

Andrew Woolner, artistic director of Yokohama Theatre Group, interviewed July 20th.

What first interested you in theatre?

Well, I think I must have realized around grade four or five that I was never going to be an astronaut because I couldn't go in that spinning thing without puking. Well, the next best thing is that I can play an astronaut on TV, which I never did. I played an astronaut in the theatre. So, yeah, initially I was really into acting and being an actor, and I was really focused on that, although I did study directing and playwrighting at school, basically because I got kicked out of the acting program.

What happened?

I was at York University in Toronto for their BFA Theater program. The first year wasn't streamed and you got streamed into a program in the second year, so I was in the acting program in the second year and then they made some adjustments to the program and decided to get rid of half of the class, and I was part of that half. Apparently, it was a rather contentious decision, and because of that I got offered a place in the directing program there. I am not really interested in directing from an academic standpoint. I am interested in theater from an application standpoint. Not to say that I don't find some of the academic ideas interesting, but can they be applied is always the question. I don't think you can or should be a theatre maker with zero knowledge of the history of theatre. Partly because when you do something you should know that that thing is not new. You can put your take on something, but you are never going to make something new.

How was the directing program?

There was a strike at the end of my third year and I ended up presenting my final scene outside of the school. The teachers were very unwilling to come, it was not a teacher's strike – the teaching assistants and graduate students were on strike – and the main faculty didn't want to cross the picket line, so we found an alternate location. Actually, I rubbed all my directing teachers the wrong way.

I have a problem with authority, so I was like now I'm in school and now is my time for making mistakes. I took big risks and made big mistakes. I think they were frustrated with me because I just wouldn't do anything straight. I wouldn't just take the easy way. I was also in the playwrighting program as it was a concurrent stream, and I wanted my final project, to combine both of those elements. I have never really been super interested in directing, I always been interested in making theatre and if that means I am the one who has to stand outside and direct others, then so be it.

What is your medium now?

I refer to myself as a theatre maker and I kind of do what is necessary. I have done shows where I am in a dramaturgy role, or as a director. I do a lot of play development, exclusively new play development, and I help other people develop their plays as well. I am probably not a performer, I am more of an outside eye. For the last show, *She Wolf* (2017), I basically had an actor who was devising stuff and I was the one who figured out how it fit together and what story we were telling and what order the scenes were going to be in. If I was working with someone who was more experienced then maybe they would be doing a lot of that by themselves and I would coordinate with the production team to make sure they had what they needed in terms of costume, set and lights and stuff. I say theatre maker because it covers everything. I have designed lights on my own shows because lighting designers are so hard to come by in Tokyo. I also produce my work and do outreach to try to get us into festivals. I don't necessary do these things very well but there is no else to do them.

Who are your influences?

I have been very influenced by Robert Lepage, particularly *The Seven Streams of the River Ota*. It wasn't so much the piece that I liked but the idea behind the development process. Lepage credited the other performers for creating the show. Ever since that I have been trying to make collective pieces. I like his interesting stage effects. In the *Anderson Project*, one of his solo shows, there's one scene where he is dressed as a woman and he walks behind a tree maybe

30-40 centimeters wide and when he comes out of the other side he is a man dressed in completely different clothes. He played every character in that show and you are never waiting for him to change costumes, he's always instantly changing from one character to another. It is not like the technology is there for show, it supports the work and it is part of the work. The essentialism of the stage effects is what is interesting to me. I try to follow his principles. I don't turn on a light if that light doesn't need to be there to tell the story. I really like Brecht. I am not a big fan of reading Brecht and I don't like all his plays – *Galileo* was a bore – but it was his approach to theatre and the idea that audience does not need to be put to sleep. Theatre does not necessarily have to be an aesthetic to your life, it can be a stimulant. Brecht was more important than any other 20th century theatre maker because he was the one who gave us unhidden lights and stage effects. Stopped it being an illusion. He realized we cannot compete with film. We have to be something different, we can do different things.

What brought you to Japan?

My wife is Japanese. We met in Canada and initially I was hoping she would move to Canada but there were some family things going on and she thought she needed to be here. I came here thinking I'd be here for a couple of years and I have been here now for fifteen years.

Why theatre in Japan?

I can't not do theatre, no matter where I am. The first two years I had a long two and half hour commute to work and didn't have any time. I'd heard about TIP, but it was so big and my experience with companies was that I was going to have to do a lot of the grunt work before I got to any level that was interesting to me. Having run a theatre company for five years in Toronto I didn't want to go through that again. So, I did a job interview and the IT guy there was a member of YTG, so I contacted them – there were only 2 active members at that time – and they were gearing up for a show which I signed on to produce. However, they had trouble casting the show, one of the members left the group

and I was then offered the artistic directorship, which at the time was meaningless as there was no company. So, I immediately put together a compilation show called *This Is Shakespeare!* It was a remount of a show I did in Canada in 2002. In 2007 YTG was a club, but I wanted a professional theatre company. I thought we'd have an amateur and professional side and they can support each other in different ways. Professionals teach and train the amateurs and the amateurs help keep the enthusiasm for the group in the community going. After that show I did a second show *Ring Around the Moon* where I brought a director in. She ended up dropping out six weeks before production and I had to take over directing the show and replace one of the cast members, who dropped out at the last minute. I was playing an old woman, and I had to adapt the show by using a framing story to explain why there was a man with a beard playing an old woman and reading off the script because there was not enough time to learn it one week before we went up. After that experience I realized that perhaps the club and the group need not be together since none of the club members were coming to auditions or giving financial support to the group. Also, I had complaints about the show. Someone actually said it was too professional, basically meaning people weren't forgetting their lines or walking into the scenery. There was no support at all. So, I thought screw this, I am going to do my own thing.

How has YTG changed over time?

The company went through two or three major stages. The first stage was to try and operate as a club, then I tried to set up co-productions with TIP – we staged *Richard the Third* and *Tartuffe*. We were still doing mostly scripted work. But in 2010 I did my own show, *39*, about an astronaut and I took that on a three-festival tour in Canada. The best part of that was I got to see forty or fifty shows and it made me ask myself *What kind of theatre do I want to be doing? What kind of people do I want to work with?* It was at the point that I decided I wanted to do shows that were multilingual. I am never going to expand my audience if I'm relying on the foreign community to support this stuff. TIP have trouble breaking even and they have casts of fifteen. If I'm doing something with a cast

of three and two of them are from outside of the country, the star of the show has to be the company and people have to come because they know we create interesting theatre. They cannot be intimidated by the fact that there is English in it.

Tell us about the interns you have worked with?

That started back when we did the very first show in 2007, when someone from Utrecht School of Arts contacted me out of the blue asking to intern with us over the summer. The experience kind of taught me about what I had to do to deal with an incoming intern. I have had students from Holland, Germany Norway, America and South East Asia. They are usually funded by their government or they raise money themselves by doing crowd-funding. Mainly I'm a stepping stone to get to Japan, and then they can put '*I did theatre in Japan*' on their resume. I have had a relationship with the Japan Dance Studio building in Kawasaki, which own a bunch of guest houses. I help the interns arrange accommodation. The interns usually come to rehearsals document things, hold a camera when we want to film something, contribute to the rehearsal process, and sometimes they may appear in the show.

How about your collaboration with other artists?

We have had guest directors coming to work with us. Tania Coke, from Tarinainanika, has directed 3 shows for us. One was a short 20-minute piece which was part of the *39* production. She directed *Touch Me Not* in 2016, and *The Other Show* which was a piece which we are remounting again for a festival in Fukushima in two weeks. We are back at it with a different cast. *The Other Show* is a physical comedy. It stars me, an actress here and a guy from Colombia. I am trying to find another venue for us to perform it, so we are not just performing it once. I worked with 99roll, a Japanese shadow puppet theater group that stages large-scale productions with huge objects. I have also invited Mochnosha and the Wishes Mystical Puppet Company to support other shows we have had. They are a husband and wife team, he's from Canadian and she's from Japan. They do all kinds of puppetry and their shows win awards. I used

to invite groups indiscriminately, but now I more interested in whether it fits with the shows that YTG does. I don't mind if it is all in English, but, in that case, we need subtitles, otherwise how is that going to appeal to our Japanese audience?

How is the rehearsal process for *The Other Show* going?

We're currently going over the video and changing it based on things we did not like about the original or because we have got new cast members and changing it to suit their skills. It is a very physical rehearsal, we don't do a lot of talking we just get into it. For *Ryouko* (Travel), a show we are staging for the Tokaido Arts Festival in September, we spent the first week just creating images – we blackout the room, put curtains up, position lights, play around with flashlights, hazer, a smoke machine, projectors and all that. We are creating little stories which we are trying to tie together, and we have a designer coming from Denmark who is sending us ideas on set, which will influence the stories we can tell. Obviously once you start putting objects on the stage and figuring out where they can move, it starts to limit you in what stories you can tell. We've been rehearsing twice a week since May. The show is weird, it's going to be a lot of shadows, physical objects, and projection mapping.

What about funding? What problems do you have getting funding?

At the moment I'm running an ongoing patron which provides about 400 US dollars per show. Shows don't make money. The only sustainable thing I do right now is I run *Nerd Nite* once a month, so that makes money which helps keep us in the black. Three speakers give talks about their areas of expertise, and there is a short Q and A after each one. That happens in Nagatacho at Grid, a building owned by GaiaX, the internet company, in their basement space. They invited us to do it there once they found out about our event which was at a venue which was too small for the people we had. People pay, drink, and we get the space for free. Our expenses are many equipment, but essentially the money raised goes into supporting YTG.

What about your day job?

I teach drama to students in the English department at Daito Bunka Daigakumae. I was shocked on my first day about the low level in English of my students. I had written my syllabus, I came in with a big plan and in the first five minutes I realized I could not execute any of this. I was trying to run an actual acting class, but I realized that is not going to happen. I have got a really good group this year, so I do acting exercises with them and at the end of term we do a mini show. I teach them basic techniques – status and objectives and tactics. I see my classes now less as teaching drama and more as putting them in an environment where there is an English language speaker who is not going to talk like a textbook to them and they are going to have to learn how to listen and interact with me, because when they graduate with their four years of English language training they are going to enter a company and one day the people from the Australian branch are going to come over and the boss is going to say, ‘Hey Suzuki san, you have an English-language degree, you deal with these guys’.

Do you think you’ll get more funding with the Olympic approaching?

The Japan Foundation is spending so much money on this right now, but the bottom will fall out. After 2020 everything is going to go away. Look, I’m never going to say no to money, but I am not looking in places which I know are going to dry up right away. I don’t know what I am going to be doing in 2020, because I don’t know who is going to be in town, so I cannot plan that far ahead. I will most certainly be doing a September show in 2020, unless I have to go back to working a full-time job.