



Yoshie Yamamoto

Yamamoto Noh Theatre
<http://www.noh-theater.com/>



Photo: Junpei Iwamoto

Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

Yamamoto Noh Theatre and its Quest to be an "Open Noh Theater"

“開かれた能楽堂”を目指す
山本能楽堂の挑戦

The Yamamoto Noh Theatre (Yamamoto Nohgakudo) is the oldest Noh theater in Osaka and one conducting some of the most progressive programs. Since more than ten years ago the theater has offered a program of evening performances for beginner audiences called “Kyoto-Osaka Traditional Performing Arts Night for Beginners” that present beginner audiences with programs bringing together a selection of different traditional performing arts of the Kyoto-Osaka area. The theater has also overturned many of the conventional practices of the Noh tradition in ways such as leaving the Noh stage to give Noh demonstrations in building entrance spaces, or Noh performances on boats, as well as collaborative performances with contemporary artists.

In 2012, the theater organized its first overseas performances in Bulgaria, and in 2016 it was invited to the Sibiu International Theater Festival (FITS, Romania), where its performances were a great success, and increasing efforts are being directed to such international exchange programs. Recognition for these overseas exchange programs lead to the Theatre being awarded the Japan Foundation’s “Global Citizenship Prize.” To overcome the image of Noh as difficult to appreciate and even boring to watch, the Yamamoto Noh Theatre has initiated a variety of programs employing all kinds of methods to help contemporary audiences connect to it. In this interview we hear about the ideals behind the Theatre’s 90 years of robust performance activities from the current Administrative Director, Yoshie Yamamoto.

Interviewed by: Rika Yamashita [art Journalist]

Noh Production and Noh Theatre Management

We tend to think of Noh as a traditional art with a very high threshold that makes it rather difficult to approach, and we don’t know about the management of Noh theater performances. Would you please begin by telling us about how Noh is managed?

Yes. Noh, as we know it today, is one of Japan’s representative traditional arts first established in the Muromachi Period (1333 – 1573) largely through the creative efforts of the father and son, Kan’ami and Zeami. Over the 650 years since the Muromachi Period, the art of Noh has been passed down verbally from generation to generation as apprentices are taught by the head masters of the family-based schools of Noh, still today these families play an important role in the transmission and succes-

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sion of the art of Noh. And our Yamamoto family is one that descends directly from the Zeami lineage and the Kanze Family.

During the Edo Period (1603 – 1868) Noh was designated an official ceremonial performing art and thus came under the patronage of the Shogunate government. However, with the end of the Shogunate and the change to a new government at the start of the Meiji Era (1868-1912) many Noh actors lost their source of employment and the Noh tradition faced a crisis in terms of continuing to transmit and preserve the art. It is said that many of the *hayashikata* (the Noh musician) families in particular, had difficulty in continuing the succession of their art at that time. However, the new powers that emerged in Meiji society to replace the samurai warrior class of the Edo Period, including the nobility and aristocracy and the business groups stepped forward to support Noh again as patrons, and this enabled the formation of new Noh families to help carry on the tradition. Those new families that were formed at that time are now in their third or fourth generations.

Yamamoto Noh Theatre (Yamamoto Nohgakudo) was established soon after the Meiji Era in 1918 by my husband's (Akihiro Yamamoto) grandfather, Hiroyuki Yamamoto. Originally, the Yamamoto family was in business as moneychangers in Kyoto from the Genroku Period (1688 – 1704), and it was one of the five largest moneychangers and known for lending money even to the *Daimyo* feudal lords. In those times there were many heads of the merchant families who loved the arts, and Hiroyuki Yamamoto's father, our great-grandfather was a lover of Noh who also served as a patron of the art by inviting heads of Noh schools in Tokyo to come to Kyoto to give him instruction in the art. Eventually, however, he lost all his wealth after putting his seal on a friend's bill of debt and left Kyoto to resettle in Osaka. There he decided to make his way in the Noh world, making use of what he had learned in Kyoto.

But, having lost all his wealth, you might wonder how he managed to build this Noh theater. It seems that it was a time of unprecedented economy growth in Osaka, which caused it to earn the name “Great Osaka” and the merchants had acquired great financial power. And Noh was the art that these wealthy merchants chose to patronize. So they gave financial support to this Noh theater as a place for their own enjoyment.

So the [Yamamoto] Noh Theatre became a gathering place for the city's wealthy?

Yes, it did. Right now, with assistance from the City of Osaka and the Kyoto University of Art and Design, we are in the process of gathering and archiving all the historical materials and documents that can be found about the Theatre. We have found among the initial investors in the Theatre such well-known names as Konosuke Matsushita (industrialist, founder of Panasonic) and Tetsuji Takechi (theater critic, filmmaker). Another family of entrepreneurs that has continued to be involved in our theater since the time of its founding is the Tamura family that owns and runs the fiber trading company Tamurakoma in the Senba district of Osaka, with its third-generation president today Komajiro Tamura III. His father and the company's second president, Komajiro Tamura II was well known as the owner of the Shochiku Robins baseball team, but he also studied Noh under our grandfather Hiroyuki Yamamoto quite seriously and it is said that he became one of the most respected performers among the entrepreneur

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Noh practitioners in the Kansai area, on par with Tokushichi Nomura. It was people like this that supported the establishment of the Yamamoto Noh Theatre. The first theater was burned down in the large-scale World War II fire-bombing of Osaka by the Allies in 1945, but it was rebuilt in 1950. There is a photograph of the completed building standing in an area where everything around it was still a field of burned-out rubble. It was put in the newspaper at the time as an example for one of the first postwar rebuilding efforts. During the construction, many people had contributed to the project as an effort to rebuild a place for them to gather and socialize as in the old days.

Would you tell us about the family (school) system by which the art of Noh is passed on from generation to generation?

The Kanze Family of Tokyo is the home family of the school of Noh that we are affiliated with, and it is this line of the Noh tradition that we are transmitting in our activities. In Noh there is a written script for each Noh play called a *Yohon* and they are published and readily available, but there is nothing written in them about how the parts are acted out and the poses and movements that are used in the Noh dances that is called *katatsuke*. The student (apprentice) must ask to be taught a part by the master directly in one-to-one lessons. The apprentice will then make notes for his own use based on that instruction, but it is done in the form of personal notes and not as a text or manual that anyone can refer to and learn from.

Our grandfather learned the *katatsuke* (choreography) of the Kanze Family school of Noh, while his eldest son and 2nd generation master Masakazu the *katatsuke* of the Rokuro Umewaka family school, and Akihiro Yamamoto learned the Kanze family *katatsuke* and has them recorded in notebooks he wrote down himself. And he teaches his apprentices the Kanze school *katatsuke* that he has learned. Since Noh is an intangible performance art, it has to be taught orally from one person to the next through the family schools that have been formed.

Do the apprentices study by paying a monthly fee or something?

For those who are training to become professional Noh performers we don't take a monthly fee or the like. When a person from the general public joins the world of Noh formally as an apprentice, they train for roughly ten years before they are given permission to become independent and start teaching themselves. As for people who come to be taught as amateurs seeking to learn Noh dance simply as a hobby, we do accept monthly fees for the lessons they receive.

From Japan's postwar period of high economic growth rate to around the end of the Showa Period (1960s to mid-'80s), there were actually quite a large number of people who wanted to learn Noh dance as a hobby. And when I married Akihiro 25 years ago it was still the case that every autumn and spring there would be a period of about two months when all of our Saturdays and Sundays would be full of recital performances by our apprentices. That is how many apprentices we had.

If the family's main occupation was teaching the apprentices, were the backstage and administrative responsibilities performed primarily by the wife of the family like yourself?

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In a Noh family, the husband (master and performer) is generally responsible for virtually everything. Not just everything that happens on stage and in the performances but also, designing the performance advertising leaflets and placing the order for their printing and of course the ticket sales, and even things like ordering the box lunches for the performers. All is done by the master. Also, it is the master’s job to keep an eye on the situation in the audience in order to provide the best possible viewing environment for those who come to the performances.

I find that very surprising!

Of course, the apprentices are relegated responsibility for some of the work, but it isn’t much more than helping out in the work the master is directing. It is the basic policy for the master (performer) to have his eyes on supervising everything that is going on. And still today, by the time an apprentice is granted the status of a master performer in his own right, it is the job of my husband as the master to teach the apprentice everything he needs to know in order to completely direct a performance he is organizing, all the way down to the backstage work. An apprentice is taught that he has to be able to do everything necessary for a production, from producing the advertising leaflets and the pamphlets handed out on performance day to the enlisting all of the necessary performers from the family and other elder masters and arrange for their compensation, the ticket sales and of course what to do when there is a deficit, all this has to be learned before he can be recognized as an independent master in his own right.

Becoming an “Open Noh Theatre,” Its Management and New Activities

From what you have just told us, we now know that it is the common state of affairs in the Noh world for the master (performer) to function as the overall producer for an entire production. So, would you tell us about how things have evolved so that there is now an office function and you have become an Administrative Director helping to run your Noh theater?

[Our Yamamoto grandfather] Hiroyuki had seven children, three of whom went on to professions in the Noh world. It was his eldest son that inherited the position of head of the Noh family. However, since he and his wife had no children to become the next-generation heir, that position fell to my husband as their nephew. And in 2004, he became the 3rd-generation heir of the Yamamoto Noh family when he was in his 40s. With that, he had taken on the very weighty responsibility of carrying on the Noh family and ensuring the continuation of the Yamamoto Noh Theatre. Meanwhile, it was a time when the vast majority of our theater’s audience was in their 60s and 70s. Since the performances were held only on Saturdays and Sundays in the daytime, the audience was restricted to people who could come at those times. What’s more, [in traditional Noh format] they were long performances that ran from 11:00 in the morning to 5:00 in the afternoon. That meant that it was difficult for people of my husband’s generation who help jobs in companies to come to the performances. It was just around that time that his uncle (Masakazu) and wife moved from their residence on the 2nd floor over the theatre to an apartment, which meant that performances

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*1 *Kamigataburi*: An organization launched in 1963 by a gathering of prominent next-generation citizens of Kyoto and Osaka under the age of 40 from inside and outside the arts. It was formed not only with the aim of building amicable relationships between the members but also for publishing a magazine dedicated to their personal interests. Among the members were Kamigata Rakugo comedian Beicho Katsura III, Kyogen artist Sen-nojo Shigeyama, comedy theater actor Kanbi Fujiyama, comedian and actor Kon Omura, actor, Kabuki actor Tojuro Sakata, Bunraku theater narration chanter (Tayu) Sumidayu Takemoto, and others.

could now be held at night. Then my husband proposed the holding of performances starting at 7:00 in the evening and only doing the first act of a Noh play in a program that was dubbed “Tokui Noh” (after the Tokui district of Osaka where the Yamamoto Noh Theatre is located) when it was actually launched in 2005. At that time, since it was at an hour of the day when people would naturally be hungry, we started offering meals as well, and this became quite a popular way to enjoy Noh and attracted a lot of viewer.

So it must have been that when he took over as the 3rd-generation heir to the family, Akihiro-san was feeling worried about the future of Noh and a need to do something about it.

Yes, he did. And, at the time, a Ms. Nami Moto who was working in the Community Development Department of the Osaka Chamber of Commerce happened to come to see one of our Tokui Noh performances and she came to us and said let’s do some link of project together. That encounter led to a variety of projects afterwards.

Around that time, the Chamber of Commerce was promoting a program called “Osaka Culture Night” that was aimed at increasing the number of entertaining cultural events available to the citizens of Osaka in the evenings, and they were wondering if there weren’t some things that Yamamoto Noh Theatre could contribute to the program, which led to subsequent discussion about various ideas. Having the experience of my husband Akihiro’s late father being a member of the *Kamigataburi* (*1) movement, He proposed that it might be possible to do performances like the *Kamigataburi* performances that brought together performers from the different traditional performing arts of the Kyoto-Osaka area in one evening’s program. That proposal led to the holding of the first “Kyoto-Osaka Traditional Performing Arts Night for Beginners” co-produced by Yamamoto Noh Theatre on New Year’s Eve of 2006. Today, these events continue to be held once or twice every month. These performance events provide a selection of four different performing arts, from arts including Noh, Kyogen comedy, Bunraku puppet theater, Kamigata traditional dance, Rakugo comedian performances, Koudan historical narrative recital, Ryokyoku naniwabushi ballad recitation, Onnadoraku shamisen-accompanied song and narrative by a female musician and Ozashiki Asobi (tradition games played by Maiko/Geisha entertainers with their guests), and each of the four performances is presented complete with explanations of the arts for beginners. The four-part performances last for a total of about two hours in what amounts to a showcase type presentation of Kyoto-Osaka area traditional performing arts and the explanations are given by a Rakugo comedian in a style similar to professional product demonstrators in a department store. If, the people in the attending audience discover an art they are interested in from the four presented in any given evening, we give them directions for how they can see formal performances of the art that are interested in at the venues that specialize in it, for example Osaka’s Bunraku Theatre or the Tenma Tenjin Hanjotei Theater. Since 2008, we at the Yamamoto Noh Theatre have taken over the lead role in organizing these events, with co-production by the Chamber of Commerce, and the City of Osaka, and with the Osaka Tourist Bureau providing additional cooperation, and the program has continued in this format to this day.

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So, these activities provided to promote the spread of Noh through tie-ups between people inside and outside the Noh Theatre.

I believe that timing of these developments was very opportune. And I believe these activities prospered thanks to a combination of the fact that, for a Noh artist, my husband had a very open and flexible attitude toward such activities, the inherently free and open local character of people of Osaka and the desire of Ms. Moto at the Chamber of Commerce to undertake new initiatives for the sake of community cultural development. And, if I may add something personal, I think it was also a good thing that with regard to knowledge of Noh, I was at the time still no more than an amateur. Ms. Moto had never once seen a Noh performance before she happened to see one of our theater's Tokui Noh performances. So, when she and I got together and talked, we both agreed that Noh and other traditional arts couldn't really be enjoyed just as they are without some prior knowledge and appreciation of the art, and that simply getting the younger audience to come to evening performances wouldn't be enough to have them enjoy what they were seeing, would it? So we asked ourselves every day what we should do about this gap. And it was these discussions continued seriously and led to a strong conviction to do something.

In 2006, the entire building of the Yamamoto Noh Theatre was designated a Tangible Cultural Property by the Japanese government. In that same year, Yamamoto Noh Theatre was also incorporated as a foundation.

Being registered as a national Tangible Cultural Property brought the interest of a lot more people to focus on the Yamamoto Noh Theatre. Suddenly we had people in the architectural field coming and asking if they could see the inside of the building. This made us newly aware of the fact that what we had considered just a common wooden-construction theater was in fact a very rare and valuable building from the architectural standpoint and that it had long been loved by many people.

At the time, the Yamamoto Noh Theatre was operating as a company limited. My took over of the head of the family, but then it became a Tangible Cultural Property, so he had to start thinking about how to preserve the theater for the next generations to come. As we were thinking about what to do, I happened to find a book about to create a foundation. I did some research about foundations at the library and it became clear that it would be beneficial to become a foundation, and in 2006, we succeeded in becoming authorized as the Yamamoto Noh Theatre Foundation by the Osaka Department of Education. And three years later we became a Public Interest Incorporated Foundation.

How did you come to hold the position of Administrative Director?

As I had more and more opportunity to work with Ms. Moto of the Chamber of Commerce, at first I had been introducing myself at conferences and the like as “the wife of Akihiro Yamamoto,” and I didn't even have a calling card. It was by no means a commonly accepted thing in the Noh world at the time for the wife of a Noh artist to be representing a Noh family in external affairs. Also, when we became a foundation, we were fortunate to have an important figure in the Kansai region financial world supporting us by serving as our foundation's chairman, so it was uncomfortable for

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me as to be making appearances at meetings and such as simply the wife of Noh artist. However, as the number of external activities we were involved in grew, it became clear that I needed some kind of official position, so I chose the broadly defined title of Administrative Director as one that would be easy to work with.

Was it from there that you began to work as a producer for the Yamamoto Noh Theatre?

No, no. Not myself nor anyone on our staff considered me a producer. It is simply that since we didn't have the financial means to hire a producer, we had to do everything ourselves. Our office at first was just two computers set up on the table in the theater's kitchen. However, in 2007 when our theater was registered by the national government as a Tangible Cultural Property, and we began organizing numerous programs for beginner audiences, and also we became even busier when we began participating in the local projects of groups like the Higashi-Yokobori-gawa Waterside Renovation Committee (e-Yoko-kai) in the Yokobori-gawa district where our Noh Theatre is located.

It was from around this time that you began a number of unique programs to help spread interest in Noh, such the “Street Live Noh” performances in public spaces and collaborative performances with contemporary artists aimed at getting children interested in Noh.

These are also things that my husband, as a Noh artist, said he wanted to try. The first “Street Live Noh” performances resulted from a request for a Noh performance at a hotel banquet room as part of the pre-event festival for the 2007 World Championships in Athletics event. But with a venue like a hotel banquet room, only the people gathered there could see the performances. Since my husband didn't find that very interesting, so he suggested that the performance be held in the hotel's lobby. That would create a situation where other passers-by and the hotel staff could experience the performance and think, “so, this is Noh?” Since then, about 100 of these “Street Live Noh” performances have been held over the past ten years in places like hotels, the entrances of the Prefectural Office and the City Hall, parks, train stations, commercial facilities, on boats and more. However, things like these outreach type activities that we conduct free of charge for the purpose the spread and edification of Noh done bring us any income. So we don't have the money to do any big-budget stage productions, we just use the resources at hand, lay down a needle-punch carpet for a stage and make things as simple as possible and take measures to ensure that the venue can be set up and taken down as inexpensively as possible. And to help in these projects we make use of a portable stage that was designed and produced for us by the Osaka design group graf (representative: Shigeki Hattori).

In the prestigious world of a time-honored traditional art, wasn't there opposition to performing on the streets?

Of course, I believe there were people who didn't like the idea. But, people of my husband's generation who shared his sense of crisis regarding the future of Noh, were supportive of his activities. At the Street Noh performances we can feel the people in the audience expressing their interest directly. When the traditional Noh “*ohayashi*”

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musical accompaniment begins, in no time at all a large crowd gathers, attracted by its unique sound. When the performance ends there is always a big round of applause, and when my husband and the other Noh masters performing hear this, it appears to inspire their motivation. In the questionnaires we ask viewers to fill out, and now on the social networks on the internet, we get comments like, “It was my first time seeing a Noh performance and I was really moved by it,” or, “The unique atmosphere it creates is really cool.” That is a very rewarding thing for the performers. Also, I believe that when they are given the opportunity to perform in public spaces, the performers feel that they are performing in contemporary society and people are enjoying it, which conveys the feeling that they can successfully coexist with contemporary society, and for people who are living within a time-honored performing arts traditional, that is an especially gratifying stimulus.

You also conduct another very unique program to promote the spread of Noh in collaboration with contemporary artists called “A Children’s Guide to Noh through Art.”

This is a program that also started from 2007. When my husband was thinking about how to spread an interest in Noh to children, he thought it wouldn’t be good to just have the children sit for long periods watching a performance like adults do, and it was at this time when he was thinking about a good alternative method to introduce children to Noh that he happened to meet the art coordinator Miho Nakanishi. And it was together with Ms. Nakanishi and with the help of contemporary artists such as Akiko Ikeda, Shinta Inoue and Taro Yamamoto that the program was created. For example, for the Noh piece *Kokaji*, Ikeda-san devised a program in which the children would make fox masks like the one used by the Noh artist performing the role of a fox in *Kokaji* and then paint them freely and wear them in order to get into the feeling of playing a fox as they watched the Noh performance. The installation artist Ikeda-san came up with a program in which he had the children paint on a wall an old pine tree, which is always the backdrop for a Noh stage, and then watch the Noh performed in front of their pine tree. Using devices like these to draw the children into the world of Noh before watching the performance proved very effective, and the children ended up enjoying the Noh performances very much. For us, these performances have been experiences we are very grateful for, ones that have brought a real feeling of accomplishment, as well as great joy.

Until that time you had never received public funding for the Yamamoto Noh Theatre, but with these programs you began applying for and receiving public grants to support your [outreach] activities, didn’t you?

At first, we had no idea that we could receive grants of that type. But when we started doing the “A Children’s Guide to Noh through Art” programs, the art coordinator Nakanishi-san made the application for a grant, and after that, through trial and error, we have learned how to write applications and win grants. Being grant recipients then meant that we had to make greater efforts to publicize our activities widely, so we began creating press releases, and together with the Chamber of Commerce’s Moto-san we started paying visits to many of the newspapers and magazines of the Kansai region to seek their cooperation in publicizing our activities. And, the people we met on those visits have been helping us in various ways ever since.

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New Noh *Mizu no Wa*
(Oct. 14, 2013 at Nakanoshima GATE)



(C) Yamamoto Noh Theatre

*2 Suito Osaka: This event started in 2009 is symbolic of efforts to revive the appeal of the waterside areas and bring new vitality to these parts of Osaka, a city that used to be known as a “water capital.” The festival features special illumination of waterside areas, cruises and other waterside events and art projects.

The biggest thing I learned from Moto-san is to approach these activities with an attitude that we should and will do all of the things we are capable of doing by ourselves. We must not simply dish out the grant money to others and have them handle everything but use all of the means that we have at hand in order to do the things we want to achieve gradually. Since most of the programs we receive grant money for end up running in the red anyway, I want us to work with people who share our ideals and dedication.

At the Yamamoto Noh Theatre, in addition to the “A Children’s Guide to Noh through Art” program, you also do other things with a variety of different kinds of artists, don’t you?

The encounter with Nakanishi-san led to other connections for us with people involved in contemporary art. In 2009, when the Suito Osaka (Water Metropolis Osaka *2) festival was held, my husband wrote an experimental new Noh piece titled *Mizu no Wa* (Water Rings) to be performed on a restaurant boat on the water while audience watched from the river banks. At that time, sharing in the joy of working together with a number of creators and artists in the building of the onboard stage, creating the stage art and lighting and then holding the performances turned out to be a very fruitful experience and opportunity for us.

From 2014, we were selected to participate in the national Agency for Cultural Affairs touring programs of “Edification for Children through the Arts and Culture” which sends artists and performers to elementary and middle schools around the country to give performances and workshops, etc., as special extracurricular study programs, and in these programs as well we are fortunate to have various stage art creators and stage technicians working with us. Since we give these performances in schools at about 20 locations a year, we spend a lot of time together with these creators.

It sounds like you have a group that is functioning sort of like a theater company for this program. What kinds of people are involved?

The artist Shinta Inoue often participates as our stage art creator and workshop leader. Working with us on stage direction and set building we have Koichiro Furuya, an active art coordinator for art projects in Osaka, and Tadanori Kurotobi, who also participates in the Miwa Yanagi’s stage performances, also helps us. And in our performances in other places besides school programs where there is no Noh stage available, and also in our overseas performances, we are helped out by Takayuki Fujimoto and Ichiro Awazu, who are also members of the performance group Dumb Type, and the lighting artist Ryoya Fudetani, among others.

This involvement with creators from other genres and getting them familiar with behind-the-scenes work of Noh productions probably helps expand the possibilities of Noh, doesn’t it?

In December of 2016, we presented my husband’s Noh piece *Mizu no Wa* (Water Rings) in the square of the Grand Front Osaka commercial complex as part of the Agency for Cultural Affairs “beyond 2020” program aimed at preparing for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics/Paralympics. For the stage backdrop, we used the paintings of old

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pine trees by 2,000 children from around the country that we met through our Agency for Cultural Affairs program participation, and we built a semi-circular stage. For *Mizu no Wa* we had 20 children from 15 different countries attending international schools in Japan play the role of water fowl, and in the Kyogen performance between the two acts of the Noh, we had them talk about waterside episodes from their own countries in order to make it a production that spoke for preserving precious water environments as a global cause. Despite the fact that there was only a short amount of time allotted for us to install the stage, the staff who are used to working together in our school performances did a marvelously coordinated job for us.

We see that you are also actively pursuing initiatives that make use of the Yamamoto Noh Theatre's building itself.

Yamamoto Noh Theatre is small for a theater with seating for an audience of just 227, so it is difficult to make ends meet just on ticket sales alone. But it is a theater like the Japan's small theaters of old where you can hear the breathing of the actors and see the sweat their brows and you can hear every sound, even without any acoustic devices or audio equipment. And it was with our programs for the spread of Noh and edification of beginner audiences where we really began to apply these advantages of this theater.

What's more, since we wanted more people to come to know the rich appeal of this theater, we also wanted a wider variety of people to be able to use it. At the time, it was really only being used as a performance venue for the Noh artists related to the Yamamoto Noh Theatre, and even though we wanted to make the theater available for people from the general public to rent as a venue for their events, we didn't know anything about how to set the rental prices. So, what we did was to refer to the rental prices for places like community centers and devised a rental price system based on four-hour rental blocks. We also set prices for the renting of the theater's fixtures and equipment. So, today our theater is being used on a rental basis for a variety of events ranging from traditional performing arts performances and theater to classical music concerts, etc., as well as parties, ikebana flower arranging events and exhibitions. Also, since our building has been registered as a national Tangible Cultural Property, there are an increasing number of people who want to come and see the building. So, we have organized regular tours of the building a things like Noh experience lecture/demonstration programs and we have posted the admission fees for these events on our website. Today, we have many people attending these programs, not only from around Japan but also from overseas as well.

Having a Noh theater, which until now you had considered a place with a high, hard to enter threshold, and being able to rent and use it as you wish must certainly make it a more familiar and approachable place for people, doesn't it?

Yes, it does. Opening it to the public in these ways has brought more people into our Noh theater. And since we have our younger Noh apprentices serve as the lecturers for our Noh experience lecture/demonstration programs, it becomes a beneficial learning experience and practice for them, while also bringing them some income. We believe that providing younger Noh practitioners with places to work is very im-

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portant. Also, after our three-year renovation project for the Noh theater that began in 2011, we have become participants in the “Unique Venue” program of the Japan Tourism Bureau, through which our theater is now used as a venue for conferences and parties by visitors from other countries. Through this program it has been used as a venue for events like a Slovakian wine tasting event and a world’s-first event by the renowned French champagne brand KRUG.

There is an image of the Noh theater as a sacred place and the Noh stage as a space that only a Noh artist is allowed to stand on, but you are actually using it as a place open to virtually anyone, aren't you?

Because, at the time the Yamamoto Noh Theatre was originally built, it was a social venue where the [upper class] gentlemen of the city gathered to enjoy themselves. My husband remembers that when he was a child, the gentlemen of the city would come to watch the Noh and then have parties in the audience area, so with our Tokui Noh program we would have social gatherings with the members of the audience from the general public. After the theater’s repair and renovation project, our direction has been to make not only the building itself but also the relationship between the theater and the local community closer to what it was when the theater was first built.

Would you tell us about the three-year repair and renovation project that started in 2011?

Looking back even now, it was really a difficult three years. We had begun a lot of new activities at the Noh theater at the time but the building was aging badly. The stage was still just as it had been built in 1950 but during the years of Japan’s high economic growth rate (1960s to ’80s) a series of poorly planned repairs had been made. After we became a foundation, the possibilities looked good for the preservation of the theater, but the aging of the building was the one big remaining problem. Just with good timing, the Agency for Cultural Affairs had begun an open-use program for buildings of architectural importance in 2011, and we were selected as one of the first projects, which enabled the repair and renovation project.

What we received was a grant to cover half the cost of the repair and renovations, and we had a difficult time getting together the funds to cover the other half. At the beginning of the project we were required to draw up a detailed preservation and practical use plan, which was quite difficult, but as it turns out, it was a very valuable experience for us. In the process of writing about the initial establishment of the Yamamoto Noh Theatre, the present state of use, plans for after the repair and renovations, and safety measures, we had to think in depth about how we would use the Noh theater as a building. Since it was our first project with a national agency, we had no examples or documents to refer to, so we had to think about everything from scratch. I now believe that the reason we were selected for the project was because we had become involved in so many community outreach programs that went beyond simply promoting the spread of Noh, such as our “Kyoto-Osaka Traditional Performing Arts Night for Beginners,” our Noh experience/demonstration lectures, our tours of the theater and our Street Live Noh, and more.

For the repair and renovation project, we teamed up with the Yasui Architects & Engi-

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neers, Inc. that had been involved in projects like the Suntory Hall, and they incorporated our intentions and then added things to make the format even better.

What was the concept behind the repairs and renovation?

It was “an open Noh theater.” We wanted to revive its function in the community as a place for socializing and make it a place where people from different walks of life could meet in ways that gave birth to new things. Also, one of the things we focused on most was making it a place with furnishings and surroundings where people could spend time comfortably. The old wooden Noh theater was very cold in winter, so we added floor heating and more toilets that the elderly could use with ease. [The design office’s] Hattori-san, whom we have known since his college days, told us he would arrange so that instead of finishing everything 100% at one time, they would leave blanks so that the spaces could be finished gradually over a long period of time. So, he took the same approach as us with the feeling that we could continue to think about how this Noh theater with its 90-year history should be preserved for the next 90 years.

In order to try new things, you made all of the Noh stage lighting LED, and on the 3rd floor you created a new room to house your archives.

Before the renovation project we had a special Noh performance for which we had the pioneer of computer controlled LED lighting, Fujimoto-san, design the lighting. At that time he brought in all the necessary equipment and the result was spectacular! In older days Noh was performed outdoors starting in the morning and lasting until the evening, so together we investigated the possibility that the natural changing of the light during the course of the day was worked effectively into the staging and worked that concept into the performance. With that success we decided to have the renovations include changing all of the Noh stage lighting to LED. Fujimoto-san had told us that it was impossible to recreate natural sunlight, but changing to LED would open up a wider range of lighting possibilities. Before the performance, my husband had placed his performance costume on the stage so that adjustments could be made in the lighting to show the costume in its most beautiful light. It was just a slight difference in the light that probably most of the people in audience wouldn’t notice, but it definitely made a difference.

At the same time you started your archive project.

While the repair and renovation work was in progress we found a lot of documents that had been stored away in oshiire closets (normally used for storing bedding). Most of it was things that had been left behind by our late grandfather Hiroyuki, including things like performance pamphlets and personal letters and correspondences, photographs and audio tapes of Noh performances were found one after another. Since the job of the performer is to perfect his art, he probably never thought of the need to organize all of these materials, but fortunately he didn’t throw them out. From 2015, we got a grant to and have been making an archive of the documents and materials with the help of specialists and the Kyoto University of Art and Design, and some very interesting things have turned up. We found out for one thing that, in 1957, when Hi-

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royuki gave Noh performances in Paris, he got assistance from the painter Tsuguharu Fujita (Leonard Foujita), who was living in Paris at the time. It became clear how the connection between Fujita and our grandfather came about and we also found things like messages from Fujita.

International Exchange

Next I would like to ask about your international relationships. Yamamoto Noh Theatre has programs for foreigners and your performers also go to perform overseas, don't they?

At the time when the Osaka Chamber of Commerce, the City of Osaka and the Osaka Tourism Bureau were sponsoring our “Kyoto-Osaka Traditional Performing Arts Night for Beginners” program, there was a grant from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport's “Visit Japan” program to promote visits to Japan by foreigners that we used in 2008 to enable us to translate Noh narratives into contemporary Japanese, English, Chinese (two dialects) and Korean and project the translations on stage during the performances. And, we had been doing this from a time before the term “inbound” came into popular use. It may sound simple, but Noh narrations are written in the Japanese of the Muromachi Period 650 years ago. To translate them into foreign languages meant first translating them into understandable contemporary Japanese before they could be translated into the other languages. It was quite a difficult task, but because we did it carefully in a hand-made fashion, I believed it helped deepen understanding of Noh and other traditional Japanese performing arts. The translations of traditional performing arts materials (scripts, etc.) that we did at that time were then published and are now being distributed free of charge.

After that, for the commemorative 100th holding of our “Kyoto-Osaka Traditional Performing Arts Night for Beginners” program we were able to mount the entire program in English. The master of ceremonies spoke in English, the Rakugo comedy was done in English as was the Koudan historical narrative recitation. For the Noh and Bunraku performances, etc., that we weren't able to do in English we had English subtitles projected on stage. We are happy to say that this event was very well received and today we are continuing to do these all-English nights four or five times a year.

In the process of repeating these [English] performances we have developed our system for receiving foreign visitors and audiences and now we are receiving foreign visitors often and holding performances and Noh experience lecture/demonstrations for them. And these activities are now being covered by foreign media as well.

What about overseas performances?

Around 2008 when we began doing performances for foreign audiences, an Osaka University professor brought a group of foreign exchange students to see one of our Kyoto-Osaka Traditional Performing Arts Night for Beginners programs. One of the students in that group was a man named Petko Slavov from Bulgaria. The professor introduced him to us, saying that he was interested in Noh and would it be possible

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for him to become an apprentice at our theater. We frequently receive that kind of request, but they don't last long. But Petko was very serious and very well-mannered and respectful and he helped out actively in our performances. And, since he was studying about Noh we could have him handle the reception and guide responsibilities for our visitors from abroad.

For about a year and a half Petko became like a member of our family, but when he finished his Masters Degree he had to return to Bulgaria, and when the time came he said that if we would come to Bulgaria with him he could pay back some of the debt he felt that he owed us for that year and a half. So, my husband accepted the offer to go to Bulgaria with him. He put his Noh costumes in his suitcase and with his Noh masks in hand he went Bulgaria, and there he did workshops for students of Petko's alma mater, the University of Sofia and students of the National Academy of Arts in Sofia. That experience led to the start of our overseas performances.

So, it wasn't on invitation to perform or a tour for which you had received a grant or other type of support to perform, it was just a matter of Akihiro-san going there on his own and just doing it?

Yes, it was. Petko-san performed the Noh dance and my husband did the Noh recitation and it was very well received. Bulgaria has many schools where Japanese is taught and there are many people there who love Japan. When my husband paid a courtesy visit to the embassy after the workshops, he was told that Noh had never been performed in Bulgaria and he was welcome to do so. Then, after returning to Japan he started investigating how to prepare for an overseas performance, and the first thing he did was to go to ask for advice from Fujimoto-san, who has a lot of experience performing overseas. Then, when we applied for a grant under the Agency for Cultural Affairs' Overseas International Exchange program, we received the opportunity to really go to Bulgaria to perform.

Then in 2012 we had our first overseas performances of *Mizu no Wa* (Water Rings) and *Hagoromo* (The Feather Mantle) at the Sofia Municipal Theater. Petko arranged all of the local coordination with the theater and the embassy, and from Japan we brought the Noh performers and Furuya-san to handle the set construction and directing, Inoue-san to handle the stage art, and Fujimoto-san and Awazu-san as technical staff. All of them had lots of experience working overseas, and along with their friends in Europe we had a very helpful international group working with us.

That year, 25 Bulgarian children joined in the performance in the roles of water fowl and spoke their parts in the Kansai dialect of Japanese (laughs). In a workshop run by Inoue-san we had the children make their own costumes with us.

The year after that (2013) you held performances in Bulgaria and Slovakia.

When we applied again to the Agency for Cultural Affairs, we were fortunate to get another grant. In Bulgaria we performed *Mizu no Wa* (Water Rings) in the capital of Sofia, and in the second largest city, Plovdiv, we performed *Aoi no ue* (Lady Aoi) in the city's ancient Roman amphitheater. In Slovakia, we performed *Hagoromo* in a forest in the outskirts of the city of Nitra. Then the next year (2014), we gave a performance in the Bratislava Castle in the capital city of Bratislava, and in the second

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largest city of Košice.

In Slovakia, we had a hard time finding venues to perform in. At Bratislava Castle we were dismissed at first because they had never rented out space there to foreigners, but through the president's interpreter with whom we had happened to become acquainted, it was finally arranged. In 2013, Košice had been the European Capital of Culture (along with Marseille) so we had been able to consult with the EU Japan Fest office that functioned as outlet office in Japan.

Your connections with a variety of people certainly made things possible, didn't they? I am also impressed by your and Akihiro-sensei's ability to constantly move forward positively.

In the fourth year, we didn't get any grants from anywhere, but my husband was invited to Sofia University as a visiting instructor and did a lecture series and also did Noh workshops in Bulgaria at his own expense. That year we were unable to give any Noh performances there, but we had the idea that we wanted to strengthen our relationships with the people there in Bulgaria, so we got the idea of having them actively participate in Noh performances on stage and we began preparations for that. There is a noh play titled *Momijigari* (Maple Viewing) that involves ten performers, five *Mae-Shite* (the leading roles in the first half of a Noh play) and five *Atojite* (*Shite* roles of the latter half of the play), and we believed that if we could have Bulgarian performers do all ten roles it would be a promoting international understanding in a truly meaningful way. Then the following year we were able to get a grant from The Japan Foundation and we were able to do the performance of *Momijigari* in October as we had planned. My husband went to Bulgaria once again in August and gave the ten people there an intense course in the Noh dances they would perform. And after that Petko-san led them in independent training until October, and two days before the actual performance, my husband went to instruct them again. In the actual performance they all did a wonderful job of performing their parts and the performance ended with a big ovation. It was because Petko-san was there in Bulgaria that we were able to mount a performance like that, I believe.

In June of 2016, you were invited to perform at the Sibiu International Theater Festival (FITS) in Romania. It was the first time that a Noh production had been invited as part of the program, and it had the honor of being the festival's closing performance.

It was wonderfully gratifying thing to have a full house and a standing ovation at the end of the performance. The truth is that we had wanted to perform in Romania for some time. Although it seemed like an impossible dream, we had talked about getting a boat that could be used as a performance stage and cruise down the river Danube and give Noh performances at each river port. From before the time we were invited to the Sibiu Festival we had talked about how nice it would be to travel to the Danube River in Romania, so we were very happy when the offer came.

Also, the overall director of the Festival, Constantin Chiriac was very impressed by the Noh performance, and he told us, Japan's traditional performing arts are among the most wonderful in the world. So, I hope we can continue our relationship with Sibiu Festival in the future.

Guerrilla Live Noh in Sibiu International Theater Festival
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In addition to such overseas activities, you have also had smartphone and tablet apps for enjoying Noh developed.

It wasn't our intention at first to develop such an app, but we ended up doing it due to a request from a schoolteacher. In the course of outreach activities where we take Noh performances to schools, we realized that the teachers knew virtually nothing about Noh. So, we did a workshop to teach teachers about Noh, and at that time, one of the teachers said that it would be great if there were an iPad application like the ones for learning to play the guitar or piano that could reproduce the experience of playing the Noh instruments. In response to that, Petko-san, who is also a computer technician, said, “I will make one.” About two weeks later he showed us a prototype, and from that the “Ohayashi Sensei” (*Ohayashi* [Noh musical accompaniment] Teacher) app that gives you a virtual experience of playing the Noh instruments was made.

You can download the Ohayashi Sensei app free of charge and enjoy playing the Noh instruments with it like playing a game. The sound it produces is not electronic sound but the recorded sound of live Ohayashi performers' music. Today, most people normally have very few opportunities to hear the music of the traditional drums, *tsuzumi* hand drums and flutes used in Noh. But, with this app you can bring the sound of Noh Ohayashi music in daily life. For example, since it reproduces the sound of the real instruments played by Ohayashi professionals, you could use it freely for things like background music of drum percussion in a high school play or the like.

The next thing Petko-san developed was an anime type five-minute explanation of Noh titled “We Noh.” With it you can learn about the basics of Noh and watch anime synopsis of the stories of some Noh plays. Of course, he didn't make it alone, my husband checked each part to increase its accuracy, and he translated the explanations that I had written out in Japanese. Also, although it is still in the trial stage, we developed a Noh subtitle app in the winter of 2016. You will be able to download the app for a smartphone or tablet, and by connecting to Wi-Fi you can get the original Noh *Utai* (recitation script), and contemporary Japanese and English translations of it in real time. We also had an app for learning the Noh *Utai* called “Super Utai” developed.

Since the time when your husband Akihiro-san succeeded to the position of head of the Yamamoto Noh family, he and you have certainly conducted a lot of new initiatives. What are the directions that you want to focus on going forward?

Looking back over the last ten years, I realize anew that our activities have not been things that we did with our own energy and abilities, but with the involvement and help of a variety of people. Most of all, I feel that we have been helped to think and learn anew about what the relationship between the community and the traditional arts should be by the people of the Osaka community where our Yamamoto Noh Theatre is located. People in all kinds of community development projects have come to us, including people who have been doing business in Osaka for many years, people from famous long-established restaurants, university professors and more, and they have taught us a lot. This has made me realize that it is impossible to have a town where the arts alone are prospering. There are many elements that come together

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to make a town interesting, such as cuisine, architecture, history, the people themselves, and when the arts are added to this mix, the town becomes alive and stimulating in ways that will be inherited and carried on by the next generation.

In other words, it is impossible for the arts to survive alone, it must be together with the people of the community that you develop its culture and that there can't be arts without the town.

I believe so. It is not an art if it isn't being supported and preserved by the community. If it is only the people in the traditional arts who insist that their art is a time-honored tradition of value, it will not survive. If the people in the community say that the art is nothing to them, it's all over. An art must be nurtured by the community if it is going to survive. Next year, the Yamamoto Noh Theatre celebrates its 90th anniversary, and we are full of gratitude for the fact that the people of the community have supported us all these years. And we have to work hard to make sure that we remain an entity that the people will continue to support for the next 90 years.