

Saya Suetsugu and Brian Berdanier, president and vice president of Tokyo International Players, interviewed March 27th.

Can you tell me about your training?

Brian: My training was in classical voice and opera – so in another life I did quite a lot of classical singing. From there I segwayed into classical theatre. I have done some training courses mostly at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco and with other smaller theatre companies along the west side of the United States. My degrees are not in theatre. I was doing opera studies for a while and did not have the discipline to continue as an opera singer. I was busy doing other things, so I considered options and it turns out that the closest thing for an opera singer to do if it's not going to be opera singing is foreign languages and linguistics, which is what I ended up doing.

Saya: I have a BA in Communications. Throughout my school years, I had taken a lot of drama and theatre classes. I went to ASIJ (American School in Japan), and then Pace University, and there I took all the theatre classes that a non-theatre major could take – that wasn't a lot, but I took as many as I could.

Brian: Pace University is where the Actors Studio is, right?

Saya: Yes, so you can line-up to see it for free.

What motivates you to do theatre in Tokyo?

Brian: I came to Japan on the JET program and was there for five years, not in Tokyo but in Saitama, and in 2007 I came to Tokyo to take my job at my current school, The International French School. I started with Tokyo International Players in 2009 in *Mrs Bob Cratchitt's Christmas Binge*. I really like to have the creative outlet and the opportunity to tell stories which is what attracts me to theatre.

Saya: After graduation I spent a year in the States working in television. While

I was in New York I spent all the money I had going to Broadway shows because that is what I enjoyed doing and I wanted to continue being involved in theatre. When I came back to Tokyo in 2009, I started searching for theatre in English and I found TIP. I had auditioned several times and didn't get in, and in 2013 I auditioned for *Avenue Q*, which was my first show.

You both have senior roles in Tokyo International Players. Can you tell us about your roles?

Saya: Since August of 2016 I have been president of TIP. Originally, I was an actor and then I started to help with translation. The first time we did an audio guide was *Night Must Fall* in 2013. For *Romeo and Juliet* (2014), I was one of the subtitle operators. I was then asked if I was interested in joining the board because I wanted to be a part of the decision-making process of the organization. When I first started TIP, like most people, you don't really know who the president is, you don't know that there's an organization behind it that makes all the decisions. It's all quite a mystery. So, I joined the board, and the year after that I ran for vice president, and the following year I ran for president. The board meets collectively once a month for a board meeting. Since 2016 we have divided the committees within the board into five key pillars – production, finance, fundraising, publicity and volunteer. Each board member heads one of these committees, and their job is to work on their respective committees, come back to the board the following month and share any updates. Apart from being president, I am also in charge of the fundraising committee and, by default, I am in all the committees. It's in our bylaws that the president is a part of all the committees, so I get to give my two cents into what decisions are being made.

Brian: I am currently the vice president. I started as an actor in 2009. From there I got recruited to be an advisor and created a little position for myself called 'literary manager', handling script management and rights applications. On the production committee, I'm in charge of getting rights and booking theatres for those shows. As vice president, my job is to be the president's friend, and to back up the president at board meetings and in any decisions that need to be

made at an executive level.

What difficulties have you experienced in your roles?

Saya: I think one of the biggest challenges is to make sure that everyone on the board is delegated a task that they are passionate about because there are jobs that people would not want to do but they take on because they are able to do it. One of the biggest jobs that we have is being the treasury. Not everyone wants to be accountable for all the money that TIP has. You make a lot of bank transfers and do a lot of administrative tasks. We also want to make sure that the productions are getting the type of support they need and to make sure we are still present for the production as well. Making sure that there is an open line of communication can be challenging.

How has TIP changed since you have become the management?

Brian: The social aspect of TIP has been a part of the company traditionally. Personally, I think we are moving away from the social club aspect. I think production values have gone up which is indicative of the leadership focusing more on that rather than the social aspect. We have also branched out in directions. We have TIP Youth. It is a separate entity, piggybacking on the TIP name because we are somewhat known in the international school community where they are trying to get their kids from. In terms of business and how they cooperate, TIP Youth is a profit organization, was developed to be a feeder for onstage and backstage talent for mainstage shows, but it has grown into its own thing. We also have Second Stage (small-scale shows), which is also its own entity. In theory, anyone who wants to come in and put up a Second Stage show can go ahead and do it.

Can you tell us about the number and type of plays you stage each year?

Brian: We have a season of three main stage plays and put on a variety of different productions. We do try to keep as many people happy as we can, so we have a tradition of a large-scale family musical that comes as our season-ending finale. In terms of getting bums on seats you need to have some sort of

broad appeal that is going to fill a 250-seat theatre. We have tried to get student or school-friendly shows and classics – we have done Shakespeare plays two seasons in a row. There is a good chance we'll do named shows in the upcoming season, things that will get our audience involved.

Can you tell us a bit about your experience directing?

Brian: I directed a production of *Two Gentleman of Verona* for the Feb 2018 slot. It was my second show with TIP, the first one was *The Language Archive* in 2016. It went from being just an idea in my head to an idea out of my hands and in a bunch of other people's hands in the process of about a year. You start with just an idea after reading a script or seeing a review of a show and think that might be fun to do. I had this idea germinating and when I felt it was ready I presented my proposal to the production committee, and we went from there – building a team, holding auditions, getting actors, all the way through to production.

For those interested in directing for TIP, what would they have to do?

Saya: One of the pre-requisites is we ask that they have had a major role in a TIP production. Assistant director or stage manager is one of the roles we would expect them to have done. Then they have to submit a proposal that is put forward to the production committee. The proposal will entail their vision of the show, any challenges they foresee, and if they have any visual concept of the show already. You can be as detailed as you want or very simple. Those proposals get vetted by the production committee.

Brian: For example, for a show that opens our next season in October we would approve the show at least six months before and then talk about budget and special things the show might need because our annual budget is approved over the summer at our annual general meeting. The director would need to think about how much time he or she would need for auditions and rehearsals, and about having early production meetings in the summer, June or July. Depending on the needs of the show, meetings with designers and acting rehearsals take

place in August and September to be ready for production. Musicals take longer.

Saya: I think the way we've come into TIP is the most common. Someone would audition for a show, be cast in the show, and from there on they would build friendships and then they either want to be in the next show or work on the next show. For the crew, most of the time, it is different because they won't come into productions until one month before performance at earliest, whereas the core production team and cast are working on the show for about four months.

How do you develop a relationship with your audience?

Saya: I think we have become more proactive in advertising on social media. We have bilingual posts, and we are on FB, Instagram and Twitter – our publicity committee is putting a lot of work behind that instead of just handing out fliers. From there on, it goes through the way TIP have always grown their audiences which is through everyone who is involved.

Brian: There has always been some sort of language support, whether it is a synopsis in the program, but we have made a push in the last four years with real time translation with earpieces, and a few shows have attempted surtitles (projected subtitles on a screen).

How does TIP benefit English learners?

Brian: This is a conversation that we have with our Japanese support team. We have to walk that fine, I mean, it is part of our mission statement that we are intending our productions to be for the English-speaking audiences, as that is our core audience. Although there is no denying that there is a big market for English learners to come to foreign language productions. The famous example that we always talk about was in the Scottish play (*Macbeth*) we staged two years ago. Our translation team insisted that there needed to be a cue to explain Banquo had died offstage. But if you cannot tell that Banquo is dead from what we are doing onstage, then we are not doing our job. Yes, we are in Tokyo, and

should have a connection with the non-native English-speaking audience around us. Though I am not sure if English language teaching is a part of our mission.

Saya: I agree. It is a fine line. We want to cater to our Japanese audience as much as we can in terms of making it accessible, but it is not a part of our mission to say, ‘come socialize with English speakers’ or ‘if you join a TIP show, you become a better English speaker.’

What about the future? Are thinking about staging something for 2020?

Brian: We won't be the executive committee in 2020 because it is in the constitution that we cannot be in the position for more than two terms in a row. We haven't looked that far ahead. We are looking at theaters all the way until the end of 2018, and still trying to get through our current season.