



Profile

Shintaro Hirahara

Born in Hokkaido in 1981, Hirahara is a dancer and choreographer. From 2004 to 2007 he was a member of Noism. After going freelance, he joined C/Ompany from 2008 and Ryohei Kondo's Condors from 2010. In 2013, Hirahara started his own company OrganWorks. He also did staging for Tomohiro Maekawa's company Ikiume and choreography for production by Kentaro Kobayashi, as well as other projects like collaboration with the contemporary artist Midori Harima. These activities have brought exchanges with a wide range of artists in dance, theater and contemporary art.

2011: Won the grand prize of the Korea International Modern Dance Competition (KIMDC)

2013: Did a 9-month research residency in Spain on a grant from Japan's Agency for Cultural Affairs for foreign research by emerging artists

2015: Won Honorable Mention in the Otaru City Cultural Awards

2016: Won both the NextAge Choreographer Award and the Audience Award in the Toyota Choreography Awards 2016

2017: Won the 11th JaDaFo Dance Award 2016

OrganWorks

<http://theorganworks.com/>

Artist Interview

アーティスト・インタビュー

May. 7, 2018



Shintaro Hirahara's image of Theatrical dance

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Presenting the work *Reason to Believe* with his company OrganWorks for the final Toyota Choreography Awards 2016, Shintaro Hirahara became a double award winner, receiving both the Next Age Choreographer Award and the Audience Award. After activities as a founding member of the resident dance company Noism of the Niigata-City Performing Arts Center Ryutopia, he danced with Condors and with Shintaro Oue and his C/Ompany as a company member. In 2013, he went on to establish his own dance company OrganWorks together with costume designer Yumiko Nishimura, composer Yuta Kumachi and advertising designer Léna Pont. After seven dancers joined the company in 2014, Since then, the company has presented rich assortment of dance works on themes derived from literary works and the like performed by dancers from various backgrounds. Hirahara has also invited choreographer Carmen Werner from Spain to hold workshops and create dance pieces on an ongoing basis. In this interview, Hirahara speaks about the "theatrical" dance expression he seeks with his high trained physicality.

Interviewer: Takao Norikoshi (dance critic)

OrganWorks' latest work *Seiju (sacred beast) – live with a sun*

You were the winner of the Grand Prize at the 15th and final Toyota Choreography Awards 2016. In October of last year (2017) you were the recipient of a grant for creating a work and a residency at the Kanazawa 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, and as part of your award-winner perquisites you were given the opportunity to perform your company OrganWorks' latest work, *Seiju (Sacred Beast) – live with a sun*.

I received a two-week residency at the Kanazawa 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art to create a work. Our company OrganWorks has ten dancers, including myself, and two of them (Yasushi Shoji and Junpei Hamada) live in Hokkaido. This was the first time that we were all able to spend two weeks together, and it resulted in an intense and fruitful period of creation. I believe it also provided a time for me to think anew and in depth about the meaning of doing creation in a regional city. From 2004, I spent three years as a resident dancer with the Noism company in Niigata, but I had never really thought about the significance of working in a regional city (as opposed to the major metropolitan center of Tokyo). So, working

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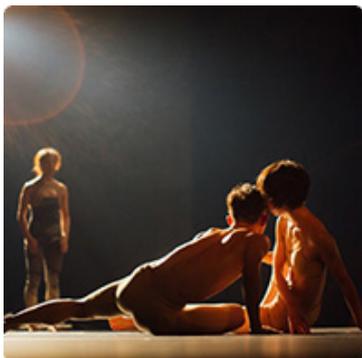
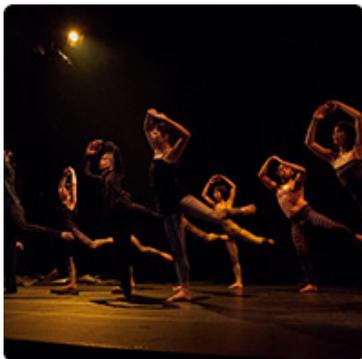
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Seiju – live with a sun

choreograph, plan and direction: Shintaro
Hirahara

(Oct. 12 – 15, 2017 at Theatre Tram)



Photos: Hajime Kato

on that project in Kanazawa, I had the opportunity to think about what Tokyo really represents from the perspective of creation and what it means to be pursuing creative activities in Japan, etc.

OrganWorks is a company where a number of different kinds of creators are active as members.

Yes. We have a stage director (Akiyoshi Tsutsui), lighting designer (Akiyo Kushida), audio/acoustics artist (Kohei Harashima) costume designer (Yumiko Nishimura) and composer (Yuta Kumachi) that I usually rely on, so it makes communication and creation easier. Kumachi is a composer who changes his style of music depending on the piece and also creates art works in a variety of genres, but when he does work for OrganWorks we ask him to specifically compose music that tells a story, like a movie soundtrack. I tell our costume designer Yumiko Nishimura that I want costumes that look like existing ready-made clothes such that even when you look at them closely they don't look handmade. To our lighting artist, Kushida, I often say that I want shadows, but with a balance that is never so dark that things in them are too obscure.

I see. That sounds fitting for your works and the way they seem to take the viewer away from reality to some adjacent but different world before we realize it. Would you tell us in some detail about the creative process for your latest work *Seiju*, the English title for which is *live with a sun*. It is a twist of *Leviathan*, the behemoth mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible and also the title of the 17th century political philosophy book by Thomas Hobbes.

Because it was to be a work to perform in commemoration of the Toyota Choreography Award, I wanted to create a work on an imposing subject, so I began doing research on myths. One day as I was walking along thinking about this and that, suddenly a flying scarab beetle hit my body. I hadn't touched a bug in a long time, so there was something very fresh about it at that moment, so I decided to create a piece with bugs as the theme. I would worship bugs, try to learn from bugs, try to become a bug, try to use bugs as a means of approach to find movement I had forgotten or create new movement. So, at first the project's title was "sacred bug," but then some of the women in the company said scornfully, "Bugs for an award commemorative performance?" (Laughs) So, as I was thinking about a theme with greater depth, there was another project scheduled in which I did a collaboration with the contemporary artist Chiharu Shiota, and it was a project in which we worked from a short story by the writer Paul Auster. After that when I was reading through some other things, I encountered Auster's novel *Leviathan* and I thought, "This is it!" And when I read some of Hobbes' book *Leviathan*, I found that in it he compared the gathering of individuals that is a nation to an uncontrollable beast. I thought then immediately, "This is a metaphor that fits bugs perfectly!" From there, new images came to mind and grew and expanded rapidly. With this, I changed the Japanese title of the new work I had in mind from *Seichu* (sacred bug) to *Seiju* (sacred beast), and as the English title I did some word play with the title *Leviathan* to coin the term "live with a sun." In Japanese, the sun (*taiyo*) is also a symbol of the nation (Land of the Rising Sun), so it is the place I live in, Japan. I had hoped to get Shiota-san to do the stage art for the piece, but she was ill at the time, so that didn't happen.

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Your work *Seiju – live with a sun* is a profound and powerful one that has life emerging a dark quagmire and violent dance of bugs interjected with text. Can you tell us some specifics of your creative process for it?

First, I began by giving Kumachi several ideas for the sound. Since I am the type that wants to have specific images for my scenes, I will explain to him what I want in terms like: “I want a bug image that is a little more grotesque, expressed using strings,” or, “I want to do a scene with mechanical type music, where the only sound is that of the bugs’ footsteps.” Then he takes that and creates tracks with about seven different types of tones, which I then examine for possibilities. There is a strong narrative aspect in my works, and sometimes it is Kumachi’s music that helps bring to my mind ideas for the development of the story line. There are also times when I use existing music, and in that case it is usually classical music that is not in Kumachi’s creative vocabulary. I also like the contemporary musician David Lang and I get the opportunity to use his music too at times.

So, do you begin working on the choreography after you get the music?

I am the type who works out the choreography and then gives it to the performers, so first I work on the dance using other existing music. Then I take Kumachi’s tracks and work to fit them in. Next, I show that to him so that further work can be done to complete the music in a process that goes back and forth several times, like a chain of correspondences.

Background

Would you tell us a little about your background? You were born in 1981 in Otaru, Hokkaido, and you have a background in classical ballet, hip-hop, and contemporary dance.

When I was 12 years old, I was fascinated with the dance and music group TRF, I practically wore out a VHS video watching their dance moves so I could imitate them. But there were no street dance schools in Otaru at the time, so I went along with my parents to a “lively rhythmic gymnastics” class they were taking, which is where I first learned ballet basics from the daughter of their instructor who was also teaching there.

As an adolescent boy, did you have any hesitations about learning dance?

My classmates had a nickname for me, “Tights,” (laughs), but I never thought it was embarrassing at all. Rather than that, both of my parents had a reputation in the neighborhood for being real carefree characters. When I was in junior high school they would run around the school grounds calling out the name of our dog, even when classes were in session. It was like an everyday occurrence for classmates to tease me, “Shin-chan, your dad was chasing the dog again,” so ballet or dance was really no problem at all (laughs).

Did you enjoy learning ballet?

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I did enjoy it, but that's not to say I was good at it. I believe there are two types of people who start to dance. "People who start from a fascination with the physicality" and "people who start from a vision of what they want to look like as dancers," and I think it's the former who become good at dancing. They're the ones who start by linking their consciousness and their body, saying "To make this move, then it's good to move this part of the body." But I was one of the latter, that's to say, I was just trying to imitate the people I had seen on TV. I was satisfied since I had this vision of "I can do these cool moves," so right away I felt it was easy to dance. But, I was never actually dancing at all since there was no link between the body and understanding that sense of body. But still, I couldn't help but enjoy it (laughs). And rather than struggling with ballet, I never became any good at it.

That just might be fatal for a professional dancer. (laughs) But generally speaking, it's wonderful to have had that "experience of dancing for the sheer joy of it" when you were a child. So you had the "soul of a dancer" and you might say that point is a certain type of talent.

I had a terrible shock when I was in the first year of high school. I was taking part in the "Sapporo Art Park" ballet seminar during winter vacation and on the first day, the instructor Jan Nuyts (artistic advisor for the Prix de Lausanne international ballet competition among others) told me, "The way you use your muscles is all wrong, and besides, your skeletal frame is not good, you should quit ballet." It stopped me cold.

When I think about it now, he was doing me a favor telling me not to waste my time on something I was not suited for, instead I should find what fit me. I myself had doubts about whether I would ever become good at ballet, but it came as quite a shock to me, and it depressed me. My head was hanging low when I went to the contemporary dance class the following day, but after my first attempt at improvisation, the instructor, Toru Shimazaki, told me, "You have a good sense for this." (Laughs).

That was surely an unexpected case of completely opposite opinions (laughs).

I began to enjoy contemporary dance, so I talked to Yukihiro Sakai, who I call my only real mentor, about furthering my studies, he invited me to come to Europe. Sakai-san was living in Brussels and had been in the Maurice Béjart ballet company (BBL) at the same time as Gil Roman. He gave me some interesting advice, "You have to learn how to develop the ability to take care of yourself. If you see or hear something interesting, learn how to say what you think in English. Every dance company these days has Japanese members, make friends with them and get work." I lived like a backpacker from then on. That was in 2001, when I was 20 years old, and that advice is still useful to me today.

At that time Belgium was heating up both economically and culturally, wasn't it?

I think Europe was at its best then. It was the way choreographers should be, and there was an awareness among dancers, too, that this was their world, I could feel firsthand this was their golden era. It was exactly at that time that Jo Kanamori was guest choreographer at NDT; I got into contact with him and talked to him at his apartment.

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That was a few years before Jo Kanamori established Noism (2004), wasn't it?

That's right. Just before I came back to Japan, Mr. Kanamori told me, "Learn the basics. If you do the basics, you'll have a chance." So I moved to Tokyo to try ballet one more time. That was when I met my teachers, Emiko and Hiroko Hayakawa. The two of them were able to put performance theory into easily understandable language. Thanks to them I was gradually able to raise my level of understanding of my body, and in spite of being a latecomer, I understood the gap between my body and my sense of dance. It was when I was 21 or 22 and then that I finally began to really dance.

Jo Kanamori moved his base back to Japan in 2002 and started the "no·mad·ic project" in 2003. In 2004, he launched Noism as the resident dance company of the Niigata City Performing Arts Center "Ryutopia." You took part in both of them, didn't you?

I auditioned and taken on as a substitute. No matter what, I wanted to work with someone who could move like Kanamori-san, someone who had firsthand experience of the golden age in Europe, and I was fired up with the thought of learning. Noism was not only the physical part, it was a place to share ideas about the art called dance. Since all of the members were in their 20s, we weren't able to truly comprehend the significance or the special environment of being in the first resident dance company in Japan.

I was a good deal younger than the other members. Yuki Yamada and Aiichiro Miyagawa joined in the second year, and Yuta Ishikawa joined the company in the third. Yamada had only just begun to dance and Miyagawa had come from a musical theater background, so they were still lacking, but Naoya Aoki was a willing listener for them and they all became full-fledged members.

You left the company to work freelance in the third year of Noism, 2007. What was it that made you decide to leave the company?

I had this strong desire to create works that sprang from within me. During the summer break I saw a solo work by Taka Shamoto who was dancing with Rosas, I couldn't stand being in a position where I couldn't feel that I myself was fully responsible for what I wanted to express. I felt that my dependency on Kanamori-san for my life in dance should come to an end.

When did you first get the idea that you wanted to create your own work?

I'd been thinking about it ever since I first started ballet. That's because doing your own choreography for street dance is a given. Toru Shimazaki's class also taught me about creation.

C/Ompany and Words

After you went independent in 2007, you became very active creating new works, and in 2008, both you and Masahiro Yanagimoto joined the company C/Ompany that

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Shintaro Oue had started.

Oue had come to Noism as a quest artist, so I knew him, and I got a call from him saying he was going to perform at ACHITANZ and inviting me to join him, and when I got there Masahiro Yanagimoto was there too. Both of them are originally from Western Japan (Kansai) with strong background in ballet who moved their base of activities to Europe, so I had virtually nothing in common with them (laughs). But it was at a time when all three of us had begun to get into contact improvisational dance and explore its possibilities, so there were a variety of discoveries to be made. And, from a person who saw that performance came a request to perform as dancers in an opera to be performed in the SAITO KINEN FESTIVAL MATSUMOTO. And the contact piece we created during spare time at the rehearsals there became our *Iki, Shi, Tai* (2009). When we performed that at Sainokuni Saitama Arts Theater we chose C/Ompany as our company name.

Iki, Shi, Tai is a power-type improvisation that also led to the work *Dansu* (Oue, Hirahara, Mirai Moriyama) and other works, and already from this time you were using words during your dance performances. In your solo piece *Gunzo / escultorico* (2012) you start in talking about everyday matters as soon as you go on stage, and then the subject changes to prewar Paris, and when that story ended you began to dance. You have also many works based in literature, such as *Chuya no Uta* (2011) based on the poetry of Chuya Nakahara, *Drag & Paste* (2013) based on Charles Perrault and Ango Sakaguchi, *Tsukue no Utsuwa no Tsukue* (2014) based on Shakespeare. We can imagine several ways that words can be used in dance, to use words that have meaning, to show the speaking body and to use words as sound. What is your usual intention when you use words in dance?

I think it is because my roots are in hip hop. Since there are words in the four main components of hip hop (rapping (MCing), DJing (turntablism), breakdancing and graffiti art), It came naturally for me. When I created my first work in 2002 I was using words. In rap, they give a verbal introduction before the music starts, and I think it is something equivalent to the use of the *makura* (sitting pillow) in Japanese *rakugo* comedy. That is why I very often employ a pattern in which I use a verbal introduction at the start of my pieces.

One example of using a verbal introduction in theater is the way Toshiki Okada comes out on stage before the start of one of his plays and tells the audience that they will now be seeing the start of the play titled such-and-such. Is that similar to the way you use words at the beginning of a performance?

I have seen Okada-san's plays, and I wonder if it is similar or not. In theater, words are thrown out at the audience for them chew on and digest and think about over time. But in rap, or with the sitting cushion they use in Japanese *rakugo* comedy (an equivalent of Western stand-up comedy but done sitting on a cushion on the floor), I believe the object is to grab the audience with your words and not let them go until you have taken them to where you want to lead them. I believe my purpose in using words and the way I use them is closer to that. In my work *Gunzo*, I used a narrator on stage as a natural presence but speaking in a way that gradually drew the audience into an abstract world to create a closeness that made the audience feel

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that potential for the events being described could actually happen right next to them, because I thought that would have a scary effect.

Okada-san is a theater director, *rakugo* comedians are performers. I believe that your way of thinking is closer to that of a performer.

Yes, I think that is correct. When creating a work it is difficult to direct the performers to speak, so it may be that the methodologies for the two roles are indeed different.

Creation and the Sakyukan

In 2011, you choreographed the piece *Goon Goon* for Mariko Kakizaki, and when she performed it at the Korea International Dance Festival (KDMC), it won the Best Choreography Award. You usually perform in most of the works you create, but this was a solo work for Kakizaki.

In all the dance and choreography competitions I had entered in Japan, including the Toyota awards, I never got beyond the preliminary judging stage. I was doing things that I thought were substantial, but my breakthrough never came, and I had reached the point where I was thinking that it would only be overseas that my work would be understood. So, my feeling at the time was that I wanted Kakizaki to go [to Korea] and give them a real show of her physicality (laughs).

Kakizaki started out in rhythmic gymnastics and it wasn't until college that she started to dance. Later she was accepted into the Batsheva Dance Company Ensemble for young dancers in Israel, but she has said that it has performing in your works that opened her eyes and potential as a dancer. In fact, I have heard the same thing from other dancers as well. Why are there many young dancers who feel that way?

I don't really know, but like I said earlier, I am the type that approaches dance from images, and perhaps I have ability to talk about the importance of and the tricks for being able to enjoy dancing and to get into the feeling of a dance. I can sense right away when a dancer has been taught so much about how to control their body that it is constraining them. That makes me feel that it is such a shame that they haven't learned how thinking about the real fascination and meaning of a piece and bringing their great physicality and intelligence together when they dance can open up whole new worlds. When I see dancers like that, I can't resist the urge to try to help them reach that next stage.

But, that isn't something that can be understood just through words.

And that is why I try to give them repeated experiences of it. For about ten years I have been performing at the Sakyukan (*) in Niigata, and I often take young dancers with me when I teach.

Would you tell us more about your activities at Sakyukan?

When I was a member of Noism, one of our supporters, Izumi Koshino, gave me a chance to perform solo at her art gallery, which enabled me to get to know some of

* Sakyukan

The Sakyukan is an estate that was built in 1933 as the residence for the director of the Niigata branch of the old Bank of Japan. It has rooms built in the traditional style of Japanese residence architecture as well as Western-style rooms, a traditional Japanese storehouse (*kura*) and traditional Japanese gardens, etc. Today it is owned by the Municipality of Niigata and used as an arts and culture facility.

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the “literati” of Niigata. One of them was the director of the Sakyukan, Hiroshi Okura. He gave me support and from around 2007 he gave me the opportunity to dance at Sakyukan regularly. In the small spaces of this former estate home where there was no way to hide anything as a performer. There were times when only as few as three people would come to see me dance, and there were times when they watched without much seeming interest and gave me light applause at the end. And it took a few years before I was able to get proper applause.

When performing at Sakyukan, I was determined not to bring ideas in from Tokyo. Instead I would spend the whole day there getting to know the unique character of the building, its atmosphere, its humidity on a given day and draw inspiration from those things. Since it was those spaces that were the most elemental thing I shared with the viewers, I have never forgotten that fact. The ten years that I spent getting to grasp the spaces of the Sakyukan has been a valuable form of training for me.

In 2017, we did a 24-hour performance there. Of course the Sakyukan had its regular closing hours but its director Okura negotiated with the city authorities to keep it open for that day. Ten members of OrganWorks performed my works and did improvisation in 30-minute segments, taking turns performing for the full 24 hours, which made for a total of 48 sessions. Of course the audience came and went freely during that time. There was some fear involved in not having any distance between yourself and the audience, but it was the greatest.

Condors and Carmen Werner

In 2010, you performed with Condors. Noism and Condors would seem to be almost complete opposites in terms of style, so I was surprised when I learned that you had joined in their performances.

I had seen Kondo-san's dance when he appeared as a guest performer at with Noism and I had seen some of his solo performances, but I had never seen a Condors performance. Kondo-san has a unique sense of physicality that I had long liked, I thought his stoic approach to dance was good, and felt he had something special as an artist. So when Ryohei [Kondo] san invited me to participate in his performances, I knew I wanted to do it. Also, the stage presence of Kensaku Kobayashi has an eccentric quality and his sense of timing and balance are exceptional. He also liked interesting and fun things, so it was the appeal of the two of them that made me want to participate in the Condors' performances.

Did the focus on character that was the building block of the Condors style contribute anything to your own works.

I want a solid concept in my works, so the Condors style may be different from mine. But, I learned a lot from the working model of the Condors in which a group of people from different backgrounds and walks of life come together to perform.

You have also worked on a continuing basis with the Spanish choreographer Carmen Werner.

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In 2003, a production of *L'ombre – Camille Claudel a Eulogy* starring Masumi Yanase with choreography and direction by Carmen Werner was presented at the Aoyama Round Theatre. Selected as the male dancers were Naoya Aoki, Kaiji Moriyama, Yasutake Shimaji, Masaharu Imazu and myself as the youngest of the group. I was the first work of dance theater I ever had a firsthand experience with, and at the time I really didn't understand it at all. After that, when I joined Noism and increased my understanding of dance I watched Carmen's works once again and discovered their fascination. After I quit Noism, I was invited again to perform in her works again, and with that we quickly became friends. From 2010, I planned a program to have her come every year to Japan to give performances and workshops.

With these workshops I hope to see more and more high-level dancers emerge around Japan, and I want to show the process that will lead to that result. Today, I think there are a bit too many people who are creating their own dance works, and I think things will get more interesting if we can increase the number of people who can nurture dancers and communicate knowledge and encourage exchange.

You went abroad to Spain on a research grant in 2013, and wasn't it Carmen's company that hosted you at that time?

Yes. I got a national grant for a nine-month residence in Spain, and I was glad I did, from the bottom of my heart. It was not only the technique that I learned but also the experience of seeing how creative work should be an integral part of an artist's daily life. This also connects to what I say about Kanamori-san, but I truly experienced the importance making your stance as an artist a foundation of your daily life.

Nurturing a company

Though you had already been doing work independently while you were active as a member of C/Ompany and Condors, in 2013 you formed your own company OrganWorks. What made you decide to take on anew the job of running your own company, with all its potentially bothersome aspects?

I had had the experience of doing staging for Tomohiro Maekawa's company Ikiume, and I remember thinking what a great company it was and feeling very jealous of having technical people in all the necessary areas right there on hand. It was just at a time when I had felt the frustration of working on individual one-off productions and not having any cumulative buildup of results from them once they were over. I was missing the chance to share the same time with the same people and feel our progress as we cleared each obstacle. I was thinking it's logical and that is the way things should be. Another aspect is that, with that accumulation of experience and success you can be critical of other companies, saying "This is how we approach things," and "That is how your company's approaches things."

What kinds of activities are you involved in as a company?

Concerning the company's activities, we have all the members living in the Tokyo (Kanto) area get together for six hours once a week. Our members living in Hokkaido

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also come when they are able to. Of course we also do regular physical training. It is important that the members be able to immediately try out ideas when I say something like, "The theme is bugs and I want you to try doing a movement like this" Also, by having a fixed group of members, it eliminates in me any worries about finding performers. It also means that I can see the dancers faces in my mind when I am working on the initial image of a piece and say to myself, "This movement will be best for so-and-so," and, I will have him do this movement for before so-and-so (she) comes in," and in that way I can do specific stage composition.

I don't want us to be like a band where people only know the lead vocal's name but one where the bassist and drummer are also known by their names. I want people to know all of our company's dancers by their names. And I want to be connected to society. Until now we have been blessed with good luck and have been able to get by, though barely, and without the leeway to really think deeply about society or about dance. But, in order to be able to delve into the level of thought that Kanamori-san does, requires a higher level of position and responsibility. For that reason, I haven't given up on the idea of having our own theater or becoming some public theater's artistic director.

May I ask what visions or images you have in mind for the future?

While doing choreography for Noism2, I have come to the strong conviction that I have to be able to dance. Because, although there is can be importance in being able to give dance choreography to people who don't yet know dance well, another aspect of the type of choreographer I envision is being able to push people who can dance to the next level of the art. So, I myself have to understand the body more and be able to continue to create staging and choreography that brings out the best of the dancers' excellent physicality and keeps them interested in it. And, in order to do that, I want to become able to manage things like stage art and props so that they can be used like extensions of the dancers' bodies. From there, I want to be able to grasp the necessities of the load that will be placed on the dancers' bodies and the implications in terms of human relations and actions as I work a piece to completion. After that, I want to continue creating until people think I have reached the level of eccentricity. I want to become a prolific creator like Picasso or Dali (laughs).