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Data

NPOs Japan Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN)



<http://www.jcdn.org/>

Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

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A look into the activities of the JCDN,
a pioneering arts NPO dedicated to getting out information
about the Japanese contemporary dance scene.

日本のコンテンポラリーダンスの情報源
アートNPOの草分けJCDNの活動とは？

After the 1998 passing of Japan's Non-Profit Activities Promotion Act, NPOs have been established in the performing arts field that are now engaged in a variety of activities. One of the representative NPOs of this which has played an important role in the contemporary dance field since its founding in 2002, through efforts such as disseminating information and establishing a system for nationwide performance tours, is the Japan Contemporary Dance Network (JCDN). We spoke with JCDN representative, Norikazu Sato, about the activities of the organization and its mission of "creating points of connection between the society and dance."

(Interviewer: Noriko Tsuchiya)

What gave you the idea of starting JCDN?

For 15 years between 1980 and 1994, I was a member of the Kyoto's butoh company Byakkosha. After the company disbanded in 1994, I spent the next two years working in a job that had nothing to do with the stage. It was during this period that I realized for the first time that most people live lives that do not have any connection at all to the arts, and to dance in particular.

After that I learned through a friend about an NPO in New York called the Dance Theater Workshop (DTW) and I had the opportunity to work at one of its departments called National Performance Network (NPN) as an intern for one year. What I saw there was an organization that conducts workshops and other activities with a focus on the questions of how dance's place in society should be created and how to encourage the spread of dance. When I was in the [Byakkosha] company, I think you can say that by contrast we were almost completely apart from the society in general and we were struggling with about how to get society to recognize our form of expression. It was a big surprise to me to see that in New York there was this completely different concept that dance is so meaningful to society. What's more, I saw that they actually had a methodology for accessing society.

When I failed to get a visa extension in time, I came back to Japan in 1997 and happened to have the opportunity to become involved in a certain international dance project. Through this project I had a chance to interact with a variety of people here in Japan's dance scene, including the artists, producers and critics. And all of them said how few venues there were for presenting contemporary dance in Japan, how small the audience was, how little information was available and how few points of connection there were with the society at large.

On the other hand, this was also a time when new movements were emerging in the Japanese contemporary dance scene with talented artists like Kim Ito, Kota Yamazaki and so on. We were also seeing the emergence of small venues involved in nurturing artists, supporting activities and getting out information. These

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included the Tokyo Session House, the Yokohama ST Spot and the Osaka Torii Hall (which has since ended its dance program and now transferred it to the Dance Box). Since there were these directors who knew the dance scene and there were programs being created, I sensed immediately that we need an idea for the creation of a network like the NPN.

So, I set up an office to prepare for the launching of JCDN with some support from the Saison Foundation and began by going around the country and surveying the dance scene by talking to people involved in dance in each region. After that I planned a meeting in Tokyo to get opinions about the activities JCDN should engage in. I was thinking that about 30 people might attend, but it turned out that about 120 people gathered from all over the country. Seeing this response, I felt that the organization had a chance of being successful.

Did that meeting lead to a clear idea of what kinds of activities JCDN should involve itself in?

Yes. The consensus made me convinced that the mission should be “creating points of connection between dance and society” and that the organization should work to build an environment for dance by conducting activities on an interactive basis that would create a system for nationwide dance tours, provide support for artists to create works, build a network with overseas groups, develop an open source of information about dance activities, create a platform for the exchange of information and conduct survey, research and promotional activities at the same time.

The reason why we decided our mission should be “creating points of connection between dance and society” is because we felt a definite problem in the fact that, although Japanese had developed economically since WWII, there had also been a tendency to eliminate artistic activities in society. I recall how shocked I was when learned about the so-called Sakakibara Incident that sent shockwaves around Japan in 1997 when a middle school student killed an elementary school student in Kobe. This incident made me think about how Japan was suffering by having become such a competitive society and how the arts had drifted away from the mainstream of life to become a form of luxury. I also came to believe seriously that it was the role of the arts to help save our country. I think this though became the starting point.

Dance is unique among the arts in that the dancer uses only his or her body as an expressive medium for communication using virtually no other tools or props.

Dance is based on the ability of self-examination, the ability to express one’s self and the ability to create moments where you can relate with others. These are all essential abilities for human beings to live [in society], which you might call “life force,” and I believe that these abilities and this force are weakening in contemporary society. This made me think that our mission should be to bring these powers of dance to life in society.

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Please tell us about your organization's activities.

The main pillars of our activities are producing and publishing the booklet *JCDN Dance Files* containing the latest information about the artists and related groups that are members of JCDN, planning and organizing the “Odori ni Iku-ze!!” (We’re gonna go Dancing!) program under which contemporary dance artists tour the nationwide network of dance spaces, and networking with overseas organizations and artists.

Our booklet is published once a year, and in 2003 it was published with a CD-ROM including one-minute clips of performance highlights for 61 groups and artists. We also run a Website with an online ticket reservation service. The “Odori ni Iku-ze!!” program that we launched in 2000 has given artists and groups the opportunity to perform outside their own locality, and its purpose is to create a new movement that encourages the growth of both the artists and the audience by exposing artists to new audiences. In 2004, 23 artist groups held performances in 14 art space venues around the country under this program. This year’s plans call for those numbers to increase to 43 artist groups touring 18 venues. Although getting our information through our booklet and the Website are necessary jobs, I believe that getting people to actually get out and move and come to these performances is the strongest force of all for making positive progress.

Besides these activities, we are also involved as coordinators specializing in contemporary dance for dance programs being organized around the country. Besides enlisting the cooperation of public halls and arts NPOs involved in regional promotion of the arts, we want to see dance programs that go beyond just performances for audience appreciation. Since recognition of the potential of workshops is spreading, we are serving as coordinators in the sending of artists to teach local dancers and the public in workshops and seminars on dance production/choreography. We are also involved in the business of coordinating dance programs in the different localities.

Most of the funding for these activities, about 60 to 70 percent, comes from the Agency of Cultural Affairs and corporate support. Another 20% comes from the commissions we receive for our coordinator services, while the last 10% comes from membership fees (presently from 287 organizations and companies) and ticket sales. We have a full-time staff of five people, and to tell you the truth, we are extremely busy (laughs).

How do you select the dancers that participate in the “Odori ni Iku-ze!!” program?

We hold artist selection events in the different regions. This year we held them in nine locations. But in Tokyo there are so many applicants that we have had to put in place a recommendation system. In addition to this we have selected this year’s participants also on the basis of public solicitation of video tapes of performance as well as inviting artists who have participated successfully in the “Odori ni Iku-ze!!” program in the past to return again as participants. The final decisions are made after we verify the October to December schedule and send video tapes and schedules of the participants to the regional event sponsors and seeing the requests that come back from the sponsors.

The “Odori ni Iku-ze!!” program is now in its sixth year. What effects have you seen from it?

With the exception of internationally recognized groups, before this program the participating artists and companies had only been able to perform in their own localities. Now, by participating in the “Odori ni Iku-ze!!” program they can tour the entire country with their performances. It has been, I believe, a big encouragement to the artists that, no matter what part of the country they were performing in

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originally, they now have an environment where they can go around the country and expose themselves to new audiences and critics and approach dance wherever they are.

Also, under this system we are able to pay the performers a fee, although it may not be large. Until now, most of these artists had to pay the expenses of mounting performances out of their own pockets, and the only people in the audience were their own supporters, so they could hardly be called professionals. But, the fact that they are now getting paid to perform before objectively critical audiences, even in the spaces are small, has definitely changed the artists' consciousness, I believe.

You are also involved in joint projects with overseas groups, aren't you?

Yes. Beginning from 2002 we have a "Japan-U.S. Choreographer Exchange Residency Project" held on a biennial basis. We began this as a joint project with the New York Japan Society and Dance Theater Workshop and Philadelphia's Painted Bride Art Center. This is a program that enables a group of artists from the two countries to spend about a week in each city of the two countries together, benefiting from exchange between the artists themselves and with the local dance communities in the cities they visit. For the 2004 project five artists were chosen from Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Tokyo and Osaka and together they toured Boston, Philadelphia, New York, Kyoto and Matsuyama.

Many Japanese artists visit New York for performances, but while they are there they are only going back and forth between the performance venue and their hotels and seldom have an opportunity to meet the members of the New York community. To break out of this pattern, we wondered if we could create a program that would give the artists an opportunity for meaningful encounters with different cultures and artists in ways that are truly stimulating. Rather than a program with a set performance schedule that presents finished works, we wanted to create a program that encourages the birth of new things at a more fundamental, grassroots level.

This project gives the artists a chance to meet the local organizers, and it also provides the opportunity for relationships to be created between the participating artists. Since the participating artist from each of the localities visited serves as the host when the group visits their city, it provides a good opportunity for networking and establishing new pipelines. In fact, one result of the 2004 program was that the participating artists worked together to create a new joint work. We want to continue this program in Asia and other regions as well.

Also, we are now working on an "Exchange Project" with Australia. This project grew out of our encounter with a number of Australian artists and organizers at the Adelaide Arts Market. We are trying now to see if we can get together a residency program during 2006, which is designated already as an Australia-Japan Friendship Year, and use this to create joint productions. One of the reasons for this project is that Japan and Australia are quite similar in the way that contemporary dance has yet failed to find a significant place in society.

We are also doing surveys and research that have led to the creation of a UK project beginning this year. The UK is a country that is investing a lot in dance. There is a government organization called the National Dance Agency that has nine branches around the country. These organizations work to nurture artists and foster dance activities in the communities. We are told that in all there are about 70,000 events being held at the community level each year, with programs such as workshops for the physically challenged and for young people who refuse to go to school. These are programs that can be of use as examples for Japan's public halls and community centers, so we want to put together a book about the programs going on in Britain now.

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How is Japanese contemporary dance being received overseas today?

There is a lot of attention focused on Japanese dance. Beginning with the butoh movement that showed the world a new type of bodily expression and building with the input from a lot of European and American dancers who have visited Japan since the 1980s, Japan is now producing dancers with a rich variety of styles and expressive language. That diversity is the focus of attention today, but in fact Japan's dance moment still lacks depth in terms of the number of artists.

In May, a large-scale butoh festival was held in Seoul for the first time. And as part of that program a segment called "Contemporary Dance Exchange" was organized to introduce Japanese contemporary dance, under your direction.

I believe that we are definitely seeing the emergence of dance among young artists that could only be born in Japan. This time we selected eight artists and groups (Ryohei Kondo & Erika Nowada, Zan Yamashita & Emi Naya, Maki Morishita, Shintai Hyogen Circle, Hiroyuki Miura, Ho Ho-Do, Mika Kurosawa and Shoko Kashima & Ryoko Sugimoto), all of whom have different styles.

In South Korea the universities have dance departments and dance is taught on a systematic basis. It is not like that in Japan, where contemporary dance is being born in a variety of places and completely different forms of expression are developing in parallel along the same line. And that is why I feel there is so much potential here. There may be no place in the world where such a rich variety of dance is being created at the same time.

Still, I feel that the next generation is not appearing that will carry on what has begun with this trend. Up until now, once a dancer joined a butoh company for example, there were people to put them through a process of serious training and teach them how to develop physical expression. But now, in Japan's contemporary dance scene, even if a person may have something that people think is interesting at the idea stage, they don't have the basic physical strength to take that to the next stage, which is to create a piece from that idea. This is because there are too few places where young dancers can seriously be trained. Looking to what should be done for the future, I think there is a danger of Japanese dance not continuing to develop if we don't have some kind of specialized educational institution for training choreographers.

No matter how well we do in creating points of connection between dance and society, it will all be meaningless if we don't have a good environment to encourage good artists continuously to perform there.

Don't you think there is a next generation of artists among the people who have applied for the "Odori ni Iku-ze!!" program?

I hope so. If this level continues to grow in numbers, we may see new and different development in. In five years we may have 30 venues for "Odori ni Iku-ze!!" or maybe even venues in all 47 of Japan's prefectures. If that happens there should be some new developments.

What are the issues that contemporary dance faces today?

Most of Japanese dance works today use existing music that has already been released on CD. This year we were finally able to release the first of our "JCDN Dance DVD Series" titled "Odori ni Iku-ze!! 2001" with featuring the performances from the 2001 tour. The reason that it took three years to get this edition out was the problems with the copyrights from the music. Choreographers in Japan still don't have enough concern about issue of music copyrights. Right now I am thinking

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about creating a list of composers who can work with choreographers in collaborative works and creating a site where they can hook up with each other on line. If such a system can be created we might see more dance works using original music.

Do you plan to continue releasing DVDs?

If possible I want to continue making releases regularly. Even if we can't get people to come to performances, if there are about ten collections in a DVD series in book stores for example, a lot more people will become conscious of contemporary dance. There will also be people who see the artists on DVD first and then come to the live performances. In other words, there is simply not information out there about dance. From here on, in order to build the base we must find ways to get the information out and in increased volume.

This is why we will launch a Website with the capacity to show streaming video of dance performances in November. Right now we have nearly 2,000 people registered for our ticket reservation site, but the ability of performers with unknown names to sell tickets is inevitably weak. But, I think that we can get more audience if we give them a chance to see video clips of the performers first.

How do you think things have progressed with regard to building more points of connection between dance and society?

We are now seeing workshops for the general public and for the physically challenged being held in various regions and projects for schools are being planned. So, in this sense the points of connection are being established. But, these points are still mostly one-time projects that are depending to a large degree on the energies of a few dedicated individuals. So, it's like the flame of a candle: Once it goes out, it doesn't relight itself. The issue for us today is; Do we have a methodology for increasing the number of points? Do we have methods to make these projects ongoing?

In terms of funding, most of it depends on grants that have to be applied for every year. If the grant doesn't win approval the project can't be continued. But, one positive trend is that we are coming to a point where people are recognizing the importance of dance and the need for it.

To strengthen this trend and make it firm, we have to establish a system where artists can earn money by holding workshops in local communities and schools. I think that we will see a very big change if we can reach a state where artists are not only creating works but also going out into the public and using their strength and talent in ways that directly benefits society. Ten years ago, the artists in Japan were not thinking in these terms at all—perhaps because society didn't have those expectations for the arts—but today this concept is definitely taking root. I don't know how far we can go but the seeds have been sown and buds are starting to appear. Since the start of JCDN there have definitely been some changes.