



Profile

KENTARO!!

Dancer/choreographer, leader of the company TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS

While working from technique based primarily in hip hop dance, KENTARO!! creates unique and innovative works that transcend the patterns of conventional styles of dance. In recent years, his works are characterized by dance with a narrative aspect interwoven with meaning and relevance and utilizing self-composed music and sound in fuzzy synchronization with the dance movement. In 2008, he won the Young Choreographer's Prize sponsored by the French Embassy in Japan at the "Yokohama Solo & Duo Competition" and the Nextage special prize and Audience prize of the Toyota Choreography Awards 2008.

In 2010, he won the Japan Dance Forum Award. Often invited for overseas performances, KENTARO!! made a solo tour of three cities in India in the spring of 2012, performed a solo long run of 20 stages in Tokyo and Kyoto in the autumn as part of his ambitious artistic and dance activities.

<http://www.kentarock.com/>

TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS

This perpetual next-generation dance company makes effective use of rich variation based on pure dance and original music to create an everyday yet wondrous world. The name of the company encompasses their aspiration to work in Tokyo, Japan, and the dreams and beliefs they aim for. Since its founding in December of 2008, the company has presented seven long works and two short pieces at its annual independent performances.

In 2012, the company successfully completed its first independent performance tour of three cities in Germany. In January of 2013 the company's showcase performance in New York was written up in *The New York Times* with an excellent review.

2013 will see the company present three new works. Acting on its motto, "To touch your heart and break through it," the company has its heart set on infusing dance with whimsical ideas and bringing even more vigor to its work.

<http://www.tokyoelectrock.com/>

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アーティスト・インタビュー

Jun. 28, 2013



Connecting hip hop and contemporary dance The unique creative sense of KENTARO!!

ヒップホップとコンテンポラリーを繋ぐ KENTARO!!の感性

KENTARO!! is an artist who strikes a resonant chord among today's young generation with his hip hop-based *datsuryoku-kei* (ennui style) dance creations. He also composes and writes words for the original music he uses in his works. In addition to solo dance activities he helps nurture the next generation of dancers through the activities of his dance company TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS and as a coordinator of various festivals and programs. In this interview he talks about his activities and ambitions as an artist.

Interviewer: Takao Norikoshi (dance critic)

From the "Dance Koshien" TV contest to street dance and finally contemporary dance

We have heard that you started dance because of the TV dance contest program for high school students, "Dance Koshien" (started c. 1988). That was the program credited with sparking Japan's boom in street dance.

I was about a third grader in elementary school at the time. My swimming teacher had been a contestant on the Dance Koshien program. He showed us his break dancing at summer camp and I thought it was cool, so I started too. Also, my mother was a fitness instructor, so I often saw the promotion videos of artists like Madonna and Michael Jackson when I was little.

Even though I liked performing in front of people, I used to get stage fright and was the kind of kid who always choked up and made errors when the ball came to me playing baseball (laughs). I tried doing all the things that looked cool to me as a kid, like soccer, skateboarding and playing DJ, but dance was the thing I made progress most quickly in. I began taking dance lessons from my first year in junior high school, and by the time I was in high school I already had confidence that I could make a living doing dance.

Since you were born in 1980, you were a child in a time before hip hop became well known, weren't you?

That's right. Even in Tokyo, there were just a few dance schools that were already teaching hip hop. And, all of the people studying there were adults, not children. At the time I had a school phobia and seldom went to school, so I was going to dance classes five days a week. By the time I was in my first year of high school, I was

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already going on tour around the country with the upperclassmen. At the time, there was still a strong hierarchy in street dance, but in many case the senior performers were kind to me and let me practice with them. When there was an event that they were going to perform in, they would invite me along and I got to perform with the upperclassmen I admired. So, we that kind of strong interrelationship that rarely exists in the contemporary dance scene, however, The kind of hierarchy among dancers that existed in Japan's hip hop scene.

Did your parents understand and encourage your interest in dance?

My father was against it at first but now he sees it in a positive light. As for my mother, she encouraged me from the start. When I am performing as a guest artist at some important club, I reserve VIP seats for my family. When I was a senior in high school, I was glad to be able to invite my mother to late-night performances. By the time I was seventeen I was already active as the leader of a dance team I formed.

What style of dance were you doing at the time?

Initially it was mostly rock dance, but after that I learned hip hop, house, poppin' and all the other styles of street dance. Break dance is the only thing I gave up on, because I had so many friends with amazing break dance technique (laughs). But, gradually I began to feel the limitations of just pursuing ways to look "cool" and getting perfect synchronization in our group dances. The only audience for that kind of dance was young people and it was only a matter of whether something looked cool or not; it wasn't a medium where you could express to the human emotions. Especially there is no expression of the emotions of sorrow, grief and pity. I began to have the feeling that I wanted to create works that I could proudly show to my grandparents as well, so, even though it was rare at the time, I began doing solo pieces from my senior year in high school. Around the same time I formed a theater group.

What kinds of works did your theater group perform?

We did entertainment type stage performances where the singing parts of musicals were performed in dance instead. I wrote the plays, directed, choreographed and produced as well. We performed around four productions, but I found that I couldn't really write things that were very interesting, and there were already so many enormously talented people in that field, so I returned to dance.

In your KENTARO!! works you make effective use of words, in such ways as using original songs that you have written the words for. It isn't unusual for artists to use words, and in recent years artists like Mikuni Yanaihara of Nibroll have started theater projects, but I think there are few who have actually gone as far as to start a theater company of their own.

In contemporary dance there is a strong tendency to use figurative forms of expression, which I feel is close to dramatic expression. That is why I was strongly influenced by Pina Bausch. I first saw her work *Nefes* (Japan performance, 2005), and even though I watched it from one of the cheapest seats way at the back of the theater, it moved me very much. It brought tears to my eyes, and that was the first I realized that dance

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KENTARO!! *Ame ga Furu to Hareru* (After
raining, will be sunny) (2011)



could make people cry. It made me feel that I wanted to do more than just looking cool; I wanted to make works that could move people in that way.

Were you going to see contemporary dance often at that time in your career?

Every week I would make sure to see at least some works of theater or dance. The contemporary dance work I saw was by Takao Kawaguchi, and next was Mika Kurosawa. Both of them were what people referred to at the time as the “almost no movement types,” (laughs), with Kawaguchi-san going around in circles on roller blades and Kurosawa-san was using a flyswatter and writing letters. I thought, “What is this?” The idea of watching dance that made you think was fresh in itself for me at the time. Next I saw the Strange Kinoko Dance Company and it opened my eyes to the great freedom contemporary dance encompassed with all these different styles.

When street dance people see contemporary dance, their opinions of it tend to be divided into two groups, don't they? People who enjoy it and people who negate it completely, saying, “They can't dance as well as us.”

That is what is wrong with many of them. It is too narrow-minded to simply say, “They can't dance like we can.” I don't think that people who are truly good dancers and know where they stand will say things like that. Instead, they are able to look at it objectively as a different form of expression. On the contrary, I see an increasing number of cases of street dancers who aren't strong enough to make a living in that field are coming to contemporary dance to try to do something of their own. Because, if the people watching them [in contemporary dance] aren't from the street dance audience, they won't notice their lack of skill. I think that is also a problem.

Just after the time you were beginning your solo dance activities, contemporary dance was beginning to draw more attention in Japan. In 2005, you won an Honorable Mention Prize at the “Tokyo Compe” dance competition, and in 2006 you had your own solo recital. Then, from 2006 to 2008 you performed around Japan in the “Odori ni Iku-ze!” tours, and in 2007 you were chosen for an artist residency at a SESSION HOUSE studio.

During this period I was searching, trying out a variety of ideas to creating short pieces. The piece that won a prize at Tokyo Compe, titled *Inoue-kun okite, okite teba!* (Inoue, wake up, get up boy!), was a mime-like piece that was an attempt to move the audience in some way. I also submitted a piece in the open “Café Live Show” contest organized by BankArt1929 for which Mikuni Yanaihara served as one of the judges. My piece wasn't selected as a finalist, but Yanaihara-san liked what I was doing and had me perform in a male duo work. After that, I participated in the off-Nibroll performance tour in Taiwan.

The two of you have something in common, in that you both have worked on the borderline of theater and dance, don't you?

One difference is that I can only create fully choreographed pieces but Yanaihara-san can create works through a process of interactive discourse with other artists, and I learned a lot in the areas of use of words and relationships from working with her.

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KENTARO!! *Naku na, Tokyo de mate*
(2008)



Photo: Yoichi Tsukada

The other performer in the duo work of hers that I performed was an actor, who of course couldn't dance like a dancer, but on the other hand, it was an experience full of discovery for me, seeing how differently we executed the same movements.

Dancers whose background is in street or hip hop dance tend to have a strong orientation toward the "dance battle" that focuses their attention too much toward being strong in the frontal direction, and that orientation weakens their work when they try to prepare something as a [theater] stage work. But, what impressed me was that from the beginning you presented very "theatrical" works choreographed with a clear consciousness of the full space of the stage, including the space behind and above the performers.

I did considerable study about stage lighting and other compositional aspects of theater works. But in the end, I believe that it comes down to a matter of whether or not you can grasp things in a perceptual sense. The same movement will have a different nuance if performed facing sideways, and if two performers are dancing a duo piece, the meaning changes if you interchange the dancers. I also feel that street dancers are basically afraid of not doing anything, so they pack every moment with movement. But, it is when a dancer suddenly stops for a moment after dancing through a succession of movements that grab the viewer and communicate a sense of the person inside the dancer; it is that moment of pause that has the power to move the viewer, and that is what I place importance on.

An award-winning "datsuryoku-kei" solo dance overflowing with pathos

The year 2008 was a watershed year for you it seems. With your piece *Naku na, Tokyo de mate* (Don't cry, wait in Tokyo) you won the Young Choreographer's Prize sponsored by the French Embassy in Japan at the "Yokohama Solo & Duo Competition" and the Nextage special prize and Audience Prize of the Toyota Choreography Awards, and you also formed the company TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS.

When I began my activities as a solo artist, I told myself that I was going to win an award in three years. I decided that if my work wasn't accepted as contemporary dance in that time I would look for another career course. But, it went exactly according to plan! (Laughs) I had not made it past the initial judging stage based on video presentations in the Yokohama Competition the first two years I applied, but in the third year I won an award just as I had decided I would. I was in the mindset that I just had to win an award that year.

It was an impressive debut. But, there were some people with only superficial knowledge that spoke rather negatively about your success, saying it was just because it was hip hop. In other words, they probably thought that all it involved was putting together standard hip hop moves and move with the momentum of the music. In fact, even though it may be based in hip hop, it was clear to us that you are creating original movements.

I knew that the technical basis probably wouldn't be understood by most, so I was content to be happy if people just found my piece interesting. I was simply happy that

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I won approval for having made a work from hip hop style dance. But, it bothered me that the ballet-educated people kept telling me that I should study ballet (laughs).

Your winning work *Naku na, Tokyo de mate* was a solo piece that made effective use of spoken lines.

Around that time I was having some problems in my human relationships that had exhausted me emotionally, so I decided to try creating a work that expressed my feelings in a composition that combined banal things and meaningless things. The audience surely thought that I would be dancing hip hop, so I decided to open with the opposite by just talking on and on for the first five minutes. Then, just about the time that they were probably thinking, "Hey, isn't this guy going to dance?" I began to move. The first thing I did was to creep along forward at a crawl that might have them thinking, "What is this guy?" And then, just when I felt that the audience was about to give up on me, I began to dance all out.

I see. It was a piece composed to get the audience thinking that this was a guy absorbed in himself, wasn't it? At the end you shout out, "I love you, everyone!" and then you fell flat on the floor and the lights went out. Despite what seemed like an overly emotional ending, the work as a whole was quite stoic in nature; in a way surely made people feel that behind this artist's positive façade was a lonely man with a pitiable burden of unspoken sadness.

I have long had this conflict within myself that leads me to think positively so I don't have to face the negative tendencies in myself. That is why my thought patterns may not be very mainstream. The kind of lines I use may be close to drama in nature, but the important thing is the way you lead into them.

You write the words and music for most of the music you use in your works, don't you?

In music I'm completely self-taught. When I was around 22 I bought myself a synthesizer that cost about 200,000 yen (approx. \$2000 dollars) and it took me about two years to compose my first piece. Now, I'm writing almost all of the music I use in our performances, including some quite complex ones. Some hip hop dancers often do their own DJ mix-type music tapes for their performances, but I doubt that there are any who are composing their own music like I am, starting with my own original melodies. When you get down to it, hip hop music only requires a cool drum beat and bass line to be effective, but for my works I need elements like piano or synthesizer sometimes playing sentimental type melodies, so I have to compose it myself. On the other hand, the basic sounds need for hip hop are too difficult for me to compose. I record my compositions on a Roland VS series model that only has a hard disc memory of 10 gigabytes. Today it is easier to compose and record pieces on a computer, but I like the process of compiling parts in an analog mode, so that is how I still do it.

For most [dance] artists doing the choreography is more than enough for them to handle, so doing the music composition as well must be an extremely big task for you.

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Even though I have been doing this for quite a while, I have to admit that it nearly kills me at times. But, the reason I came to believe that I have to do it this way is because of what I was told when I won the Toyota Choreography Award. Dance professionals and dancers in were saying that in the end I was simply putting together movement to ride effectively on the power of existing music. They were saying that, in effect, it was something that anyone could do. That is what made me decide that they wouldn't be able to complain if I wrote all my own music. Now, I even sing the songs myself.

In dance performances, using spoken lines is a two-edged sword. For better or worse it always has a very big effect on the work.

Yes. Even if there is no meaning in the dance, it is interesting how meaning comes into the scene the minute words of a song come into play. In order to communicate directly the message I want to send, I deliberately choose to use common expressions in the words to the songs I write for the stage, so the words will stand out. But, in order to be sure that it doesn't become cheaply emotional or cliché, I have to take care in the setting (context) I create with the directing and the dance.

As the sub-prize of the Young Choreographer's Prize sponsored by the French Embassy you got a residency period in France. What did you do there?

I went to see dance performances almost every day, but at the time it was all "non-dancing" works (laughs). Seeing works like that once in a while is OK, but it gets difficult when it is that kind of work every day. One thing that left a strong impression on me was a work of Wim Vandekeybus. It was a very powerful stage with video, acting and dance. It was also good for me to see Sankai Juku in France. I was able to experience first-hand how well received their art was. Besides seeing lots of works, I was also showing my own creations while I was in France.

You are continuing to perform overseas now. In general, how is your work received by overseas audiences?

I believe that few people see it as hip hop. I think people see it mainly in the context of dance works. When I performed in Germany there were a good number of break dancers coming to see me perform, and it seemed to me that they were seeing it naturally as a different form of dance expression. But, I am told that in Europe the street dance audience won't usually come if you present something purely as contemporary dance, and in that sense it appears that the divisions between the different dance genres continue to stand firm.

There is a gritty cultural background behind the history of hip hop (answering the call to use dance battles as a substitute for battles to the death between street gangs amidst the worsening gang wars) that remains an aspect of its form of expression. In places like America where hip hop evolved in that context, do you feel a response to the fact that a different kind of hip hop has evolved in Japan stimulated by TV programs and far from the original weight of the violent background in which the genre was born?

Overseas I am asked what kind of dance style mine is, but I am never asked what I

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think of hip hop. I guess it is because everyone does it now simply because it is cool. But, I don't think of hip hop merely as dance. To me it is a form of expression that I use to communicate my message to society. In that sense, I think the expression rappers bring to their art is amazing. Although you won't find it in the normal media, when I hear a young rapper in his or her teens singing, "I want to die but I can't do that either," it truly sounds real to me. That is what I want to do in dance too, and I would be glad if I can create dance works that help save people who want to die. So, even when I am dancing to a classical piano piece, I am dancing with a consciousness that is based in that kind of hip hop expression.

In your solo works you have tried a number of challenging creative efforts, haven't you?

At the end of last year did an 12-day solo performance run with 15 stages, which was virtually an exercise in disciplined training. Although the choreography was unchanged, the movement on the first day was completely different from what it became by the final day. This is something that can only be experienced by doing a long performance run. If you keep the tension in your body running constantly [when performing] you will get tired very quickly; you have to learn to relax the tension [in your muscles] by still keep the sharpness in your movement. To do that, rhythm and your breathing are important. When a movement requires explosive power it is done without breathing, so when that movement is finished you should breathe in and when you dance again you should breathe out for a moment. With an unskilled dancer who is unable to relax in parts, you will see their shoulders beginning to rise and they get tired very quickly. But, for me it is the same breathing method used in everyday speaking. So, if you were to ask me to stand up right now and dance for two hours, I can do it. After dancing long and hard on the stage, I like the feeling of being able to stop and stand still with easy, normal breathing that would make people wonder if this is the same person who did all that dancing just now. But I am one who sweats heavily, so I can't really surprise people that way.

You have also done collaborative works with Masako Yasumoto in *Kako no naka* (2010) and with former Netherland Dance Theater member Kenta Kojiri in *Terasukini* (2013).

I toured around Japan with Yasumoto-san in the Odori ni Iku-ze program and was truly shocked and amazed to find someone who could created such unexpected styles of dance, and I thought at that time that I would like to do dance with her sometime. Kojiri-san and I are the same age and from the same locality. He said he wanted to do a solo dance to one of my pieces, so I picked up on what he wanted to do and then composed a piece for him.

Forming a company and aspirations as a producer

After winning the awards in 2008 you formed your own company TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS. Among the younger generation of artists there seems to be a common feeling that making a company is a burden.

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TOKYO ELECTROCK STAIRS
Todokete, Kaibutsu-kun (2011)



Photo: Manaho Kaneko

That's exactly why I wanted to make one. In fact, I had already started the preparations before I won the awards, but I don't know if I would have succeeded in making the company as I did if I hadn't won the awards. At the start I thought it would be good to have a company made up half and half of contemporary dance and hip hop dancers. I chose the ELECTROCK name because I like electro and rock music. I added STAIR to that because of the meaning of climbing up one step at a time and also because I thought the name of the hip hop group People Under the Stairs was cool. For our company works I think about lighting and such with the aim of making the dancers look as good as possible.

In those works there are always solo parts for the dancers, and there are sometimes scenes where the dancers introduce themselves by their real names. How do you do the choreography for those works?

Lately I am using a special method to create solo pieces for each dancer. I begin by creating a solo piece based on my image of the specific dancer's body [characteristics]. Then I dance it for the person and have him or her record a video of it on their smart phone. Then I have them take it home and learn the dance by themselves by copying what they see on their video. Naturally, because each dance has their own unique physical attributes, etc., the dance will never look the same as when I first performed it for them. And, also because the initial choreography isn't done by count. Through repeated exchanges we then develop the piece further. After doing the choreography, when I get an inspiration I will then compose the music, often in the same day. So, I have no time to rest. But, since the dancers are all practicing their parts on their own, it is actually quite an efficient method.

Since forming your company, you have come out with new works at a very fast pace. You debuted *W peesu ni yuki ga furu* (Snow falls on W peace) in 2008, *Nagai Yoru* (Long Night) in 2010), *Suiheisen Saiko* (The horizon on the sea is the greatest) and *Todokete, Kaibutsu-kun* (Deliver it, monster boy) in 2011), *Saigo ni au, buru* (The blue, I meet last) in 2012) and this year (2013) you have debuted *Hajimari no march wo matteita* (We waited for the opening march / in which KENTARO!! did not perform) and *Tokyo Ru-ru-ru*.

In my case, rather than beginning with a concept, I begin most of my works from a simple desire to dance something I have in mind. Of course, it is not simply to look good, each time I make great efforts to communicate some message. Especially with *Todokete, Kaibutsu-kun*, which we began rehearsing for in April 2011, just one month after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, we had to ask ourselves if it was meaningful to be dancing at a time like that, and I think that questioning came through strongly in the work. The theme of that work was "Sing of love" and it actually was the case that sections where dance would normally be at the forefront, we were singing instead. It was because I felt the need to communicate clearly the meaning for dance.

When I saw Wim Vandekeybus' work in France, I was impressed to see how many people there were who could both dance and act, and it made me ask myself seriously what kind of work I wanted to create in Japan, and would indeed be able to create. That question is always in my mind when I am creating works.

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Vandekeybus' works are extremely intense and they tour so often that the dancers' bodies can't tolerate the intensity and the pace. As a result, the dancers are constantly quitting and being replaced by others, I am told. That may be one definition of a professional approach, but from the standpoint of nurturing the careers of dancers, it doesn't seem very effective.

I see. For me, there cannot be a work separate of the members participating in it, and to a large degree the choreography is created specifically for the individual dancers. So, that type of creation would not be possible in Vandekeybus' case with such a turnover. With my method the contents of the work can change on the basis of the participating members as well. The membership of my company has become fairly constant recently and I have big expectations for each of them. The members voluntarily take part in the classes at the studio where I teach regularly, and because we are creating works often, I would say that I am together with the company members about half of the year. The participating members are about six or seven years younger than me, and a lot of them have rather dark natures (laughs).

When they aren't dancing, they are the types who are constantly asking themselves what they are living for. Some of them don't even call back when I call them and leave a message. But, they are always on time for rehearsals and they all certainly have unique individuality (laughs).

Unlike most Japanese artists, you also have the working sense of a producer, and in 2010 you actually launched a festival named "flat plat fesdesu." It consists of a week-long schedule containing three or so programs made up of five- to 20-minute pieces by four or five artists/groups, doesn't it?

That festival at the [Komaba] Agora Theater has only been held twice so far, but before it I proposed events for the Alternative Space RAFT in Higashi Nakano (in Tokyo) that have been actively pursued. RAFT also has a program called Dance Nest that lends artists studio space for free residency periods leading up to weekend performances. The original proposal for this program came from me. I was happy to see that program initiated.

At ST Spot (Yokohama) we also make programs and I want to see us provide a simple "hook-up" program (where successful hip hop artists hook up with a young hip hop dancers and give them the opportunity to get some attention with performances). In dance, I believe that artists has to be active and working hard during their twenties. In the festival we have been doing at RAFT, there were also people that we thought would be good for young artists in contemporary dance to be encouraging as well, so we made a program that booked them with veteran artists and arranged performances that people could see for 1000 yen (approx. \$10).

I see it as a strength of yours that you, as an active dance artist, are able to use your connections to do that type of curation involving talent you find in a wide range of genres. You are always providing us with new and surprising discoveries.

That is exactly what I am trying to do, and I think it is one of my assets that I have seen more dance and more theater than most people. Also, because it is a small-scale festival, it can be held whenever we can put together a program of artist we

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really want to have people see. “flat plat fesdesu” has quite a cross-sectional manner that includes music and theater as well as dance, and the appearing artists are from a wide range of age groups. I don’t like to see people only of the same age grouping together. I want to bring in lots of accomplished older artists as well. We have a team called Crackers Boat that works on the planning and production of the festival. The team has three members, including myself, and there is a designer as well. It is difficult because I do all of work of assembling the dance program, but it helps having the other team members to be responsible for the booking and other administrative work. The younger members of the company also help in the field work. Also, from this year another person will join the team to handle production for the solo and company independent performances.

I don’t find people (artists) who are only doing their own thing to be as appealing as those who also work with others. When a very successful musician takes the time to tell others that they should listen to the music of a particular young artist and that brings attention to the young artist and helps his or her career along, we respect the musician who helped get the young artist discovered. And the young artist whose career was helped in that way will surely do the same thing to help young artists in the future. I think it will be great if that kind of synergy can help build an exciting arts scene.

What you say sounds to me like an ideal vision for a hip hop community, doesn’t it?

Yes. In contemporary dance, the older generation seems to still have strong connections among the artists of their generation, but we really don’t have that in my generation. So, I think it is something we need to build.

Would you tell us your outlook for the future?

I get a good number of offers for commercially-based projects, but I want to keep trying to build my creative powers and create good works so I can remain in this arts scene for as long as possible. Actually, one thing I would also like to do sometime is to be the artistic director of a theater. I also want to be active in getting theaters involved in the creation of productions and become involved in community-based programs. So, I hope everyone will give me their support in these efforts too!