

Senior Theater Collective

“The 10,000 Gold Theater 2016”

Saitama Prefecture



Background and Impetus

Japan’s population is aging rapidly. Currently even in Saitama which is one of the youngest prefectures, the number of senior citizens is increasing at rate more rapid than anywhere else in Japan. In 2015, the population of people aged 75 or above in Saitama was around 770,000, but it’s predicted that in ten years this will increase by 1.6 times, so that by 2025 it will grow to around 1,210,000. The late Yukio Ninagawa, former arts director of Saitama Prefecture’s Saitama Arts Theater, proposed creating a theatre group made up of seniors, as he said, “People who have a few years behind them can use their personal history as a base to physically express themselves, and I want to offer them a venue for personal discovery.” In 2006, he founded the Saitama Gold Theater, with members aged 55 or above. In recent years, they have put on performances both at in Japan and overseas including shows in Paris and Hong Kong, and have developed into a theatrical company that has garnered attention worldwide.

Mr. Ninagawa said that he wanted to give the opportunity to an even greater number of older folks, and came up with a plan for larger theatre collective called “The 10,000 Gold Theater 2016.” In April 2016, he started advertising for seniors to take part in the project with the appeal, “I want to bring out the seniors and let them shine!”

Unfortunately, Mr. Ninagawa passed away suddenly in May 2016, but the project was taken over by the Saitama Arts Foundation which runs Saitama Prefecture’s Saitama Arts Theater.



Saitama Gold Theater in rehearsal (Mr. Ninagawa with group members, photo from 2007)

Project Aims

With the aim of creating an opportunity for a large number of senior citizens to shine and be energetic through expressive activities, Saitama Prefecture carried out this project to encourage older folks to actively participate.

In addition, the 10,000 Gold Theater 2016 is an established mainstay of the culture programme in the prefecture for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, and one of its major aims is to foster momentum in the build-up to the events while encouraging participation in arts and cultural activities.

Project Outline

There was a public appeal for participants from April to June in 2016, which gathered around 1,600 people, ranging in age from 60 to 91. Initially there were applicants from Saitama Prefecture and the

surrounding areas, but there were also applicants from all over Japan and even people living abroad. While some people had theatre experience from their student days, for the majority of people it was the first time in their lives that they had to learn lines.

In regards to the play, Seiji Nozoe, who had been involved in the organization and script of this production from the beginning, took over from Mr. Ninagawa after his passing. Mr. Nozoe wrote a play modelled on Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, based on the theme of the dreams of elderly people, called "The Gold Symphony, My Dream, Your dream." Mr. Nozoe said, "I want to use the setting of the play and the lines to rock the participants' worlds."

Rehearsals started in July at the Saitama Arts Theater under Mr. Nozoe's direction. First, the members were divided into seven large groups who rehearsed each scene in turns. From September to December, they used a gymnasium for full group rehearsals, and rehearsals became more intense as their public performance approached.

It was decided that the Saitama Gold Theater would perform alongside the Saitama Next Theater, a young theatre group who train at the same theatre, as well as with professional actors connected to Mr. Ninagawa. In rehearsals, the professional actors and members of Saitama Next Theater were not just concerned with their own performances, but offered advice to the older novices. In crowd scenes they supported their progress while moving together.

The staff also made efforts to support the participants with not only guidance and instructions, but also by being considerate of things like a possible difference in energy level.

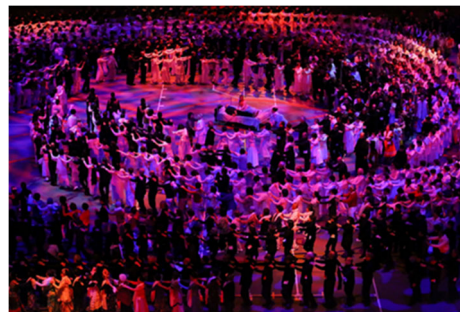
In addition, guided tours were held while the rehearsals were taking place to open the production process up to the public as much as possible. This was an attempt to give citizens of the prefecture an opportunity to connect with arts and culture in various forms, and to try to revitalize the local area by getting them involved.

The public performance was on Wednesday, 7

December at the Saitama Super Arena. Around 1,600 participants performed, while approximately 8,000 people watched, creating a theatre event of unprecedented scale.



Scenes from rehearsal



Performance scene (7 December 2016, Saitama Super Arena, photo by Maiko Miyagawa)

Strengths and Innovations

The 10,000 Gold Theater 2016 was an inclusive arts and culture project that due to its wide appeal for performers, allowed anyone aged 60 or above to appear on stage. There was great merit in providing an opportunity on an unprecedented scale for many older people to independently participate in expressive activities and to fall in love with the performing arts.

Results of the Project

The 10,000 Gold Theater 2016 demonstrated new possibilities for the performing arts, in the form of collective theatre performed by the elderly, and for the area of Saitama, it increased the understanding and momentum for senior citizens to participate in

arts and culture.

Audience surveys filled out after the performance showed opinions like, "I was moved by the power of the senior citizens," and, "I felt an increased positivity and I want to try new things." The levels of satisfaction recorded were around 90%.

Performers rated the project highly and said that they, "Had a sense of achievement," while around 1,000 of the people said that they intended to carry on with theatrical activities in the future.

With mass media like television and newspapers picking up the story, it also conveyed the idea that the arts and culture division has a part to play in the ageing society.

Problems, and Responses

The 10,000 Gold Theater 2016 collective involved an unprecedented approximately 1,600 people, and there were some points to reflect on concerning the implementation of this project. One of which was the difficulty of the production and the preparation time being too short

Also, it was important that this wasn't a one-time event, but that the accomplishments of the project are to be carried into the future.

Therefore, in 2017 a call was put out to the participants and the Gold Arts Club was formed, with over 1,000 people registering.

Among those, around 760 people took part in a drama workshop under Mr. Nozoe's direction again, starting with the basics of drama like speaking and movement practice, and taking on challenges like singing, musical instruments and dance.

Future Developments

In 2018, Saitama Prefecture and the Saitama Arts Foundation (Public Interest Incorporated Foundation), continuing on from 2016's 10,000 Gold Theater and as part of its culture programme for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, held an international performing arts festival featuring senior citizens called

World Gold Theater 2018. The Saitama Arts Theater was the main venue, and there were public performances of plays and dances carried out by the Gold Arts Club and by senior theatre companies from abroad.

Around 700 members of the Gold Arts Club took part in rehearsals for Moliere's play "The Imaginary Invalid". They were divided into two groups and performed the play eight times in all.

Saitama Prefecture is considering continuing this project to enable senior citizens to shine energetically through arts and culture.

Reference URL

<http://www.saf.or.jp/>

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Definitions of Technical Terms etc.

Mr. Yukio Ninagawa (1935-2016)

Mr. Ninagawa was a Japanese theatre director. He worked on a wide range of productions, including contemporary dramas, Greek tragedies, foreign classics like Shakespeare and Chekhov, and modern dramas. He was one of the directors that represented modern day Japan. He was also highly respected abroad and was known as "Ninagawa, man of the world".

Saitama Gold Theater

10,000 Gold Theater

Gold Arts Club

In Japan, elderly people are often called the Silver Generation, but Mr. Ninagawa wanted, in his words, "To make the Silver Generation shine even more." Thus, he chose the name Saitama Gold Theater. Since then, Saitama prefecture and Saitama Arts Theater

have always used "Gold" in the names of arts programmes for the elderly.