, or will I lose (laughs).

With regard to that fear of being consumed, Europe provides an environment where one work can be performed many times, and that has given us the prospect of continuing this as a career. It is an environment where we can experience the joy of slowly bringing the works we have put so much effort into creating to maturity and to have that process functioning on a solid financial base.

**But in Europe, as well, there is always the fear of being “consumed.”**

Certainly there is, and it is something that I may have been worrying about. *Five Days in March* is in a sense a “lucky” work that was created without any concern for such things, but I did have the concern afterwards that it might end as a one-shot success. So, after that, the question arises as to whether the next work you create intentionally from scratch will reach the audiences as *Five Days in March* did. But the essence of the problem is not whether it is well received or not, or whether it goes beyond the localism of the Japanese setting. The essence, I believe, is whether, as an artist, you are able to rise above your past work. It is sad if the representative works listed in your resume are from decades ago, but in some cases that is a fact, and it is something that you have to fight as an artist. Or you may just live on past laurels. That is why doing *Hot Pepper, Air Conditioner, and the Farewell Speech* at HAU and having it be a success was so meaningful, I believe.

**By the way, you had a period when you were also working for the theater ST Spot in Yokohama, and you served as festival director at Komaba Agora Theater in Tokyo. What kind of influence does working in positions like that have on an artist?**

That depended on the artist. In my case, the time I spent at ST Spot was not the kind of experience that can be talked about on the level of whether it was “useful” for my career. Rather, it is something at the very core of what I am today. For example, it was a complete coincidence from my standpoint that ST Spot happened to be a

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space with a strong commitment to dance. But, thanks to that, I was able to meet artists like Natsuko Tezuka, and encounter dance, which until that time had held no interest in whatsoever. There were so many things like that which I was able to gain from by working there. I feel very fortunate in that sense.

This is just my case, but that curiosity, or that receptivity to the things that can happen to you is probably a necessity. This is a matter of the individual artist I believe, and there are some environments that tend to rob the artist of these kinds of opportunities. All I can say is that I would like to see those kind of negative circumstances not occurring.

Anyway, I feel it would be a bit irresponsible to say that these kinds of positive encounters are just a matter of fate or fortune, but I consider myself to have been very fortunate. Also, I think it was good that I was completely unknown for a long time until I won the Kishida Drama Award. I think that was very fortunate for me.

**It would seem natural that coming to perform overseas would lead you to experience new worlds and meet a variety of new audiences, which would expand the actual realities you can experience. Despite this, do you think the things you portray will remain unchanged?**

I am of a generation that people joke about as being only able to portray things “within a 3-meter radius.” So, even if we go abroad and see worlds previously unknown to us, I imagine that the tendency to portray things within a 3-meter radius will not change. And looking at myself, I can’t imagine it changing. But, I do feel that I am now much more conscious of the 3-meter framing. I definitely find myself to be increasingly aware of that sense of portraying things within that 3-meter radius. I think that awareness is evident in my latest work *Who Knows We Are Not Injured Like the Others?* For example, if I were asked why the setting for *Five Days in March* is the Shibuya district of Tokyo when there are plenty of other possible cities in the world like New York or Baghdad, until now that was not something I was thinking about.

**What do you think is the value in performing those works written about a 3-meter radius being performed in distant lands?**

I think the values lies in the audience. For example, the Kunsten Festival des Arts in Brussels is held in the context of the local issues of that city and its region, such as multi-cultural and immigrant populations, as an opportunity to stimulate thought on these issues. So, at least I believe that there should be some value in the audiences there seeing a work that defines conditions of another culture like Japan.

I believe that probably the purpose of theater is not to show something to the audience, such as showing the moving emotions of a drama, but to change the audience with what you present. That doesn’t mean changing their entire character but giving them something.

It is only recently, however, that I came to think this way. When I think about it, I realize that I have come to use the word “audience” more and more in my directing. For example, I am now saying to the actors, “Think about what you can do to change the audience rather than about what the realities are to you or the problems you are dealing with in your own consciousness” In my opinion, that is eventually the concept that Brecht had. Not in the sense of what is known as Brecht style theater, but in the sense that the system we call theater is in fact something for the audience, a system

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intended to do something to the audience. In other words, it is not a matter of how much reality you can bring to your staging of the drama within the play, but how you can bring a change in the audience. Isn't that where the true meaning of theater lies?

In that sense, I feel that Brecht lies at the foundation of European theater today. That is why we see things [in Europe] today like a form of theater where the audience is seated in the cargo compartment of a trailer truck and driven around to give them an experience of the trucking business and get them to think about the distribution system. That is by no means a strange form of theater but, rather, a very appropriate form. Because it is a way to change the audience, and that is what theater is about.

It is only recently, however, that I have come to realize these obvious truths. In fact, it may be just in the past few days that I have come to feel this so clearly. As I wrote in my message for the in-theater pamphlet for *Who Knows We Are Not Injured Like the Others?*, I have been making plays until now about contemporary life, or the state of being weak and unmotivated, or being languid, or about physical movement, and until recently those had been ends. But now they are beginning to become means instead of ends, I feel. Instead, the goal is becoming how to do something to the audience. It may be a complete misunderstanding on my part, but I believe that is what Brecht was saying we should do.

How does the audience's experience change? For you, the strongest and best media for effecting that change is the actor's body, isn't it?

Yes, it is. If the actor is just as a symbol, that role could be performed by a cup or anything.

Watching *Who Knows We Are Not Injured Like the Others?* I got the impression that you were putting even more of a load than ever before on the actors' bodies. As a result, I felt that the strength of what was communicated to the audience through the medium of the actor's body was stronger than ever. To create that physical presence, have you changed the way you work in rehearsals?

In a talk session we had with Tim Etchells (leader of Britain's progressive theater company Forced Entertainment) at a recent open rehearsal, there was something that the interpreter suggested as an effective way to explain it in English. That was that the audience doesn't "perceive" things that are on the stage, they "conceive" them. It was a tremendous surprise to realize how these two words could be juxtaposed. The Japanese word I had been using until then in our rehearsals was *jusei suru* (conceive in the sense of being impregnated). You impregnate words and space in the audience. You create something that will be born in the audience. So, in the rehearsals for this latest work I had been repeatedly saying things like, "That hasn't made it to the level of impregnation," or "That didn't reach," or "It hasn't conceived," or "This time it was impregnated."

I thought it was amazing that there was this word "conceive" in English that expressed exactly what I was trying to say, as if they had seen right through me from the start (laughs).

In that power to cause a change the audience, I definitely feel anew potential for theater. From a different perspective, you could also say that without that kind of strength it is becoming hard to maintain a unique quality to theater that other media can't offer.

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That's true. In the end, theater is a medium that is not well suited for "representation." For example, when an actor is lying on the floor and supposed to be dead, you can still see the rise and fall of their breathing in the stomach area (laughs). But it can't be helped, because until just a minute ago that actor was engaged in a violent life-or-death fight scene. And if the director makes it worse by saying, "Don't let your stomach move!" that is seen as the negative side of theater, isn't it?

But, it shouldn't be that way. For example, if you are representing death, you at once have the material aspect of the actor's body in front of you and the representation of "this person is dead" both existing at the same time. And, although it is not representational, the potential to use these two to be used in compliment to create an effect is what distinguishes theater as an art form. So, I believe that, "Don't let your stomach move" is not the kind of direction that should be done in theater. It is an art where you can create the presence of a person lying dead even if there isn't actually an actor lying there playing dead. If you don't use it in that way, you will not be able to bring out the full potential of theater.

**How is it possible to do that with just the physical presence of the actors, without relying on the narrative "story"?**

It is best when you can achieve the feeling that such "story," or situation or feelings—in other words the representation—comes to the actor at the very end. The impact will be weak if the actor is immersed in those elements from the beginning.

In short, if the things like the feelings involved in the actor's role are made the focus of the performance, it becomes a personal performance. What I am concerned with is not that kind of personal performance but what you could call the "public" aspect of performance, which is the aspect of performance that implants something in the audience. Recently, I am thinking first and foremost about how to integrate the meaning of the word "public" on the creative level, so it is realized in the performance. Because that is something that we have to think about—the social realities and the directions the world is moving. And, in my eyes, for a work to be "public" means that it is a strong work. I think we can say with certainty that doing theater as something public is a consciousness we have clearly been lacking in. Doing theater as a public art shouldn't mean that we have to focus on social themes, or that we can't do overly experimental things. On the contrary, it is perfectly acceptable to do things that involve highly individualistic concerns or obsessions. The measure of whether a work is "public" or not should be how powerfully it is realized, or whether it is being realized at a high level or not. This is the kind of thing I want to concern myself with now.

**When you say "public" in Japan, we tend to associate it with the highest common denominator, and unfortunately leads to conclusions like, "Since you are using public funding, you should present something that everyone can understand."**

That is the worst kind of trap to get caught in. So, we have to fight against that kind of entrapment. And, toward that end, the only thing I do is to try to create works that are so compelling and so convincing that people will have to say, "This is truly public."

To do that, it is necessary to spend a lot of time in the creation of each work and then bring the works to full maturation through repeated performances over a significant period of time. That is why I want the theaters and producers to provide us with the kinds of conditions that enable us to create truly public works. Or, the other possi-

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bility is for us to engage in theatrical activities in a way that allows us to secure those conditions by ourselves. In either case, the most practical way for us to achieve those conditions at this point is to continue our activities overseas.