



Profile

Mr. Takao Hashimoto

Street performance producer. Judging committee member for the Tokyo Metropolitan Authority's Heaven Artist Program. Graduated from the Law Dept., Chuo University. Following activities as a music and theater planning and production producer, he participated in the production of the Noge International Street Performance Festival launched in 1986. Served as general producer for the Noge festival from 1989 to '95. Since then he has launched a series of large-scale street performance festivals including the "Sancha de Diadogei" festival, the Hitachi International Street Performance Festival, the "Heaven Artist Tokyo" festival and the the Koenji Bikkuri Street Performance Festival.

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A quarter of a century has passed since Takao Hashimoto helped start the Noge International Street Performance Festival as one of the founding members in 1986. Since then, he has produced the Sangenjaya International Street Performance Festival, the Hitachi International Street Performance Festival, the Theatre de Rue Tokyo (forerunner of the current Heaven Artist Tokyo festival held in Ueno), the Koenji Bikkuri Street Performance Festival and others, one after another. Hashimoto has also worked to establish a system for licensing street performance artists and to help young Japanese artists tour overseas. In this interview we talked with him about these 25 years of activities.

(Interview: Norio Kohyama, non-fiction writer)

It has been a quarter of a century since you organized the first street performers festival in Noge, Yokohama in 1986. What was it that originally led you to begin producing street performance festivals like that?

When we first began the Noge International Street Performance Festival I was just thinking that it would be fun if we could create a festival atmosphere by gathering a bunch of rare characters going their acts around town. At the time, the pantomime artist IKUO Mitsuhashi had come back to Japan from Paris and we gathered a number of other performer friends to start the festival.

After graduating from university, I went to work at a big corporation, but working in a big organization like that didn't suit me and I quit after three years. I started working as a live-in assistant at a *yakitori* (grilled chicken) restaurant, and after learning the trade I opened my own yakitori shop in Noge. I kept up that business until around 1987. While I was running that shop I was also producing theater production and jazz concerts. And the jazz musicians who came to Japan and a lot of actors from the area used to frequent to my shop.

It was in the early 1970s and, looking back now, I really was involved in a lot of things. It was a time when the "small theater" movement was very active and knew Shuji Terayama of Tenjousajiki and Tadashi Suzuki of the Waseda Kogeijo theater. And Kazuyoshi Kushida of the Jiyu Gekijo was a classmate of mine from elementary school. I called on friends like these to join me in a lot of different projects aimed at making Yokohama a contemporary and stimulating place. I was an outsider, not native to Yokohama, but after coming to Yokohama I loved working there and I wanted to start something here in this city.

At the time, Noge was not what you would call a respectable town. You would come

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across big fights and people covered in blood, and there often disturbing incidents. There were so many vagrants around that you had expressions like, “That Noge no-good.” You could say that it was a town full of energy, but you could also describe it as anarchy. The river was lined with tugboats that they brought in from Choshi or somewhere and men lived on those boats and did day-work in the harbor. After their work was done they would go back on those boats. That kind of atmosphere made it an exciting town. And that is also the reason that we were able to do a lot of things there. One of the end results was the Noge International Street Performance Festival.

Now you are involved in street performance festivals all around the country, with the shared catch phrase of making “the whole town a stage.” Did you have the idea of doing this from the time you stated the Noge festival?

I never dreamed it would turn out this way (laughs). My feeling at the time was simply that street performance was a form of entertainment. So, the image I had in mind was that it would be good enough just to fill the town with people who could stir up a lot of fun and excitement.

Since I was deeply involved in the theater world at that time, I was well aware of how difficult it was to create an interesting theater production. So, I had no presumption that putting some performers on the streets would make the town a stage. I just wanted to change the face of the town for a while and break out of the everyday by filling the town with some far-out characters. You could say I wanted to re-create the Middle Ages. I thought it would be great if we could create the kind of exciting chaos that might have existed when Kyoto became a lawless town during the Onin War, or the kind of town that might appear in the paintings of traveling monk Ippen Shonin in the Kamakura period.

If you trace back the roots of street performance in Japan, it was part of the popular culture of the people in the Middle Ages. It was a profession of the socially discriminated caste-less people at the bottom rung of Edo Period society who were under the leadership of the Kuruma Zenshichi. This Kuruma Zenshichi was the hereditary name given to the chief (*Etagashira*) of the caste-less people who answered to the Asakusa-based administrative authority governing all caste-less people, the Danzaemon. The Kuruma Zenshichi had a big estate right next to the red-light district of Yoshiwara and represented a powerful force, governing over a shantytown of some 300 shacks where the caste-less people lived. Among the people he governed were a group known as *Gomune* who were the street performers of the day. *Gomune* was a discriminatory name born in the social order of the Edo Period. Traditionally, the arts of street performers are handed down from father to son, but in the case of the *Gomune*, they were a group who received a license to perform on the streets for their livelihood as their traditional birthright.

Because the *Gomune* were a discriminated caste, they had no pride to speak of. Their arts were sword handling, *Nankin tama sudare* (Chinese-style bamboo trick sticks) and *odedekoden* (a kind of trick art). The traveling puppeteers, *Echigo-shishi* dance performers and monkey handlers were also *Gomune*. Therefore, it is safe to say that Japanese street performance was born within this Medieval caste system.

How does this contrast with the origins of European street performance?

Of course it was the same in Europe. In Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* you have

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the character Peachum, who is the king of beggars and he has some of the beggars doing street performance to make a living. In Europe, there was an increase in movement of people around the 10th century. These travelers included pilgrims, knights, monks, the Crusaders and peasants opening up new farmland. Also among the transient population were beggars and performers. Like the Gomune in Japan, these beggars and performers were organized into groups like guilds, called *Zunft* in German and the people in each group, be they beggars or performers, took pride in perfecting the skills of their respective arts. Among this type of itinerant performers were also traveling minstrels and traveling performers who did things like juggling and tightrope walking, and by the 11th century you had gypsies entering this itinerant population. Of course, you also had people rising from these ranks into prestigious positions in society, such as high-level musicians.

In contrast to that history and tradition, you had people from a completely different social class coming into street performance in the 1970s. The impetus for this was the hippie movement of the '70s. The young people who had opposed the Vietnam War and opposed the imperialist tendencies of the world's superpowers, turned to the road and the hippie lifestyle. Some became folk singers while others who couldn't sing well found they could do other arts, like juggling. Those street performers began to come to Japan in the early 1980s and became very popular. Among them were some very intelligent people, the jugglers I know who are Harvard and Cambridge university graduates. People like them represent a phenomenon that could never have emerged in any other time but our contemporary age, and they have nothing in common with the people of the *Zunft* who had to eek out a living performing on the road or the poverty of the traveling performers like Zampano and Gelsomina in Fellini's *La Strada*. We began the Noge festival by getting together and talking about what a spectacle we could create in the town by bring in a bunch of far-out characters like those contemporary jugglers .

From those small beginnings, what made you develop it into the kind of international festival it is today?

From around the time we started the Noge festival there were already performers from overseas coming to take part. And from quite some time before that, I was already aware what a universal phenomenon street performance had become around the world. I had heard that a circus company formed by street performers in Canada was doing very interesting things, and when I happened to be in Paris in 1988 or '89 I went to see them perform; it was *Cirque du Soleil*. What I saw was something completely different from what had been known as circus until then. At that time, I also found out that in France there was the *Nouveau Cirque* movement that presented acts in a non-traditional circus form. I had long been interested in circus and had seen the Bolshoi Circus, the Kinoshita Circus and the Sekine Circus and studied them to some degree, and I felt that there was a chance that recognition could come to a new type of entertainment with street performers different from the traditional seasoned entertainers like Fratellini, who we all knew from Fellini's *The Clowns*.

When IKUO stepped down from the job of producing the Noge festival and I took over the job, one of the first things I did was to go to the 1990 Montreal Jazz Festival. I had been producing jazz concerts for years, so I knew the jazz players. They told me that during the jazz festival there was a simultaneous street performance festival

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around Montreal, and I thought this might be a good opportunity to make some connections. When I went, I found out that was indeed the case, but I didn’t know anyone there. I heard that the headquarters for the festival was a big tent, so I went there and sat in the same place diagonally in front of the tent from morning till night. Seeing me there, people came up and asked me who I was, to my delight (laughs). When they did I showed them the big lot of photos of the Noge festival I had brought with me.

I asked them a lot of questions and in the process I quickly got to know a good number of high-level American artists and some of the amazing performers from Cirque du Soleil. That was before Cirque du Soleil had become the big corporate enterprise it is today and was still operating out of a big tent by the St. Lawrence River. The founder and current president of Cirque du Soleil, Guy Laliberté, and the artistic directing genius Guy Caron were both there at the time. He had been the first president of France’s Ecole National du Cirque. That was at the time when Nouveau Cirque was becoming popular in France and also the time when street performance was becoming much more artistic.

The trend in France was aided by the support of the French Ministry of Culture for the street performance festival at Aurillac in the south of France in 1986, and it was the time when they began to call it Theatre du Rue (theater of the street). In addition to funding, the French government also initiated programs for artist training. I am also one who has received considerable assistance from the French government, and was early in the 1980s that this trend toward the artistic elevation of street performance began. So, it is not a very old movement.

That means that you were starting to promote street performance in Japan with the Noge festival just on the eve of this emergence of international attention for street performance.

It is really a coincidence that it happened that way, with Aurillac and Noge starting in the same year. But, of course, France did it in bigger style. Mitterrand had become the French leader in 1981 and Jack Lang was brought in as Minister of Culture. He is a very dynamic person, and he proposed the idea that artists should come out into the community.

Established theaters have a number of cumbersome restrictions on their use. First of all you must get approval to use them and you can’t use water or fire in them. If you want to do a work employing a dynamic flood of water, you can’t do that in a theater. But many of that type of bold, dynamic works were beginning to be realized by street performance artists. The Royal du Luxe company was probable the most successful in that area of grand performance. And, the PLASTICIENS VOLANTS company successfully created comprehensive multi-genre works using big balloons and inflatables and opera quartets, on top of which they did circus-like acts. All of these were only things that could have been accomplished only in outdoor venues.

Another artist who achieved incredible results was Philippe Decoufle. He was even given the job of designing the opening ceremonies for the Albertville Winter Olympics. When things like this become common, we are no longer at the stage where people see a juggler and start debating, “Is this an artist?” (Laughs) I don’t want to be annoying by starting up a debate about “Is this culture? Is it not culture?” But, I would like to say that I believe there has now been what you might call a reinstatement of this type of performance that began as a trade of the under-classes of

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societies of old, both in Japan and around the world, and now these performers can hold their heads high and take pride in their arts.

Did you start the Noge festival with the intention of having it continue a long time?

Of course I intended to have it continue. My life philosophy is to not junk anything that you have started. But, along the way there were a variety of problems that emerged. For instance, there was the question of how the town should be involved in a festival like this, and the problem of direction, regarding how to elevate it from the level of popular entertainment to art. There were plenty of turning points along the way.

At first, I was content to have a street performance festival on the purely entertainment level, but as I became aware of the emerging international trend in street performance and street theater at the time, I felt that eventually we would have to make it a more artistic festival. If the festival was going to become a big event that could raise the prestige of the locality and bring in a positive economic effect, we would have to “shed the old skin” and take it to the level of ‘art.’ The, in 1992, the Maison Franco-Japonaise came to us and asked if we would like to have Ilotopie come to perform. At the time, Ilotopie was the most provocative performance group in France. Most of the actors were academics and people with a PhD. I always like that kind of cutting-edge stuff, so I happily accepted.

They arrived with five big containers weighing a ton each. The work they performed had whitewashed people inside big cages, each engaged in some everyday action like taking a bath or pouring coffee into a coffee cup. Then all of a sudden the cages start filling up with Styrofoam until they are full and the actors can’t move. Next comes a handcar with people carrying tools riding on it. They use saws to cut the actors out of their cages, load them on the handcar and roll them away again. It was a fascination and inspiring 4 1/2- hour performance. And, since it is a work that cuts segments out of everyday life, the moving moments it shows in the day of a life becomes art.

Another show involved two women and three men, completely naked except for loincloths and painted from head to toe in one of five colors. Then they go out on the street and walk around that way (laughs). Before having that performance in Noge, they performed it in the square in front of the Tokyo Arts Theatre in the Ikebukuro district of Tokyo. That really created a sensation on the street (laughs). After that they did it at Noge, in Kyoto and in Sendai. We had to get the company’s big containers through customs, transporting them—and the enormous cost of all that was paid completely by the French side. The following year we had Peche Kurdo and the year after that it was Theatre de l’Unite. We did all those interesting performances at Noge.

I think those are outstanding accomplishments, but did things go smoothly between you and the town and the local government through all this?

There was a lot of difficulty in that regard. It was in the years 1992-94 that Ilotopie came to perform, and by that point there was a widening rift between my interests and those of the Noge. Since I wanted to gradually make Noge an artistic festival, I was bringing in the most cutting-edge acts and companies. But, since this wasn’t comedy but serious performance, it wasn’t on the level of someone riding a unicycle skillfully and making everybody laugh. But that is the kind of traditional street performance fun the Noge side wanted. Since we were doing things like Ilotopie, there was a lot of extra work that the festival staff had to do and their frustration was building up.

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So, in 1996 I had another person take over the producer position for the Noge festival. At that time I had already started doing the Sancha de Daidogei (Sangenjaya International Street Performance Festival) and the Hitachi International Street Performance Festival. With these new festivals, the focus was on ‘art’ from the beginning, so I was able to employ my vision directly and fully. Especially in the case of Sangenjaya, I had been approached by the artistic director of the Setagaya Public Theater, Makoto Sato, two years before the theater opened, and in a preparatory meeting with a lot of big figures in the theater world and public figures, I was able to make my case for street performance as art.

Culture facilities are by nature rather snobbish. They think they are important and act that way. The Setagaya Public Theater was going to be built suddenly in the middle of an ordinary small business district in Sangenjaya but they were talking about doing performances of *Woyzeck* and *Waiting for Godot*, the kind of difficult stuff that makes your head hurt, and the kind of thing that your average old man and woman on the street hate. They knew that wasn’t going to go over easily, so in order to be a facility dedicated to theater, they first of all needed a link to the local citizens. So, I told them to leave it up to me.

Saying that, we organized a grand-scale Sancha de Daidogei festival the year the Setagaya Public Theater opened.

In the case of the Hitachi festival, there were also a number of background factors. The Hitachi Civic Center was being constructed, and things had to be planned to fill its schedule no matter what. So the local government contacted me. Hitachi had absorbed another town to become a very large city in terms of land area, so it was decided that we would use some of that space to do a festival full of the sense of street performance as art.

In these activities, how do you try to achieve the “local economic development” you mentioned earlier?

First of all, you have to believe that culture should create economic returns. I believe that is the most important factor.

To achieve economic development, you have to make your city one that has a magnetic pole of people with cultural assets. Described in the extreme case, you have to get these people away from their television sets and get them to go out and spend their money on cultural events. And my particular belief is that street performance is one of the best platforms for doing this.

The more you are able to raise the cultural [artistic] level of street performance, the more you will be able to expose people to high-level contemporary art without asking them to buy tickets first. I always tell people that this is the fate and the mission of street performance. Human beings have a nature that is very honest with regard to quality. Once they have seen high-level art or heard high-level music, they no longer react to lower level arts. They then develop a craving for high-level arts. Then if you continue to change the works and the way they are shown, your audience will continue to grow.

If you feed the needs of these audiences but don’t make them pay for the fare, you are not a viable city. Because they always bring their wallets with them I say that with each festival I will gather an audience of 1,000. If the each spend 1,000 yen during their visit, that’s 10 million yen. If they spend 2,000 yen that’s 20 million. To do

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that, the city has to offer a richer, more abundant form and show a more hospitable face. To accomplish that, the people of the city need to make greater efforts on a daily basis, and by doing so the citizens will be activation the city economy. That is why I say art activates the economy. Isn’t that a syllogism? (Laughs)

I tell the city and its citizens that if I plan the festival I will carefully select performers and create an event that will achieve international recognition, so all you have to do is prepare delicious things to serve the crowds that gather and practice putting on your most hospitable smile (laughs).

And to be able to do this, you have to create the systems for welcoming visitors. For example, it is meaningless if you leave things up to outdoor food and souvenir stall operators, so we have them create a “Committee for the Organization Outdoor Stalls.” That is what we did in Hitachi and in Sangenjaya. And now the Koenji festival is in its second year, so we will be organizing one there too.

In each city you have to create that kind of organization and have them think of inviting ways to get the visitors to loosen their purse strings willingly. A festival is based on culture, so the committee’s way of thinking naturally has to be based on culture, too. They can’t think in the same way as the stall peddlers. The festivals we present have been created with our utmost efforts and concern for quality and the knowledge that it requires people with high levels of training. Those are the standards we use for selecting the participants.

The choice of places is also important. Each city has its own unique origins. Each case requires creative thinking. In the case of Koenji, the “place” we chose for the festival was the area between the Ohme highway and Waseda Avenue. When we announced that we had people telling us, “Are you crazy?” But we succeeded in making it a festival that toured the commercial streets connecting those two main thoroughfares. The festival was designed to fit the town, with artists performing on each corner and larger spectacle type works in the squares, and when you went a little farther you would come on a street filled with the sound of classical music. All around this section of the town there are lots of nice shops, and if each of the 10,000 visitors spend 1,000 yen that is an income of 10 million yen.

This is the second year of the Koenji festival. Why did you choose Koenji?

I only do street performance festivals in town that are already cultural centers. In Koenji there is the Za-Koenji Theater and its director, Ren Saito, saw the Sangenjaya festival and asked me if I would do a festival in Koenji. I accepted. If there hadn’t been the Za-Koenji Theater there, I wouldn’t have done a festival, no matter how much they asked me.

In short, you need a source for art to flow from. Basically, I see it as a structure where information flows from Here (the theater) to There (the streets of the town) and then back again to the theater. The street performance I propose is taking art that would normally be performed in a variety of places, like theaters, tents or studios, and performing it outdoors instead. That is why I only do festivals in towns that have a theater for the art to return to eventually. Of course, there is the exception of things that can’t fit in a theater.

A place like the Aubade Hall in Toyama is located outside of the town in a place with no surrounding business streets, so in that case we employed a concept of using the area surrounding the Aubade facility and turning it into a borderless confusion in

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which there was no longer a distinction between inside and outside the theater. In the end we had the performers and the audience all get up on the Aubade stage so the audience could watch acts like a Chinese acrobat company right up close. Then we had things like a concert with a group of eight musicians from Senegal performing together with some of Japan’s top jazz musicians. All of this is street performance.

In the quarter of a century since you started the Noge festival, Japan’s street performance world certainly seems to have gone through a big transition. What is the biggest factor influencing this change?

It is the “Heaven Artists Project” initiated by the Tokyo metropolitan authority. This is a system that licenses street musicians who pass the audition of a judging committee and give them the right to perform in public places like parks all over the metropolitan area. The street performance festivals have been possible because they operate within the special conditions and period of a festival. The Tokyo Heaven Artists program is different, however. I think it is a program that you won’t find anywhere else in the world.

This program began originally from an idea that happened to be brought up within the Tokyo metropolitan government. Initially, it was little more than an idea that it would be interesting to have street performers performing in the subway stations. Tokyo’s governor, Shintaro Ishihara has a habit of coming up with interesting ideas and talking them up in public. Since it is then up to the local authorities to then develop on those ideas, some city government people came to me for advice about doing a street performance project. The government people said they wanted to do it at the Meguro Teien Art Museum, and they wanted to charge admission. But I wouldn’t accept that idea. By nature, street performance is not something you charge the audience admission to see. I told them that if they wouldn’t do it in Ueno Park and for free, then I wouldn’t become involved.

At the time, street performers were prohibited from performing in Ueno Park. In Tokyo, the weekend vehicle-free promenades (*hokosha tengoku*, or “pedestrian paradise” in Japanese) area of Harajuku was one of the original meccas for street performers, but when the “Takenoko-zoku” youth dance groups were barred from dancing there, the street performers were kicked out too. After that they moved to Ueno Park. But it was not only the street artist that moved to Ueno; along with them came the street peddlers who had been selling things like counterfeit telephone cards in Harajuku’s Yoyogi Park. That caused the police to kick out both the peddlers and the artists completely from Ueno. That happened around 1997.

However, by that time, Ueno Park had already become the home ground for a new generation of street performers. About 15 years after the start of the Noge festival, a new generation of performers with new types of art had appeared and made their debuts mainly in Ueno Park. They were a new type of artists who didn’t have any of the inferiority complex the older generation of street performers had. For that reason, Ueno Park was the perfect place for street performers to return to with the new Tokyo metropolitan authority’s project.

After being kicked out of Ueno Park around 1997, most of them had moved their performance locations to in front of Shibuya Station or the weekend “pedestrian paradise” streets of the Shinjuku district. Neither of these places were approved for street performance, so the police would move catch them when found. So, most of the

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performers had been caught at least once and made to write a letter of apology. Having heard these stories, I wanted to find a way to enable them to perform again in the peace of Ueno Park. The result of this idea and my negotiations with the metropolitan authority was the Theatre du Rue, Tokyo festival of 2001.

There are a number of anecdotes behind that event. It was organized as a four-day event, but Governor Ishihara was only scheduled to come for one 10-minute inspection tour of the festival. But I was able to make some adjustments in the route he was supposed to walk, because I couldn’t stand to let him leave after just 10 minutes! (Laughs). So, I talked to the performers along that route beforehand to make sure they would put on their best show for the Governor. I think one of the big appeals of the Governor’s personality is that he is receptive to that kind of approach. In the end, the performances delighted him and he ended up spending two hours on his inspection tour of the event. The next day he also found time in his schedule to come back and see more.

During the Governor’s tour on the first day of the event, I told him that even though Japan had a lot of pedestrian paradises, there were no performers or artists there to entertain people, so it ended up being no more than a traffic measure to allow people to walk those streets. I told him that I thought it was a sad state of affairs and unworthy of a country that was supposed to be one of the great cultural centers of the world.

The next day when I went to pick up the Governor at Ueno’s Tokyo Culture Hall (*Tokyo Bunka Kaikan*) for his second tour, he suddenly said to me, “Let’s use the name “Paradise Artists” or “Heaven Artists!” (Laughs) I believe he got the name from the “pedestrian paradise” term (heaven is another translation of the “*tengoku* in the Japanese term *hokosha tengoku*). So, that was the one time I told him, “I think that a great idea!” (Laughs)

I also told the Governor that quality was important. I said for example, if we let any kind of street performers who wanted perform in Ueno Park, we could expect to see it rapidly fill up with lower quality performers and there would be no place left for the performers who can really be called artists. In fact that had happened at Harajuku. At first there was an impressive group of performers gathered there striving to do good street performance, but gradually the young Takenoko-zoku dancers began to gather there and fill the pedestrian paradise street with kids. That ended up squeezing the good performers out with no place to perform.

The square in front of the Pompidieu Center in Paris was a gathering place for truly artistic street performers in 1980s and early ’90s, but gradually the square was taken over by a variety of ethnic musician groups who were there to earn money from the crowd. The same thing happened in London’s Covent Garden and Amsterdam’s Leidseplein square.

In order to prevent that same thing from happening here, we had to make some rules to prevent the bad from replacing the good. Some people were opposed to that idea, but I told the Governor that we had to create a system for licensing performers who were judged to have a good level of artistry so we could have street performance functioning properly and positively. Then the Governor said that if I were the only judge of the licensing quality it would be a form of despotism, so the idea to gather a number of judges and have judged audition system was adopted.

One of the reasons we were able to create such a great system in Tokyo is that

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local government in Japan is done on the prefectural and metropolitan area basis. This system is similar to the ones in Lausanne and Montreal. They welcome street performers who will come in to the city hall and pay their taxes and get a receipt that they can then take to the police department and get a permit to perform in the place of their choice. But, even in Lausanne, there is only one street is open to performers. It is limited in scale this way and performers are not free to perform throughout the city.

However, the Tokyo program makes available performance sites throughout the city. The conditions for use are that the sites must be owned by the Tokyo Metropolitan Authority and there must be a custodian on duty at the site. There are presently a little over 50 approved sites for performance in parks and in squares in front of public buildings. They include the square in front of the Tokyo Arts Theater, in front of museums and in lots that are scheduled for redevelopment, and a variety of other places.

Tokyo is the only city in the world that has such a dynamic system. Presently there are between 350 and 360 performers licensed under the system, and when they inform the authority when and where they want to perform, the authority contacts the custodian so that the performer can use the equipment and such kept by the custodian for the performances and then return them afterward. That is the basic flow. If several performers join together, they can make a schedule where perhaps three performers with schedule a three-hour block of time at a specific site and work out a rotation together.

Of the various site, Ueno Park is the most popular because there is always an audience there. Ueno is an area with a concentration of culture facilities, art and natural history museums and the Tokyo Bunka Kaikan. The people who visit Ueno have interest in cultural things and they also are surprisingly willing to stop and enjoy street performance as well.

The makeup and number of the artists must have changed a lot as well.

Yes, it has. The first year of the program, 70 groups and individuals were licensed. Since then there have generally been 35 or 36 more artists licensed each year, including street musicians. It is a lifetime license and all the holder has to do is perform at least once a year and file a report on the performances in order to get the license renewed. There is something bureaucratic to the process, but it reflects our desire to have these artists give the citizen a good, artistic performance at least once a year in exchange for the venues and facility accommodation we will provide for them.

The performing environment for the artists has also changed in a variety of aspects since the initiation of the Heaven Artist program. For example, we now have a number of cities like Shizuoka and Yokohama where you have performers on the streets on a daily basis. In the case of the Yokohama Minatomirai area, you have performers performing literally 365 days a year. But these performers need a permit from Minatomirai. Performers are also active at Yokohama’s Yamashita Park, but for many years now this area had a sophisticated audience and the old acts just don’t make it there. This is a worldwide trend, I believe. Performers can’t compete today in terms of contents and quality if they are only offering the old acts.

Furthermore, you have a lot of younger performers today. Again this year we had our written applications for Tokyo street performer licenses in July and have the auditions in September, and we find the average age of the applicants getting younger

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and younger. It has become quite common now as a new lifestyle for young people who don’t want the average work-a-day life to turn to the freedom of performance arts. By nature, I was a born street performer from a very young age, but those were still the days of conservative thinking and so I went to college to fulfill my parents’ expectations. Though now I wish I hadn’t (laughs).

In France they have a national school of circus arts, but in Japan there is no training program like that at the national level. So, how do people become street performers today?

It varies, but now there are many colleges that have street performance clubs and juggling clubs. The young people who belong to these clubs begin with an interest in the techniques involved, but simply showing those techniques in front of people is not enough to constitute art. Since art involves showing some impulse or inspiration within yourself, it is best if you can get them to look in that direction by speaking to them directly and help to educate them. When there are young people who pass the license auditions and seem to me to have particular promise for the future, I will speak to them and gradually try to help educate them as artists. I also give them introductions to overseas festivals.

Have their life environment and conditions changed?

In Japan there are several hundred festivals—regardless of quality—that will call people street performers and pay them a participation fee. By making the rounds of these festivals and doing some solo street performance with a hat for donations in their free time, these people can make more than enough to live on. I think we have reached the point where that economic environment is in place for them to some degree.

Just counting the festivals I am involved in producing, there are eleven. Since there are also several other large ones, there are about twenty in all that I can cast higher-level performers in.

Regarding performers collecting money in the hat from their audience, Tokyo now allows the practice but the ordinances regarding it are different in other parts of the country. Anyway, my practice is to have the performers pass the hat around when they perform. Of course, that is not the main incentive for performers who are pursuing their craft as an art, but I consider the hat to part of the street performance culture.

Explaining a little about the art of passing the hat, it is easy to understand if you think of the case a fire breather who says, “I will breathe fire if you put some money in the hat, and after five people have put money in, the performer does his fire-breathing act. That is how some performers operate. In my festivals I don’t let them do it so blatantly. In the case of street performance, the audience usually stand to watch the performances, so there is a limit of about 20 minutes to the time they will spend there standing in the same place. Even when they are seated, the limit is about 40 minutes. The best timing for bringing in fresh audience is about once every seven minutes. So, the most efficient pace for performance is to finish the performance after seven minutes and pass the hat. In my festivals, however, we are presenting full-fledged performances that are planned to run for 20 to 30 minutes. That doesn’t make it a very good environment for getting a good take bypassing the hat, but knowing audience will give good donations for artists that have shown them a high-level performance.

Today, performers will earn a good amount if they perform seriously and well. And

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since they also get their participation fee, they must be making quite a good amount. Because one of the most active artists I know does about 950 performances a year.

Is information about this system employed in Tokyo being communicated internationally?

Tokyo has put out a DVD introducing the Heaven Artist performers. Not all of them are included, but it introduces about 170 groups and individuals. I believe that the Life Culture Dept. in charge of the program is working seriously to promote street performance, but they aren’t really aware of what an amazing thing the Heaven Artist program is in the international context. I have taken people from the French Embassy to the Tokyo Government offices but the conversation never came around to the Heaven program. There is no other city in the work that is doing a program like this, so I think they should advertise it more.

So, it would seem that the first step toward getting recognition for the program in Japan and also abroad will be to encourage a sense of pride in this program among the citizens of Tokyo, won’t it?

That is exactly what ‘s necessary. For our now annual “Heaven Artists Tokyo” festival in Ueno Park, we have the cutting edge of contemporary street performance coming in each time. We invite from seven to ten of the world’s leading contemporary artists and we have them competing in skills with the Japanese artists. The festival is held on the fourth Saturday in October each year. This year we have about 150 groups and individuals on the program. We make it a rule not to turn away artists who want to perform in Heaven Artist and arrange so they all can participate. In this sense it is unique among the festivals of the world.

Tomorrow I leave for the town of Nanterre in France taking nine Japanese artists with me. We have a pamphlet in English [about the Heaven Artist program and festival] to distribute there and we will also be talking about it in a seminar. Up until now I have talked about Heaven wherever I go, in S. Korea, China, Singapore, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and the UK. Performers all over the world are envious of the Heaven Artist program we have in Tokyo.

That is something that I would like the people of Tokyo and the people of Japan to be more aware of.