

PERFORMING ARTISTS' VOICES REMAIN UNHEARD: THEATER PRODUCTIONS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN JAPAN

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This article elucidates the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on performing art productions and the insufficiency of financial assistance programs from the government during the first months of the pandemic 2020 in Japan. By taking an opera production and kabuki productions as examples, the reactions of the management of Biwako Hall and the commercial theater production company Shōchiku to the pandemic crisis are described; how they implemented innovative and new production measures and incorporated digital tools to compensate for financial losses, as well as to retain their old audience and attract new audience. It becomes clear how insignificant the Japanese government perceives the performing arts and how little public financial support they receive. Furthermore, the indispensable role that corporate support and commercial production companies play in theater productions in Japan is illuminated.

Keywords: Japanese theater production, opera, kabuki, COVID-19 pandemic, Japanese culture policy

1. Introduction

In October 2019, the kabuki actor Ichikawa Ebizō (市川海老蔵) IX performed in the play *Oedipus* at Theater Cocoon in Shibuya, Tokyo. In the play, the city of Thebes is afflicted by a mysterious plague. To counter this plague, the city is protected by a thick shelter to reduce the impact of the contaminated air. Everyone who steps out of town wears heavy protective clothing and masks. Rather than addressing the people directly, the politicians in the play smile at the camera and address them remotely on a large television screen. At the time, nobody could have imagined

that protective masks and remote communication would be part of daily life in Japan from February 2020.

The Japanese theater landscape is characterized by extensive diversity. This landscape includes 8th century theater genres as well as the latest offerings of the avant-garde companies, along with all the genres in-between. Musical theater is staged in all its variations, from classic operas to experimental sessions, in addition to traditional dance forms to cutting edge performances. All these genres are equally affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and its countermeasures.

This article deals with the impact of these measures on the performing arts in Japan after theater closures in February 2020. The impact of the COVID-19 restrictions and the financial assistance programs by the government are elucidated by means of two performing arts genres: an opera production, representative of a Western theater genre and of production at a publicly run venue, and a kabuki production, representative of a traditional theater genre that is commercially produced by a private production company. These cases also represent the current process of production of theater and musical theater in Japan.

To provide the background against which performing arts are produced in Japan, the history and aims of Japanese cultural policy and the governmental as well as private organizations that provide financial support for art and culture are described. This is followed by a description of the financial assistance program for cultural infrastructure and activities initiated by the government to assist the actors and artists of the arts and entertainment industries. The next part deals with the reactions of the management teams of both example productions to the COVID-19 crisis that highlight the inadequate support provided by the public administration to Japanese theater as well as the importance of private companies in the performing arts in Japan. These examples demonstrate that while there has been a vociferous demand to grant recognition to the importance of the performing arts in society and to provide the performing arts industry with financial assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic, these demands have remained unheard.

2. Japan's cultural policy

The procedure of institutionalizing cultural policy and consequently ensuring governmental support for the arts is based on the nature of cultural patronage and the traditional role exercised by the state in the artistic field. The organization of cultural policy follows the political and administrative structures of a country. Therefore, the political culture determines the cultural policy of a country, whereby, according to the political scientist Klaus von Beyme (1998, 412), the policy's deficiencies are primarily due to the respective civil society traditions and its attitude toward art and culture. This is applicable to Japan.

Historically, the Japanese government has strictly demarcated education and culture. The former falls within the jurisdiction of the government, while the latter is primarily envisaged as the responsibility of the private sector. Since the establishment of the modern nation-state in 1868, Japan's cultural policy first and foremost aimed to preserve important buildings and important objects of fine art and crafts. The first extensive inventory and the first registration of national treasures by the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of the Imperial Household took place in 1888. In 1897, the Law for the Preservation of Ancient Temples and Shrines was proclaimed. In this law, national treasures were defined as significant ancient artworks or seminal artifacts in the decorative arts or architecture with exemplary character. In 1929, the Law for the Preservation of National Treasures was proclaimed. This law remained in effect until 1949. Apart from the lifting of restrictions on the construction of theaters¹ or the renewal of control and censorship on performing hours and contents of plays,² the performing arts in Japan were not subject to any political measures until well after World War II.

In the new constitution, adopted in 1947, Japan declared itself as a cultural nation. A division dedicated to the arts and culture was established within the Social Education Department of the Ministry of Education. Apart from this, no other step was implemented by the government, and it prioritized reconstruction, the development of social infrastructure, and the promotion of industry over the promotion of arts and culture. The adoption of the Law for the Protection of Cultural Policies in 1950 determined the concept and definition of tangible and intangible cultural properties and their protection, that remained the main focus of the cultural administration until the founding of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) in 1968 as a result of the merger of the Cultural Bureau of the Ministry of Education and the Cultural Properties Protection Commission. The ACA is positioned as an extra-ministerial bureau of the Ministry of Education and has no separate minister (Neki et al. 1996, 27). The establishment of the ACA as a part of the Ministry of Education two years after the construction of the first National Theater exclusively dedicated to traditional performing arts elucidates the insignificance attached by the political agenda of the Japanese government to other types

¹ With the lifting of restrictions on the construction of theaters in 1868, the inheritance of theater licenses had also been abolished. The kabuki theaters, banned since 1841 from the city center, moved back to Tokyo's center from outside of the city, and small theaters at shrines and temples which previously had only temporary licenses, also entered the market. New theaters were founded, intensifying competition in this highly volatile business (Kurata 1999, 111).

² The Regulation for the Control of Theaters passed in 1883, placing theater performances under the control of the police headquarters (Ōzasa 1990, 32), a regulation that lasted until the end of World War II.

of performing arts, especially modern drama (新劇 *shingeki*). This shows that the Japanese government did not aim at comprehensive and balanced public support for all genres of the performing arts in the conception of the first National Theater and that the preservation and promotion of traditional performing arts, such as kabuki, puppet theater (文楽 *bunraku*), and folk performing arts (民俗芸能 *minzoku geinō*), such as puppet theater from Tokushima (淡路人形芝居 *Awaji ningyō shibai*) or shrine dances from the Izumo Shrine in Shimane Prefecture (出雲神楽 *Izumo no kagura*), were considered of paramount importance.³ As the cultural policy scholar Kawashima Nobuko points out: "The area of cultural policy has been little developed at [the] central level in any case, and support for the arts and culture is not mandatory for local authorities" (Kawashima 2012, 301).

Until the 1980s, the government's main concern revolved around economic matters, and the promotion of culture remained secondary (Neki 2007, 47). Voices demanding reliable governmental support for the performing arts remained unheard. The "Era of Culture" (文化の時代 *bunka no jidai*) advocated by the then Prime Minister Ōhira Masayoshi (大平正芳) resulted only in the construction of countless public cultural institutions during the 1980s and 1990s. However, these multipurpose cultural halls (文化会館 *bunka kaikan* or 文化ホール *bunka hōru*) were constructed by local public administrations against the backdrop of the bubble economy. They were not initiated by or in accordance with the cultural agents, let alone on the initiative of performing artists (Neki 2007, 99). Rather, they were purely economically oriented projects, implemented to stimulate the local economy.

The 1990s heralded the beginning of a more active financing of arts and culture by the government. However, the ACA promoted preservation and access to rather than innovation of art and culture because its funding programs prioritized support for established and successful cultural organizations and associations of artists. Thus, by funding such associations, the administration could avoid critically assessing the need of financing individual projects (Havens 1987, 342).

With the establishment of the Japan Arts Fund (芸術文化資金 *Geijutsu Bunka Shikin*) in 1990, there was a sharp increase in the promotion of the performing arts. The organization's endowment capital comprised 50 billion yen of government funds and 10 billion yen provided by private companies (Kobayashi 2004, 13). With the establishment of this organization, the government and private industries jointly financed cultural activities for the first time. This joint effort disintegrated the dual structure that had prevailed in Japan in which education

³ In 1946, the politicians renewed their interest in the idea of a national theater; however, it was only pursued at the end of the 1950s after the country had recovered economically. For the history and the implementation of the Japanese National Theaters, see Bergmann (2018).

was the responsibility of the state, and culture, especially theater, was considered the responsibility of private entities. The establishment of the Japan Arts Fund was paralleled with the amendment of the National Theater Law of 1966 adding to its duties the assistance to cultural and artistic activities. The National Theater was redesignated as a special public corporation under the name of the Japan Arts Council (日本文化振興会 *Nihon Bunka Shinkōkai*). This model also led to the conceptualization of the New National Theater for opera, musical, ballet, and modern drama that opened in 1997 (Neki et al. 1996, 27–28). In 2003, the Japan Arts Council was redesignated as an independent administrative institution in charge of the National Theater, National Noh Theater, National Bunraku Theater, and the New National Theater and oversaw the opening of the National Theater Okinawa in 2004 (Japan Arts Council 2020). Its budget comprises of the Japan Arts Fund budget, the National Theater Budget, and the New National Theater Budget. The Japan Arts Fund supports general artistic and cultural activities unrelated to the national theaters. Since its establishment, the support and promotion of culture has been realized through a partnership of cultural creative groups, the state and regional administrations, and private industry. Nevertheless, the cultural policy of the public sector still lacks efficient support for contemporary artistic and cultural creative activities. Japan's current cultural policy can be characterized as "a patchwork of projects conventionally supported and sporadic programs undertaken without strategic frameworks and visions to embrace these" (Kawashima 2012, 302).

In the 1990s, the private industry's share of cultural funding increased. In 1990, the Association for Corporate Support of the Arts (企業メセナ協議会 *Kigyō Mesena Kyōgikai*) was founded. In addition to its main task of enabling mutually fertile partnerships between art and business, the association provides its members with information and statistics on art and commerce; organizes conferences, symposia, and exhibitions; conducts research, and publishes and awards prizes for outstanding sponsorship projects (Neki et al. 1996, 169). This specific model for cultural support financed by private initiatives and companies plays a significant role in supporting the performing arts in Japan.

Only three of the approximately 1,800 public theaters and cultural halls that are in Japan today have a resident company.⁴ As it became increasingly difficult for local authorities to manage and operate the numerous facilities directly due to the administrative staff's lack of expertise, a designated management system (指定管理制度 *shitei kanri seido*) was introduced under the government of Prime

⁴ The first resident company was established in 1990 at Art Tower Mito in the city of Mito and was named Acting Company Mito, followed by the establishment of Piccolo Company of Hyōgo Performing Arts Center in Nishinomiya in 1994, and the establishment of Company of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center in Shizuoka in 1997.

Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō (小泉純一郎) in 2003. This management system allows local authorities to outsource the management of their facilities to private organizations. This system was introduced to allow a wider range of management, including designated managers and non-profit organizations, that were not allowed to get involved in productions at public cultural facilities under the old administrative system. Since the introduction of the designated management system, the preconditions for operation have also been reduced, as the designated managing organizations are able to treat the entrance fees as their own income (Nishimatsu 2014, 3–4). The designated managing system assumes responsibility for the efficient provision of services, while the public sector ensures that public welfare stipulations are observed. This partnership with the private sector means a relief for the strained public budgets in the public sector, since the private entrepreneurs provide all or part of the financing themselves, therefore taking full responsibility to ensure that the project is profitable. Thus, this business model represents partial privatization of the performing arts in public venues. In the first place, the introduction of this public-private partnership aimed at saving personal costs and outsourcing personnel in cultural facilities (Kobayashi 2013, 12). This clearly shows that these cultural policy measures focus on economic aspects of productions and neglect performing artists' needs. The concept of public theaters in the sense of subsidized theaters and their productions by the public sector does not exist and has never been intended by the ACA.

Japan's cultural policy could be characterized as patronage of arms-length governmental support (Hillman-Chartrand and McCaughey 1989, 54–55). Only 1% of the annual fiscal budget is allocated for culture, of which more than 73% is spent on cultural heritage preservation measures, as shown in the pie chart representing the budget of the ACA in 2018 in Figure 1 below. This shows that only about a quarter of this budget is available to support cultural activities produced outside of national institutions. In this context, it is important to note that while Japanese people do not disregard the importance of arts and culture, and are interested in them, the state has never given a high priority to these activities, a stance unmistakably reflected in the cultural fiscal budget. Engagement in arts and culture, either in creation or consumption, is considered to be the personal hobbies of those involved and to be of little significance to society at large (Kawashima 2020, sec. 2, para. 1).

In his *The Arts as the Basis of a Nation* (芸術立国論 *Geijutsu Rikkoku Ron*), a book published in 2001, Hirata Oriza (平田オリザ), playwright and director, advocated the view that a modern, economically well-off country like Japan needs to subsidize performing artists for the sake of a pluralistic society, and that performing arts should be officially supported in local communities where the local culture is mutating to the preservation of cultural properties alone to attract

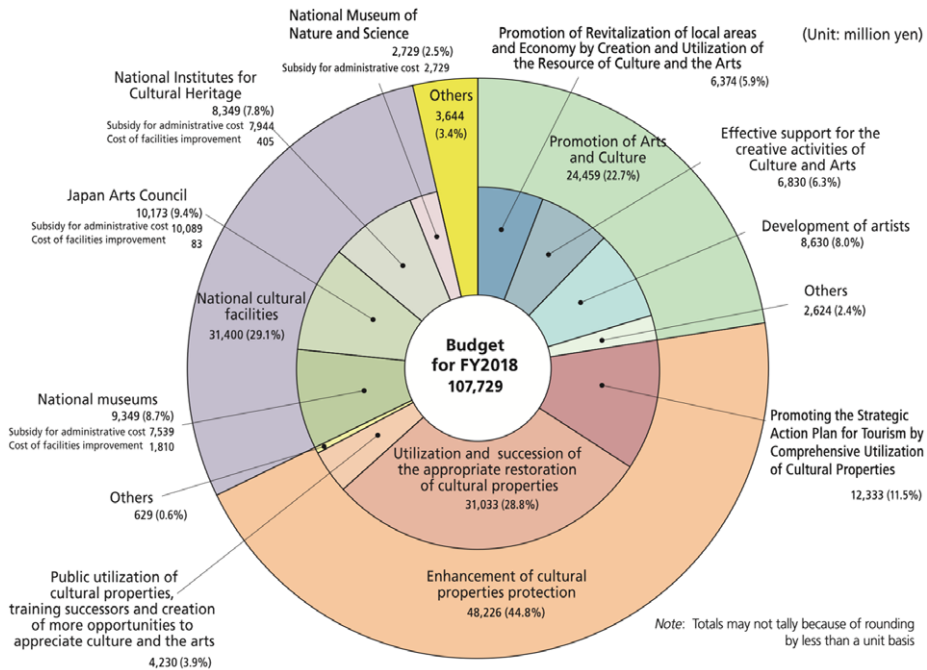


Figure 1: Budget for the ACA for the fiscal year (FY) 2018 by areas

(Source: Commissioner's Secretariat Agency for Cultural Affairs 2018, 11)

tourists, ultimately failing to be of use to the community (Hirata 2001, 39–43). Policy deficiencies are primarily due to respective civil society traditions and their attitudes toward art and culture. Civil society is considered a participatory model of society, that serves as an indicator of the degree of democratization of a society. An active, powerful civil society has the potential to influence national politics and political processes and is thus considered a normative part of a democracy. In this context, Japan's civil society can be regarded as a late-comer,⁵ although citizens' initiatives and non-governmental organizations have demonstrated a new trend toward citizens' participation since the 1990s, a trend made possible due to improved legal frameworks. However, political influence tends to be marginal because of the unequal power relations between business associations and citizens. Japan remains an interventionist state that shapes civil

⁵ Sprotte (2012) and Berry (1998) state the existence of civic engagement in Japan as early as the Tokugawa period (1603–1868) and the first half of the 20th century, respectively. In their studies, they disregard the democratizing potential of civil society as a normative order and thus recognize a "prototypical variation" (Sprotte 2012, 9) of civic engagement in subsectors of pre-1945 Japanese society.

society in close contact with business organizations (Weiß and Goebel 2002, 127; Foljanty-Jost and Haufe 2006, 253). This might be one reason why there are no strong voices in the public to demand more public support for arts and culture and thus also the performing arts.

3. Support programs by the Japanese government for the arts and culture during the COVID-19 pandemic

Against this historical and cultural policy background, it is not surprising that the Japanese culture sector heavily depends on corporate engagement, a constellation that is unique to Japan (Kawashima 2012, 306). The three biggest production companies in Japan, Tōhō Co. Ltd.,⁶ Shōchiku Co. Ltd, and the Shiki Theater Company,⁷ along with numerous other privately run smaller theaters and companies, manage productions and activities of a wide-ranging scale and diverse genres. To benefit from the Japan Arts Fund support, budget theaters and performing arts troupes have to apply for subsidies for every production. The cultural policy's focus on cost-reducing structures of productions in publicly run theaters and its disregard for the privately run theater scene is also reflected in the measures employed by the government in the COVID-19 crisis. The following section shows that support measures for artists and theaters in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic were framed in economic support measures and grants or in limited subsidies to promote Japanese arts online.

The following data outlines the share of the performing arts and music market in the Japanese gross domestic product (GDP). In 2016, for example, the performing arts and music market accounted for 508.9 billion yen, or 5.1% of the total contribution of cultural and creative industries to the GDP⁸ that is approximately 0.095% of the Japanese GDP (ACA 2018, 9). Every autumn, PIA Research Institute publishes an annual report of the music and stage entertainment market in Japan. It has stated a steady yearly increase in this commercially produced market since the start of its survey in 2000. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the stage and music entertainment market size was 629.5 billion yen: 205.8 billion

⁶ The Tōhō Co. Ltd. was founded in 1932. It consists of a film, theater, and corporate real estate department. It manages two theaters directly. Theaters like the Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in Tokyo and the Takarazuka Theater in Takarazuka belong to the company conglomerate (Tōhō Co. Ltd. n.d.).

⁷ Shiki Theater Company was founded in 1954 and operates nine theaters exclusively all over Japan. It employs over 1,300 people including actors and technical and management staff. It stages over 3,500 performances a year (Shiki Theater Company n.d.).

⁸ This cultural GDP includes museums, the performing arts and music, art and photography, and the revenue from copyrights, media, design, and creative services.

yen for the music market and 423.7 billion yen for the stage entertainment market. Compared to 2018, this showed an increase of 7.4% (PIA Research Institute 2021). It should be noted that this commercial entertainment business was stable until COVID-19 countermeasures were implemented. Due to the pandemic, from January 2020 to December 2020, the Institute observed an 80% decrease in the size of the stage and music entertainment market in comparison to that in 2019, down to 110.6 billion yen (PIA Research Institute 2021).

On February 26, 2020, Prime Minister Abe Shinzō (安倍晋三, in office 2006–2007 and 2012–2020) requested all theaters refrain from running performances on the basis of self-restriction (自粛 *jishuku*). This measure was intended to last for two weeks. However, on April 7, a state of emergency was proclaimed in Tokyo and six other prefectures, and on April 16, the restrictions were implemented in the whole country. This state of emergency was not lifted until the end of May 2020. Meanwhile, big theater events, such as the name-taking ceremony⁹ of the kabuki actor Ichikawa Ebizō IX adopting the name of Ichikawa Danjūrō (市川團十郎) XIII, had to be cancelled. Likewise, all performing arts events planned for the Olympic and Paralympic Games had to be called off with the cancellation of the games due to the pandemic. Since June 1, 2020, holding live performances was possible again; however, infection clusters of COVID-19 occurred in a small theater in Tokyo¹⁰ and the Tokyo Takarazuka Company explained that the performing arts not only had to cope with the big financial losses during the three-month-long closures of theaters, but they also needed to find new ways of how to deal with threats of the pandemic in order to survive (Hagiwara 2020, 35–36).

In April and June 2020, two supplementary budgets, comprising 108 trillion yen, were launched as emergency economic measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, along with government spending of 25 trillion yen, 4.6% of the GDP. In the first supplementary budget, 6.1 billion yen were earmarked for the ACA, mainly in support of cultural institutions, but not for supporting freelance artists. This first supplementary budget for the ACA included 2.1 billion yen for measures to prepare for the reopening of cultural facilities. Museums, theaters, and music halls were entitled to apply for a support of up to 4 million yen to cover expenses such as the installation of infrared cameras, air conditioning equipment, air purifiers, and alcohol disinfectants in order to implement anti-virus hygiene regulations. A budget of 1.4 billion yen was provided for the implementation of digital content

⁹ Name-taking ceremonies in kabuki (襲名 *shūmei*) are among the most important events, not only during an actor's career, who climbs to a new career level with the new name, but also generating enormous revenues for the production company through the months of name-taking performances and events.

¹⁰ In early July 2020, a cluster of COVID-19 infections was traced to a performance at Theater Moliere in Shinjuku, Tokyo and in August 2020, at Takarazuka Grand Theater in Takarazuka.

infrastructures to enable the streaming of high-resolution theatrical art contents and museum exhibitions. Additionally, 1.3 billion yen were allocated to so-called "Art Caravan" (アートキャラバン *Āto kyaraban*) programs to revive the arts by joining the forces of fine art organizations, artists, and local public organizations to organize art events throughout Japan. Another 3 billion yen was destined to promote opportunities for children's arts and culture experiences at schools and other local facilities. The government also adopted a fiscal measure in which the tickets of cancelled cultural, arts, and sports events due to the anti-COVID-19 measures were recognized as tax deductible donations by the individual customer in the case when no refund was claimed (ACA 2020–2021).

The second supplementary budget comprised 56 billion yen for sports and culture, in which the emphasis was laid on the support for the acquisition of software. Through this program, artists could increase their efforts by boosting their Internet presence. Furthermore, self-employed people and freelancers were entitled to apply for a subsidy of up to 200,000 yen. Actors and musicians benefited from this support program, as they mainly work as self-employed freelancers. Overall, substantial means of subsistence for individual artists were not provided, and the option for applying for financial help in case of cancelled programs and performances only became available in April 2020 (ACA 2020–2022).

As a support measure, the ACA launched a program called "J-LODlive" in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry, that provides subsidies to promote the creation of global demand for Japanese entertainment content. It was financed by the first supplementary budget of the fiscal year 2020. This program entitled organizers who had postponed or cancelled their performances due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus to apply for subsidies for live performances and their recordings for international distribution. The recording production and distribution costs of the videos were also subject to these subsidies. All performing arts were entitled to apply for these subsidies for one production. The subsidies themselves encompass up to 50 million yen per application (J-LODlive 2020).¹¹

4. Theater productions and the COVID-19 pandemic crisis

The focus of the first two support programs for art and culture by the Japanese government in the COVID-19 pandemic were to benefit the venues, that is, the theaters and concert halls, and support the implementation of hygiene measures but neglected assistance for freelance artists, such as actors and performers. This

¹¹ On February 16, 2021, only 79% of the money earmarked for this program had been spent (J-LODlive 2020), a fact that might hint at bureaucratic hurdles or that the program was not sufficiently tailored to the need of the cultural industry.

part deals with the reactions of the management teams of two example productions to the COVID-19 crisis that highlight the inadequate support provided by the public administration to Japanese theater on the one side and in consequence the importance of private companies to the performing arts in Japan on the other.

4.1 The opera production at Biwako Hall in March 2020

The Japanese government's call to refrain from performing came only a few days before the premiere of Richard Wagner's opera *Twilight of the Gods* at Biwako Hall in Ōtsu city. This was the last part of the cycle of four epic music dramas, *The Ring of the Nibelung*, that had been performed at this theater since 2017.

Before looking closer at this "miracle of operatic proportions," as described by the critic Robert Markow (2020), some remarks on the production at this venue can shed light on Japan's opera production culture at large. An opera production in Japan can be compared to a puzzle that consists of several parts or agents. These agents include: the privately run opera companies¹² that provide the singers, orchestras that provide the musicians, and theaters or halls that provide the venues. Directors, conductors, and soloists for the star parts in a production are often hired independently. While this may seem operationally complex, this system is well established; the opera productions at the New National Theater are also run this way. The Association of Opera Companies in Japan has proven this to be an efficient means to produce opera performances (Kobata 2018, 63) as none of the opera theaters in Japan maintain residing opera singers or an orchestra; thus, this established complex production system is judged in a positive light by the artists of the association.

Biwako Hall, or formally, Biwako Hall Center for the Performing Arts, Shiga, is one of the most beautiful and technologically advanced opera venues in Japan. It is located in Ōtsu, a city with 350,000 inhabitants next to Lake Biwa in Western Japan. It includes the Main Theater, with 1,845 seats for the performance of operas, ballet, and classical concerts, a Middle Theater seating 800 for drama, ballet, or concerts, and the Ensemble Hall for chamber music with a seating capacity of 323 (Biwako Hall n.d.). As seen in Figure 2, the budget of Biwako Hall allocates 170 million yen for production projects, money that is sufficient to cover the costs

¹² One of the biggest of these opera companies in Japan is the Nikikai (二期会) Opera Foundation founded in 1952. Its members consist of 2,500 singers who belong to five sister organizations: the Kansai Nikikai founded in 1964, the Hokkaidō Nikikai founded in 1964, the Nagoya Nikikai founded in 1970, and the Chūgoku Nikikai and Shikoku Nikikai founded in 1973. In 2005, the foundation was renamed as Tokyo Nikikai Opera Foundation (Tokyo Nikikai Opera Foundation 2007). The foundation cooperates closely with the New National Theater in Tokyo and is a part of most important opera productions in Japan.

Number of performances in 2015:	282
Visitors (per annum):	115,000
Project budget:	ca. ¥ 1.7 billion
Major income:	
Usage fees (including parking fees):	¥ 220 million
Operating revenue (admission fees + performance fees):	¥ 170 million
Prefectural grants (designated management fees):	¥ 906 million
Government subsidies:	¥ 170 million
Private grants, etc.:	¥ 100 million
Major expenditures:	
Remuneration and salaries:	¥ 300 million
Performance fees, etc.:	¥ 350 million
Commission fees:	¥ 540 million
Self-earnings ratio: Usage fees + Business revenue / Total expenses = 23	

Figure 2: Biwako Hall Stage Arts Fund 2015

(Source: Courtesy of Fujino Kazuo, Member of the Executive Board of Biwako Hall)

of one new opera production, for example as the *Twilight of the Gods* production presented below. It is important to note that 906 million yen per annum are provided by the prefectural government as fees for designated management costs that are not fixed to specific projects but can be allocated to productions by the management of Biwako Hall.

Numajiri Ryūsuke (沼尻竜典), the artistic director of Biwako Hall, embarked on performing the Ring Cycle together with veteran German director Michael Hampe, stage designer Henning van Gierke, and Scottish visual artist Jamie Goodenough, in 2017. This team made extensive use of state-of-the-art stage technology in the first three performances and the last performance *Twilight of the Gods* was scheduled for March 7 and March 8, 2020 (Markow 2020). The closing of all theaters and the cancelation of the performance would have meant that the Ring opera cycle at Biwako Hall would forever remain unfinished as rescheduling was impossible due to the complex production structure that makes it difficult to guarantee the participation of its members on a different date. This opera production included the Kyoto Symphony Orchestra conducted by Numajiri, two casts consisting of Japanese singers, two German singers, and one American singer, all supported by the Biwako Hall Choir and the New National Theater Chorus. Even though the Shiga prefectural government preferred to cancel the performance, the director of Biwako Hall, Yamanaka Takashi (山中隆) opted for a solution that would value the artistic work and finish it adequately while keeping the risk of infection for the performing artists as low as possible. Yamanaka decided that both performances



Figure 3: Performance of the opera *Twilight of the Gods* without an audience, Biwako Hall Main Theater, March 7, 2020

(Source: © Biwako Hall)

were to be staged without an audience and be livestreamed on YouTube free of charge on March 7 and March 8, 2020. With the consent and strong support of the artists and staff, the live performances took place without an audience and were streamed online free of charge (see Figure 3). At the same time, the video recording of the performances served as material for its commercial release on DVD. Approximately 10,000 people watched each online performance completely and roughly 370,000 people either watched the whole or part of the performance (Tsutsui 2020, 23). Hence, this virtual performance reached a much bigger audience than it would have had as a live performance. Furthermore, this production was unique in its suddenness and paved the way for further solutions for the world of musical theater to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. One reason for pushing through the performance might have been the subsidies of roughly 50 million yen by the government that would only be paid in case of an accomplished performance (Fujino 2020a). Aside from the staging of an opera production, despite strict restrictions due to the pandemic, this production will be remembered as the first worldwide livestreaming of a Japanese opera production. This became possible only because Yamanaka holds position of the managing director as well as head

of the board of directors and had the command of the money for the designated management fund. Therefore, he was able to finance the extra cost of streaming and video production out of this fund without any delay. This was important as at the beginning of March 2020, governmental emergency help to the performing arts was not yet sanctioned.

The exceptional reaction to the livestreaming of the performing and coping with the imminent cancellation of the production by all artists and staff involved was honored with the 68th Kikuchi Kan Award (菊池寛賞 *Kikuchi Kan Shō*)¹³ in 2020 for an innovative measure in the field of performing arts during the COVID-19 crisis. In an interview, Yamanaka Takashi expressed his hope that this example might be one way of coping with the crisis and at the same time a means to reach broader audiences (TR Times 2020). The livestreaming of the performance not only prevented the spread of the virus, but also reached a wider audience online that also appealed to people that had never seen an opera before (Akita 2020, 29). While streaming of live performances is a common phenomenon currently, in March 2020, this felt like a miracle in the world of Japanese opera. Without doubt, the digitalization of stage performances was a viable solution.

4.2 Kabuki production under the COVID-19 pandemic conditions

The following example deals with the impact of the closing of the theaters from the end of February until the end of May 2020 in a genre that heavily depends on a lively interaction with its audience: kabuki.

In Japan, the art form of kabuki includes over 400 years of performance, preservation, and transmission of sophisticated speaking, singing, dance, and acting techniques that are unparalleled in their stylization and yet individually characterized by the actors. It was designated as cultural world heritage in 2005. The Kabukiza Theater, located in Tokyo's busy Ginza shopping area, is the main theater for exhibiting kabuki performances in Japan today. Kabuki performances are exclusively produced by the private production company Shōchiku Co. Ltd., founded in 1902. With the gradual takeover of all important theaters and, thus, of all kabuki actors by the founders of the company, the twin brothers Ōtani Takejirō (大谷竹次郎, 1877–1969) and Shirai Matsujirō (白井松次郎, 1877–1951), the multicompany enterprise has dominated kabuki productions since the 1930s.¹⁴ The

¹³ The prize is presented annually by the monthly literary magazine *Bungei Shunjū* (文藝春秋, *Literature and Arts Spring and Autumn*) and the Society for the Promotion of Japanese Literature (日本文学振興会 *Nihon Bungaku Shinkōkai*). Originally initiated in 1938 by the dramatist Kikuchi Kan (菊池寛, 1888–1948) to reward authors for their lifework, it was revived in 1952 and the category of recipients was enlarged to honor achievements in cinema, broadcasting, performing arts, and other fields in contemporary literary culture.

¹⁴ As the number of kabuki productions decreased during the 1920s to half the number of the

achievements of the kabuki stars and the skillful, rigorous management of this company preserved kabuki without public subsidies until the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, at the National Theater in Tokyo, which hosted ten kabuki productions per year before the pandemic, only Shōchiku kabuki actors perform on stage. The state-funded training of kabuki actors at the National Theater plays an important role in the training of actors who primarily perform supporting roles, leading to being deployed by Shōchiku after finishing the training program (Matsui 1996, 72). Nevertheless, the future of this art form depends on the success of the programs at the Kabukiza Theater and the other theaters run by Shōchiku. The production company's theaters are limited corporations run under direct management of Shōchiku Co. Ltd. These are the Kabukiza Theater, the Shinbashi Enbujō Theater in Tokyo, the Ōsaka Shōchikuza Theater in Osaka, and the Minamiza Theater in Kyoto (Shōchiku Co. Ltd. 2019).

Until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a new program was offered at the Shōchiku theaters every month. As a rule, a program was played for 25 days, with a morning matinee and a late afternoon program, lasting three to four hours each. When the voluntary shutdown of all theaters was called out by the government on February 26, 296 kabuki actors, numerous musicians, stage workers, technicians, stage assistants, and other staff who are either self-employed or work for subcompanies were without a job. Evenly affected by this voluntary shut down were all the restaurants, souvenir shops, and vending stalls in the theaters, which play a part in the successful running of a theater due to the services they provide during a performance.¹⁵

Shōchiku decided to record the March and April programs at the Kabukiza and to stream solely the April program online for free for a limited period in April. This was a complete novelty in the history of kabuki. The closing of the theaters meant financial losses for the production company. However, even without any income from ticket sales in March and April 2020, Shōchiku paid its actors the same fees as during regular productions. There were no kabuki productions during May

productions in the 1910s, the phenomenon of actors performing exclusively for Shōchiku was closely related to the uncertain living conditions of the actors at that period, as these actors lived on short-term contracts with little guarantee of a regular income. There existed a fierce rivalry among the actors as they competed for the usually only five to six productions at a kabuki production theater per year. The rationalization of kabuki productions and the centralized management of numerous theaters by Shōchiku by distributing actors out of a pool of actors led to the success of the company, and in the end, to its first monopoly of kabuki productions in the 1930s (Bergmann 2018, 164–176).

¹⁵ The services that had been established as a kind of business cooperation between the theater and the service providing companies or stalls since the establishment of the first permanent theater houses in the seventeenth century and are an integrated part of a kabuki theaters run by Shōchiku.



Figure 4: Disinfection at the Kabukiza Theater, Tokyo, August 2020

(Source: © SHOCHIKU)

and July 2020. During this period, the star actors were paid no honorarium, the second-ranking actors (名題 *nadai*) were paid 50% of their honorarium, and the other actors (名題下 *nadaishita*) 70%.¹⁶

As mentioned above, on May 25, 2020, the state of emergency was lifted in Tokyo prefecture, allowing kabuki productions to resume. However, Shōchiku did not schedule performances at the Kabukiza Theater until August 1, 2020, in order to find the best solution to restart its kabuki productions. It sought advice from experts to establish a hygiene concept tailored to the theater. The standard program of two performances per day before the pandemic was discontin-

¹⁶ Two groups of actors have been distinguished since the Edo period. The *nadai*, whose names were recorded on the theater bills and posters (番付 *banzuke*) during the Edo period, and the much larger group of the lower ranks, *nadaishita*. Only *nadai* actors played leading roles, and were entitled to a higher salary, their own dressing rooms, and servants. They were also allowed to install curtains or lanterns in the theater with their names or crests (Gunji 1985, 37). In 1923, the first Actors' Association was founded. It introduced a uniform examination for the award of the rank *nadai*, which is still held once a year. As a prerequisite for the exam, an actor must have been at least a disciple of a *nadai* actor for ten years. Furthermore, he must be nominated for the examination by his master and teacher as well as by the chairman actor of the Japan Actors' Association (日本俳優協会 *Nihon Haiyū Kyōkai*), the successor organization of the first Actors' Association since 1957 (*Nihon Haiyū Kyōkai* n.d.).

ued and replaced by four independent programs, each consisting of one play presented without an interval. Actors, musicians as well as all staff members changed for each of the three programs to prevent possible infections on stage and in the dressing rooms. Singers, musicians, reciters, and stage assistants wore masks on stage. Only 50% of the 1,808 seats were offered for one performance. The audience members were seated with one empty seat between each person to the right, left, front, and rear, and were asked to wear a mask and refrain from talking to each other. Between each of the programs, the venue was disinfected (see Figure 4). Additionally, cheering shouts from the back seats of the theater (掛け声 *kakegoe*), a traditional sign of appreciation for an actor's performance in a special moment of the play, were prohibited. All visitors were prohibited from giving gifts or letters or paying visits to the cast members in the dressing rooms, which, under normal circumstances, was a highly valued and long-established custom in the kabuki world in order to help the actors maintain contact with sponsors and fans. Restaurants and vending stalls remained closed, and eating was prohibited throughout the venue (Yoshikawa 2020; Kabukibito 2021). All these restrictions meant a performance environment almost surreal for the lively kabuki performances generally characterized by the actors' close ties to the audience members, and the audience members' active response to the acting on stage.

Regarding the costs of the August program of kabuki performances, Asahara Tsuneo (浅原恒雄), the general secretary of the Japan Actors' Association, estimated the fees for actors and musicians to be approximately 40 million yen, the costs for scenery, props, costumes, and wigs, etc., at approximately 50 million yen. The cost for the theater venue was approximately 40 million yen and additional costs for operating expenses and other purposes were approximately 30 million yen. Altogether, this meant an estimated sum of 160 million yen in direct costs (Asahara T., personal communication, August 13, 2020). The admission fee ranged from 8,000 yen to 3,000 yen for each of the four daily programs. With only 50% of the seats sold, the production hardly made any profit. To deal with this problem, the Shōchiku management applied for and received 50 million yen out of the abovementioned "J-LODlive" support program. Even with the subsidy, the August production at the Kabukiza Theater generated a loss of 70 million yen.

For the August program at the Kabukiza Theater, the plays were selected considering the needs of as few actors as possible to lower the risk of infection. This meant that many actors were unable to perform and thus were not entitled to any remuneration, as kabuki actors work as self-employed workers. In August, all actors who performed on stage received 50%–80% of their monthly honorarium. Of those kabuki actors who had no opportunity to perform, the top star actors among the *nadai*-ranking actors were paid 50% of their monthly honorarium,

the other *nadai*-rank actors were paid 70% of their monthly honorarium, and the remaining actors, that is, all *nadaishita*-rank actors, received 80% of their monthly honorarium (Asahara T., personal communication, October 27, 2020).

This compensation for actors with no engagement (見舞金 *mimaikin*) must also be seen against the background that the company has been engaged in the preservation of kabuki since its foundation at the turn of the 20th century. Despite its strict profit-orientated commercial management, it maintains a patron-like relationship with its actors, who are at the same time dependent on the company to make ends meet. This kind of special relationship, based on mutual dependence and trust, as Abiko Tadashi (我孫子正), the president of Kabukiza Co. Ltd., characterized it (Abiko 2021), helped to preserve kabuki until the pandemic crisis. In order to be able to cope with the crisis, in spring 2020 the company set up a two-year emergency budget, financed by bank credit and assets from other companies belonging to Shōchiku Co. Ltd., to cover the huge losses due to the pandemic and to enable the company to preserve kabuki (Abiko 2021). The outcome of these measures is not easy to predict, especially as the company still restricts the number of audience members in all its kabuki theaters to minimize the risk of infection and the pandemic is still not over at the time of writing this article.

With the administrative support of the Japan Actors' Association, by October 2020 approximately 70% of the kabuki actors had applied and benefited from a one-time subsidy of one million yen, that the government had set up for small and middle-sized enterprises as well as for self-employed actors and freelancers. This program was criticized for being not enough to meet the financial needs of most freelance artists and for being excessively bureaucratic; thus, 45 billion yen allocated to this program had not yet been retrieved as of October 2020 (Fujino 2020b).

Besides the streaming of the April Kabukiza program, Shōchiku embarked on several new activities to connect to fans and to sell their kabuki-related products. Since August 2020, Shōchiku started offering kabuki videos on demand for a fee on its official site providing information about everything concerning the company's kabuki productions, *Kabukibito* (歌舞伎美人), literally translated the title means "Kabuki beauty" (Shōchiku n.d.). This service is also a historical novelty considering the company's restrictive policy regarding images and recordings of kabuki performances. However, kabuki depends especially on its fans. Since its foundation, fans not only help to fill the theaters, but also finance productions and the livelihoods of the actors. Therefore, contact with theater fans is very important for the actors.

The Japan Actors' Association adopted extraordinary measures to do so. In the past, actors granted insight into their personal stage and private life only to members of their personal fan clubs and sponsors; however, the actors now allow

the public an insight into their personal lives. The video platform *Kabukimashō* (歌舞伎ましょう), best translated as “Let us concern ourselves with kabuki,” went online on YouTube in March 2020 (Nihon Haiyū Kyōkai n.d.). In short video clips, often recorded by mobile phones by the actors themselves, the actors directly address their audience, calling for perseverance and asking for their support and patience until the kabuki theaters reopened. Furthermore, they presented their private hobbies, samples of their acting in private surroundings or introduce their family life. After the relaxation of the anti-COVID-19 regulations in May 2020, young actors recorded up to 20 minutes long clips about their hometowns and local kabuki-related topics they also shared on the *Kabukimashō* platform on YouTube that shows more than 46,000 subscribers (Nihon Haiyū Kyōkai n.d.). The threshold to encounter one’s beloved actor in private and off stage, even if only virtually, had never been so low and can be considered as a little revolution in the world of kabuki, which had so far been a very closed world to the non-kabuki-fans, due to the hierarchical structures among the actors, who traditionally kept personal close contact to their fans only in the frame of individual fan clubs, and Shōchiku supported this kind of star cult by restricting public access to the star actors. In this respect, in my opinion, the production of these *Kabukimashō* videos by the Japan Actors’ Association is a step to open the kabuki world to the general public.

5. In lieu of a conclusion

The first livestreaming of an opera, as in the example of the production of *Twilight of the Gods* at Biwako Hall, proved the importance of the incorporation of digital tools into common art practices to compensate financial losses and to retain old and attract new audiences. The same can be stated for the format of kabuki performances on demand on the web. The COVID-19 pandemic corroborated the inevitability of combining digital and analogue tools.

The above-mentioned opera production shed light on the complex manner of setting up opera productions in Japan, demonstrating that a risk-taking manager made a difference by pursuing unconventional means for saving the performance of the *Twilight of the Gods*. The dedication of the production company Shōchiku Co. Ltd. to keeping its kabuki productions running during the COVID-19 pandemic and its action to support its actors serve as an example of the important role private enterprises play in Japanese theater productions.

The focus of support programs for arts and culture by the Japanese government in the COVID-19 pandemic has been on the venues, that is, the theaters and concert halls. However, most performing artists do not belong to a company or an ensemble at a venue. They are organized in many different performing artists’ groups and organizations that have not formed a union and do not speak with

one voice. As mentioned above, actors and musicians are generally self-employed and often the border between amateurs and professionals is blurred, as artists often have to work part time beside their artistic engagements. The COVID-19 pandemic unveiled the fact that it is also the basis of Japanese cultural policy that arts and culture are considered a private luxury, but not essential to society. The government's support programs have not been tailored to artists' needs. Freelance artists are not entitled to file for unemployment benefits. The support program did not cover financial income losses due to the cancelling of performances nor had the amounts been enough to cover the living costs during the ongoing pandemic. This is also due to the lack of basic data on artists and their activities, such as cultural statistics, that would have allowed for the creation of an optimal support system. Since recent, precise statistics about the situation of performing artists in Japan do not exist, this article also lacks such a basis. Reliable and long-term support as had been required by the think tank NLI Research Institute in order to support actors and artists in the crisis (Yoshimoto 2020, 3) is not forthcoming as a paradigm shift in the long-term cultural policy towards more substantial public subsidies in the performing arts. Self-help and corporate initiatives continue to take the lead in supporting artists in Japan.

As mentioned above, the PIA Research Institute observed an 80% decrease in the live entertainment market size in comparison to 2019, from January 2020 to December 2020 (PIA Research Institute 2021), due to the pandemic crisis. The future will tell whether, despite the ignorance of the artists' voices and their needs by the government, the survival of theaters and theater troupes in Japan who are not part of a commercial production company like the kabuki actors or part of a public performing arts venue like the Biwako Hall is viable.

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