

Impressions of Dance Camp⁺ 2024

Hiromi Sakamoto

Dance Camp⁺, the second phase of Dance Camp, which began in the summer of 2023, was held for three days from August 10th to 12th, 2024, at the International Communication Center for Persons with Disabilities (BiG-i). As is widely known, BiG-i serves not only as one of the few completely barrier-free facilities both in Japan and overseas, but also, in terms of intangible aspects, as a valuable facility that has accumulated know-how for supporting cultural, artistic and international exchange activities for people with disabilities. BiG-i is a hub and activities venue for people with all kinds of disability to enjoy artistic and international exchange activities, and is a place that people in Japan are proud to share with the rest of the world.

It is often not easy for people with disabilities to interact with people from overseas. It is very rare for dance artists, choreographers and teaching artists from several countries (Malaysia, Hong Kong, Korea, the Unites States and Japan) to have such an opportunity to come together for a variety of dance and theatre workshops.

*A teaching artist refers to an artist who has specialized knowledge and skills in arts and cultural activities, and utilizes these attributes in educational settings and community activities to share with people.



Photo: The cover of a flier and instructors

There were 200 applicants for this three-day event, of which 132 were people with disabilities; the number of participants was 150, of which 88 were people with disabilities.

Unfortunately, since the space and the number of staff were limited, there was not enough room for all applicants to participate in all programs. However, since BiG-i provides opportunities for activities that are safe, secure and exciting for people with disabilities by providing meticulous assistance and allocating well-trained support staff, more and more people would like to join such activities if an opportunity arises again. There are many who are keen to participate in such programs more than once, and the circle of people is expanding.

It is important to provide people with disabilities with access to the arts and international cultural exchange activities. For example, Article 25 of Japan's Constitution states that "All people shall have the right to maintain the minimum standards of wholesome and cultured living." It is truly wonderful that people with diverse physical conditions and expressions from different parts of the world were able to meet and interact, transcending the boundaries between people with and without disabilities. It was also wonderful to find a truly "democratic public space" where people could assert their individual views and ways of living. For that reason, I hope to see such opportunities increasingly arise and spread, filling the planet with love and humanity.

This series of workshops kicked off with Dua Space Dance Theatre, a dance company from Malaysia, and six programs were held during the three days. I would like to describe each of the programs below.

The people from Dua Space Dance Theatre were considerate and their instructions were clear and easy to understand. They were also skilled at allowing participants to experience the feelings of joy and exaltation that can be obtained only by sharing the same space and time, such as demonstrating concentration and promoting cooperation with others. In the second half, they took on the challenge of promoting cross-cultural understanding by learning Malaysian ethnic dance, which I found was a very good program for deepening international understanding.



Photos: Members of Dua Space Dance Theatre enjoying their workshop

Shunji from YOZIGENZ, another dance group was particularly excellent at getting the young people to dance comfortably, and while using movements such as breaking, he allowed each and every individual to experience moments of joy one after another. He encouraged the participants to think of a number of poses that would make them look good and move their bodies, and then told them to expand the range of expression while getting into a rhythm, transforming such movements into a dance. He had them repeat this process again and again, connecting all the elements to develop a performance, the power of which brought smiles and excitement to the spectators.





Photos: Shunji, teaching at his dance workshop

Mary Jane Tang led the participants in experiencing how continuous effort to work at tasks to improve individuals' dramatic imagination and physical expressiveness can lead to the development of dramatic imagination and physical expressiveness at a group level, and then to the creation of a large piece of dance. This experience produced a phenomenon that made the participants feel as if a pre-existing community had suddenly appeared.





Photos: Mary Jane Tang, teaching at her dance workshop

Kim Wonyoung and Kazuyo Morita presented a mysterious, heart-warming workshop that gave the participants the experience of looking at the energy within themselves, feeling their connections with others while cherishing themselves, and deepening this experience more carefully, statically, and intellectually than in their everyday lives.



Photos: Kim Wonyoung and Kazuyo Morita, teaching at their dance workshop

Maki Tabata presented her workshops, in which she conveyed everything she noticed, while praising good points, and tried to verbalize the phenomena she had seen to constantly share them with others. In this way, she succeeded in livening up the atmosphere, raising the awareness of the participants, and creating a space where it was natural for each individual to maintain his or her own dignity and respect for others.



Photos: Maki Tabata, teaching at her dance workshop

Ping Chong + Company was the only group that held a theater workshop instead of a dance workshop. Amid the situation in which verbal expression was more vital than embodiment, as this was the final program in the series of workshops, the participants enjoyed performing in a very relaxed manner in an atmosphere like a culmination of all the previous programs, and delivered performances full of dramatic imagination in the group presentation.



Photos: Ping Chong + Company, teaching at their theater workshop

After all the workshops had finished, the workshop instructors held a casual round-table meeting, in which I also participated as facilitator. I could see that since many of the instructors had the opportunity to experience other instructors' workshops, they were able to learn from each other about the unique and interesting aspects of others' programs, and how to interact face-to-face with participants and inspire each other. I also heard comments including "I would like to see another similar event here at BiG-i," "Please come to Hong Kong," and "See you next time maybe in Kuala Lumpur." These comments helped me to realize that a community of people who share common interests in people with disabilities, dance and international exchange, was expanding. It is noteworthy that all the instructors praised BiG-i for its tangible and intangible features, and commented how very satisfied they were with the facilities as well as the BiG-i team.

These invaluable workshops, held in mid-summer in Osaka, were a succession of moments in which teaching artists who had practiced art activities for people with disabilities around the world used their experience, knowledge and skills at full

throttle to interact face-to-face with each participant. The entire experience was one of warm, beautiful interactions between participants, as well as people with unique characters working and sweating in pursuit of physical expression and the joy of life. As citizens of a peaceful, law-abiding democratic country, I believe that we should be always extending our helping hand to activities like these, in pursuit of happiness and international understanding based on cooperation and harmony.



Photo: Hiromi Sakamoto (right)

Hiromi Sakamoto

Hiromi Sakamoto is a professor of performing arts at Department of Literature, Arts and Cultural Studies, Kindai University. After serving as a drama director of NHK, he played active roles as a theater director and a cultural program producer. One of his masterpieces is *Undesirable Elements: Difficult Lives*, written and staged in collaboration with Ping Chong (produced by BiG-i's Kyoko Suzuki).

Sakamoto also studied the performing arts of the indigenous Māori people of New Zealand, at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, and received a Ph.D. in Education. He also serves as one of the advisors for the Association of Public Theaters and Halls in Japan, as well as a producer at Higashiosaka Cultural Creation Hall.

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