



YOSHIDA, Kyoko

Data

Arts Midwest



<http://www.artsmidwest.org>

Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー

An organization for the promotion of the arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest

2005.11.28

アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウェスト

In the United States there are six non-profit Regional Arts Organizations (RAO) dedicated to the promotion of the arts in the states of their respective regions along with inter-states/regional arts exchange. Each of these RAOs receive funding support from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and various other public and private funds, which they use to conduct independent activities, in cooperation and coordination with the arts councils of each state. We interviewed Ms. Kyoko Yoshida, who works at the RAO responsible for nine Midwest states, Arts Midwest. There she is the director of the U.S./Japan Cultural Trade Network (CTN), a project for the promotion of arts and cultural exchanges between Japan and the U.S.

(Interviewer: Eiko Tsuboike)

Can you tell us how you, a Japanese citizen, came to work in arts management in the U.S.?

It began when I started working at the "Spiral Art Center" in the Aoyama district of Tokyo that opened in 1985 with 100% financing by the lingerie maker Wacoal. I was engaged in inviting and presenting international dance companies and other productions at the "Spiral Hall." But the onset of recession caused the funding for such programs to be reduced, and about the same time arts management was becoming a subject of interest in Japan. I became interested in the non-profit arts sector as it was functioning in Europe and North America, so decided to go to New York to study arts management at a graduate course at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York for 2 years.

For a while after finishing the program, I worked free-lance as a manager and marketing consultant for Japanese companies coming to New York for performances, and eventually in 1996 I went to work for the Japanese American Cultural & Community Center (JACCC) in Los Angeles, thanks to a good relationship resulting from the research work with them for my Master's thesis. First, I worked as assistant to the executive director, Mr. Gerald D. (Jerry) Yoshitomi, who had been long aware of the need for a nationwide network that would enable Japanese performing arts companies to tour the country beyond Los Angeles. So, I became involved in creating such a network. Three and a half years later, I became a program manager for the Center's Japan America Theatre (880 seats), and started to invite and present several Japanese companies at the Theatre. Mr. Yoshitomi resigned from his post, and the programs at the JACCC began to shift focus toward presenting works by more traditional Japanese artists and local Japanese American artists.

I wanted very much to introduce Japanese contemporary performing arts to the U.S. audience beyond just Los Angeles, and since I was already building a national network of presenters interested in that area, I wanted to continue in that direction. It was then that the executive director of Arts Midwest, Mr. David Fraher, asked me if I wanted to create a project for U.S.-Japan arts and culture exchange at his

Presenter Interview

An organization for the promotion of the arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest

アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウエスト

*1 CTN

CTN is a project that seeks to create a long-term network and support system for cooperation between Japanese and American artists and presenters in the stage arts and arts in general. The organization is active in the planning and implementation of programs that will expand exchanges between Japan and the U.S. in geographic terms as well as strengthening the contents of these exchanges.

organization. Mr. Fraher believes that in the American Midwest you have to actively go out and create opportunities for international cultural and arts exchange, otherwise you are in danger of becoming isolated from the rest of the world. So, he was planning to create a U.S.-Japan project with support from the Japan-United States Friendship Commission. First, I was helping him from Los Angeles, but in March 2002, I moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota where Arts Midwest is headquartered, and since then, I have been in charge of CTN (*1) as a project of Arts Midwest.

What kind of services does the CTN provide?

For an example, there is a network of presenters in the U.S. who present international (especially Asian) performing arts programs on a regular basis. CTN works to provide the latest information about Japanese performing arts to that network by such means as organizing briefing seminars with the Japan Foundation. We are also directing efforts to introduce American artists, with a focus on Midwest and other regions not known much to Japanese people. Since 2001 we have been participating in the Tokyo Performing Arts Market (TPAM) with video presentations and live showcases of the U.S. artists. In 2003, we organized a live showcase featuring Rennie Harris Puremovement hip hop dance company, Minneapolis's Sean McConneloug, and hoi polloi of Boston, and introduced other U.S. dance groups including Dayton Contemporary Dance Company of Ohio on video.

We have also organized several U.S. delegation groups of presenters to attend TPAM in the past to introduce Japanese performing arts. We had one presenter from Pennsylvania who had previously had no interest in Japanese performers, but after participating in CTN's delegation trips, he fell in love with Japanese culture and the Tsugaru shamisen of Masahiro Nitta. That eventually led to the first U.S. tour of Nitta and collaborations between Nitta and a Pennsylvanian Jazz band. At CTN, while we are involved in this kind of information exchange, what we always want to do is to provide "contextualization" at the same time, i.e., the background of the artists' works and overall bigger picture evolving the artists. In the case of Rennie Harris, we provided information on the African dance tradition and social messages behind hip hop, and the position of Harris in the American dance scene. We also try to create opportunities for more actual contact and deepen the significance of the exchanges by conducting artist workshops and other residency activities at the same time.

It is the same when we bring American presenters to TPAM. We organize special lectures by Japanese specialists so that presenters understand the bigger picture of the current trends and developments. We also provide them with information on the Japanese cultural basics like business cards and keeping strictly to schedules prior to the departure for Japan.

What about inviting Japanese artists to the U.S.?

At CTN we don't usually invite artists directly, our main roles are supplying information, helping work out problems with Japanese artists who have been invited to the U.S. and generally what we call technical support. There is already a system in place to some degree for Japanese artists to perform in the U.S. and there are presenters who are interested in Japanese artists, so what we need to do is to constantly supply them with information to stimulate their interest in inviting Japanese artists. Also, inviting artists from another culture is a very difficult thing.

Presenter Interview

An organization for the promotion of the arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest
アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウエスト



*2 RAO

The RAO (Regional Arts Organizations) besides Arts Midwest and the NEFA include, the Mid-America Arts Alliance (M-AAA) covering an area of six states including Texas and known for its touring art exhibition programs, the Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) covering a vast area of 12 states in the western U.S. and the Pacific coast, the Southern Arts Federation covering nine southern states including Florida and the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation covering nine Eastern seaboard states including New York.

<http://www.usregionalarts.org>

For just a 2-hour performance, the preparations may demand sending hundreds of emails back and forth, and there often are communication difficulties as two entities work across the Pacific. So, it is something that takes a great amount of determination and effort to realize such a program. We believe that our position at CTN is to provide various support to prevent these efforts by presenters from failing. It would be good if TPAM had a good system for inviting presenters to Japan. For example, when the British Council conducts showcases at the Edinburgh Festival, there is a system for them to provide the travel subsidies for presenters, as long as the presenters attend a certain number of British artists' showcases, specified by the Council. This year, there were more than 20 presenters from the U.S., and about 200 presenters from all over the world who went to Edinburgh Festival invited by the Council.

The U.S. has an area 25 times larger than Japan. So the concept of region must be very different from that in Japan. In the case of Arts Midwest, it covers the nine states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Could you give us in a little more detail what is an RAO like and how it functions?

The RAOs (*2) are nonprofit organizations administering a system that was established about 30 years ago under the guidance of the NEA. As you know, the U.S. has a large area consisting of 50 federated states. For that reason, the national government is not able to provide all the states with detailed governance and services. That is why the NEA established the RAOs to cover a certain number of states each to provide a more effective system of support.

I think that this system also has a merit of check and balance between the RAOs and the states. The best known among these RAOs outside of the U.S. are Arts Midwest and the New England Foundation for the Arts (NEFA), which is based in Boston, and covers the northeastern region known as New England.

How are the six regions designated?

Arts Midwest has a jurisdiction of nine states, but the region traditionally referred to as the U.S. Midwest is not necessarily limited to these nine states. The basic regional divisions traditionally have geographic and cultural backgrounds, I believe, but the division of the states into the six RAO regions was made from the standpoint of the NEA.

The different RAOs also have different orientations, and of the six, the ones that make special efforts toward supporting the arts and culture more directly beyond the region are Arts Midwest and NEFA, in particular. Despite being a regional organization, NEFA runs a funding program to support the creation and tours of dance on a nationwide basis. This is the National Dance Project (NDP), which receives funding from the NEA and such leading foundations as the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. What makes NDP unique is that it closely operates with about a dozen designated presenters around the country, known as hub sites, and the respective dance directors gather twice a year for a national conference to select which programs to give support to.

I believe that about 300 requests are submitted for support each time and these are narrowed down to about 30 at the written application level and then the selection panel reviews video presentations of these at the national conference over a two-day period. Prior to this stage, however, the hub site presenters divide up the 30 applicants among themselves and go out to do careful studies of them,

Presenter Interview

An organization for the promotion of the arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest

アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウエスト

including interviews with the choreographers so that they can give presentations on behalf of the artists during the selection session. They make cases for the artists by saying things like, "When I interviewed her/him I was convinced that the new work will be great. I will certainly give a serious consideration in presenting the new work at our theater if they receive the funding." This way, the newly created work will procure a good possibility of presentations and tours even prior to its existence. It is a very creative funding program itself that is unprecedented in the rest of the country.

The RAO of the different regions all have different and unique names. Are their organizations and sources of funding also different?

Yes. The things they all have in common are that they all have a strong association with the NEA, some form of membership and funding program for its member states, and that they work in cooperation with the states' arts agencies.

For example, when Arts Midwest invited the *wadaiko* (Japanese traditional drum) performer Eitetsu Hayashi to the state of Ohio for a long-term residency project through CTN, the program was sponsored and managed in a close tie-up between Arts Midwest and the Ohio Arts Council (OAC). The residency project aimed to bring the artist's creativity and positive stimulation to regional communities that have various social problems including drug use and teenage single mothers. But neither we nor the OAC have information about what local facilities and organizations will be the best hosts for the residency activities, so OAC made contact with the city arts councils who have the best knowledge of their communities to find the right entities (schools and other nonprofit organizations) for the programs.

So the network sounds like a functioning system in this sense?

Yes. The United States has a longer history of an NPO (non-profit organizations) sector in the arts, so functional networks have been developed not only between the smaller community NPOs and the city or state governments but also between the artists and presenters and among the presenters themselves. In particular, since the presenters have established themselves as professionals, they not only have good eyes for the artists but also participate in international festivals to gain the sense of international arts scenes, have good connections and knowledge of their local communities and audiences, and actively communicate with municipal and/or state government for funding, which makes them a crucial part of the networks in the arts. Also, presenters and artist often interact and communicate with city/state arts councils and RAOs, serving as selection panel members or advisors for various policy makings. Constant communications support various networks to function. National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) brings representatives of all the state arts agencies together for annual conferences, and there is also a yearly conference for all six of the RAOs to meet together.

How about the intentions for inter-regional exchange in the U.S. with this RAO system?

The original reason for creating the RAO system was what Mr. Fraher calls "interstate trafficking." This means crossing state borders. In the U.S., crossing a state border can make thing as different as going into a different country, and that is why a system like the RAOs was necessary to promote interstate exchange originally. This was also effective in expanding markets for artists, creating more tours and work for them. But now, 30 years after the RAO system was established, I think that the contents of their activities are changing, as some of them are actively involved in international exchange programs.

Presenter Interview

An organization for the promotion of the
arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest
アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウエスト

One thing I am particularly conscious of is the fact that, as a nation of immigrants, the U.S. has groups of people with diverse cultural backgrounds living within its borders. Understanding its diversity has been a critical issue in America, and while there are places like New York and California where you encounter that diversity on a daily basis, there are also predominantly white communities in larger parts of the states under our jurisdiction. In the U.S., we are destined to the interstate trafficking in order to understand the country's diversity as well.

I would like to ask you about the situation in the Midwest. Is Minneapolis a cultural center in the region?

Minneapolis is certainly one of the cultural centers in the region. It is said to have the second largest per capita number of theaters among U.S. cities after New York City. They have Orchestra Hall, which is the home of the Minnesota Orchestra, and the Guthrie Theatre, which is an internationally famous regional theater. We also have one of the most significant contemporary art museums with performance spaces in the U.S., the Walker Art Center, which reopened after major renovation and expansion in April 2005. The Guthrie Theater is now undergoing construction of a new building, and the Children's Theater is being expanded, too. There is a tremendous amount of development going on in the city now. Unfortunately, however, not much of this information is probably reaching Japan.

There are several other major cities which are regarded as cultural centers in our region including Chicago, Illinois, and other cities in the states of Ohio and Michigan. For an example, University of Michigan has excellent international programs for their season which is presented by University Musical Society. They presented *the Elephant Vanishes*, a co-production of Japan's Setagaya Public Theatre and Britain's Theatre de Complicite. There are also many other universities and colleges in the Midwest that are playing the roles of major presenters, and we think that there is a great potential of presenting Japanese artists with them.

American universities that have theater facilities are presenting a variety of programs and are playing a similar role of regional public centers in Japan as well. They have significant budgets, they have connections to the community, and they have an audience including their students. A dozen of them are forming a network of "University Presenters" as well.

You have told us that introducing Midwest artists beyond their home states and region is also one of Arts Midwest's functions. How do you go about this?

For example, every year in September we have an arts market known as the Midwest Arts Conference (MAC). This event invites artists from around the country (primarily the Midwest) to participate in the live showcases, and of the 200-300 applications, the selection committee selects about 20 groups to give live presentations. The fee for the showcase application is \$60, and the production cost is \$650, so only artists that are willing to pay the cost to show their works at MAC apply. More than 300 booths are also set up by artists' managers to distribute information on their artists during MAC, and more than 1,000 presenters from all over the U.S., some from abroad as well, attend MAC to gather information on and book the artists, many of whom are based in our region.

There are two more regional conferences besides MAC, which are the Western Arts Alliance (WAA) and the Performing Arts Exchange (PAE). These are held in the month of September each year with staggered times of about two weeks in the three regions of the West, Midwest and South in that order.

Presenter Interview

An organization for the promotion of the arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest

アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウエスト



In fact, before these regional conferences, there are booking conferences in many states, and in January, after the regionals, there is a national gathering of the presenters, artists and their managers, which is the annual conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters (APAP). Thus, the professionals in the field meet on state, regional and national levels not just to collect information on artists but also to discuss common issues and visions. I think that this kind of system results in empowering the nonprofit arts sector as a whole in the context of larger society.

What kinds of Japanese performers are U.S. presenters interested in today?

I think it differs on an individual basis, but I would say that there are a good number of presenters who are interested to see what is coming next in the genre of contemporary Japanese dance. I also think there is considerable potential in the field of Hogaku (traditional Japanese music). Hogaku may not be well known among a large number of presenters yet, but there is an interesting possibility of growth here especially with such means as collaborating with American Bluegrass or Jazz musicians.

When introducing Japanese artists, do you think that collaborations are a viable method?

Yes. It is often times difficult to draw audiences for Japanese artists who are not known in the U.S., but if you can arrange collaboration with a known local artist, there are various opportunities for things to develop from there. At the same time, however, it is not very easy to arrange artistic collaborations. We need to think about the best way for the artists to meet each other.

What about artist residency programs?

I think that residencies are very effective and significant in many ways. When asked why you want to invite a Japanese artist over to the U.S., often times it is not convincing enough to simply say that because they are outstanding artists or that because that kind of expression doesn't exist in the States. However, if you also say that the artists will be conducting residency programs to directly interact with and contribute to the community, you have much stronger case and are more likely to get funding as well as more interest from the audience and the community. In fact, at Arts Midwest we are running a "Midwest World Fest" project and every year since 2003 we have invited "Bamboo Orchestra" from Japan. This is a brilliant program designed specifically for the Midwestern communities where the ensemble stays for one full week each in a number of communities in the nine Arts Midwest states (five weeks in the first year, four weeks in the second). And these are mostly communities least known in Japan, and where the people have little knowledge of Japanese culture, or have never even met a Japanese person before. The schedule for the week is very well structured and pretty much the same in each community. They arrive in the town on Sunday and there is a welcoming party that night. On Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday they go to the local middle schools and high schools and conduct workshops. On Thursday there may be a jam session or some special event, and on Friday there is a small concert for the children of the schools they have visited. Finally, on Saturday they give a full evening public performance for the community, then they move on to the next community on Sunday.

Presenter Interview

An organization for the promotion of the arts in the American Midwest, Arts Midwest

アメリカ中西部の文化振興組織
アーツ・ミッドウエスト

For six months before the arrival of the Bamboo Orchestra, the children have been studying about Japan and its arts and culture from a CD-ROM we have produced, so they are really anxious for the arrival of the musicians when the time comes. I once visited one rural community in Wisconsin to observe the program in operation. When it came to the day of the final performance and the children saw the same artists who had come to teach them in their classroom now playing on the stage, they felt a special connection and got really excited. In the rural areas of the American Midwest it is almost inconceivable to have parents and children going together to a concert by Japanese musicians, but it was a full house, and one hundred CDs were sold out during the intermission at a small concert hall that held about 500 people. It was really touching to see how the audience listened so intently to each subtle little sound of the bamboo instruments. At first, our plan was to invite groups from different countries every two years, but the Bamboo Orchestra has been so well loved by the communities and the presenters that we decided to extend their visit for another two years.

International residency projects such as this have a great deal of potential to be developed outside of major metropolitan cities in Japan and in the U.S., incorporating the regional characteristics. There are many American artists who are good at residency and outreach activities, and many of them have great interests and respect for Japanese culture, so, I think it is very feasible to implement wonderful exchange programs. I think that this kind of high-quality grass-roots international exchange programs are especially significant today, in the era of globalization.