



# “We are locals from around here—from Earth”: Illustrating the spirit of Olympic and Paralympic Games from the eyes of Kyogen

Nomura Mansai, Kyogen stage actor; Chief Executive Director, Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games

Interviewer: Editorial staff of *Gaiko* (Diplomacy)

—Mansai-san [Mr. Mansai], you have performed around the world.

**Nomura Mansai:** My father<sup>1</sup> put effort into overseas performances from early on, and I started travelling with him when I was an elementary school student. I was 9 years old when I traveled with him for the first time. We went to Hawaii when he became a visiting professor at the University of Hawaii. We performed *Igui*<sup>2</sup>. Two years later, I played the part of a baby monkey in the play *Utsuozaru*<sup>3</sup>, which was staged in Paris and London. Since then, I have performed in many countries, including the United States, Europe, China, Russia, Australia and Malaysia, because just like my father, I attach importance to overseas performances and cultural exchange.



Nomura Mansai II

**I truly appreciate how widespread Japanese culture has become.**

—Was any performance particularly memorable?

**Mansai:** I cannot forget the performances in Moscow and Leningrad (currently Saint-Petersburg) in 1989. The country I visited was not Russia, but the Soviet Union in its final years. There were no goods available in those cities amid perestroika. Shops were open, but the shelves were empty. I saw lines of people wherever I went. However, you could find things to purchase in special places (laughs), such as restaurants where only government officials and guests from overseas were allowed to enter. You could eat Japanese food, although it was expensive, which was prepared with ingredients transported by air. I was astonished by the *katsudon* (pork cutlet on rice), which cost 2,500 yen. (laughs)

<sup>1</sup> Nomura Mansaku II, Living National Treasure

<sup>2</sup> A story about a boy named Igui, who disliked being affectionately patted on the head and played tricks on adults using his hood.

<sup>3</sup> A story about a monkey trainer who was ordered by a feudal lord to kill his monkey to obtain its beautiful fur. The monkey trainer had no choice but to follow the order and raised his stick. The monkey took the stick in his hand and started to perform, bringing tears to the eyes of the feudal lord.



*Machigai no Kyogen (Kyogen of Errors)* performed at the Globe Theatre, London in 2001. It was adapted from *A Comedy of Errors* by William Shakespeare. (Courtesy of the Mansaku-no-Kai Kyogen Company)

The reaction of the people in Moscow was different from other cities. Audiences in New York and London already had a deep interest in different cultures and were open-minded, because shows from around the world were always available to see. However, people in the Soviet Union were not used to seeing *kyogen*. It was the first time the audience saw something like that and seemed deeply shocked.

When I appear on stage overseas wearing the mushroom costume for the play *Kusabira*<sup>4</sup>, people almost always burst into laughter. However, I felt that the audience in Moscow was puzzled by what they saw. They were indeed perplexed.

Nevertheless, we received thunderous applause when the performance ended and people rushed backstage. During the period of shortages, a lady brought us tomatoes to prevent us from suffering from a lack of vegetables. There was also a person who saw the performance for three consecutive days and gave me his favorite music record on the final day. Those people may have wished to express their gratitude for witnessing a new culture, and offered something cultural themselves.

— — You also studied in London.

**Mansai:** The performance of the new *kyogen Hora zamurai*<sup>5</sup> staged in London in 1991, which was adapted from Shakespeare, helped create the opportunity. The performance was part of the Japan Festival. The artist overseas training system promoted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs provided me with an opportunity to revisit the country in 1994. I learned stage direction at institutions including the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was such a valuable experience.

— — Last year, you performed in China to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between Japan and China.

**Mansai:** I visited China for the first time in the early 1980s, when I was around 15 or 16 years old. I remember seeing many people on the streets of Beijing still wearing the Mao suit. When I took out a Polaroid camera in front of the Purple Forbidden City, people gathered around because they were so curious. I took photographs of some of them and gave the developed prints. They were so delighted. Now you can see rows of hotels managed by foreign companies. As a person who knew China at the time, I cannot help but feel that the country has changed dramatically.

At the same time, I appreciate how widespread the culture of Japan has become in China. While the relationship between the two governments may have been strained from time to time, the connection between the two cultures and people was not. I feel that the Chinese have a deep interest in Japan. I perform in China every three to four years. There are dedicated fans that line up backstage. You never see anything like that anymore in Japan. (laughs) While some are devoted *kyogen* fans, others have become fans after watching the film *Onmyoji*<sup>6</sup>.

## Perform a wide variety of plays using subtitles

— — Is there any difference between Japan and overseas as to your performances?

**Mansai:** I believe overseas people find it easier to understand now, because we have started to display subtitles in the local language using a projector. We are extremely careful about the translation. For example, there is a play called *Busu*. The story is that servants eat the sugar that their master secretly hid. Sugar at the time was unrefined, and it was brown with a syrup-like texture.

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<sup>4</sup> A story of mysterious large mushrooms that grow uncontrollably. When a mountain priest offered up a prayer, they grew even further to play tricks.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from the Shakespearean comedy, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

<sup>6</sup> Japanese film directed by Takita Yojiro in 2001. Mansai played the leading role in this movie.

Therefore, if it were translated as sugar, people would picture something completely different. There is not sufficient time to explain it in detail, so we decided to translate it using the word honey. Honey is the perfect word to describe something brown, sweet and syrupy. I work closely with the translators when working on translations. I am mindful of making translations that are easy to understand, while trying to retain a touch of traditional elegance. For this reason, I even feel an even greater sense of satisfaction when performing outside of Japan.

Meticulously prepared subtitles allow us to perform plays that we used to avoid overseas due to a lack of movement. Plays such as *Kawakami* and *Tsukimi zato* both feature a blind person played by my father, which may be known from a lack of movement, but portray a character with inner turmoil. They have gained a favorable reputation globally in recent years, probably because the theme exploring disability is still relevant today. The classics have the power to create an impression that is universally appealing.

— —The example highlights the profoundness of kyogen.

**Mansai:** While kyogen is often introduced as a comedy or farce, the essence is a vivid depiction of humans, who are full of desires. Some desires are small, such as the desire to drink alcohol or to eat something sweet (the latter may even drive some to tell a lie), and others are great. The feelings between a husband and wife, and disability as I mentioned earlier, all reflect desires of humans. What is portrayed in kyogen is such timeless, everyday life. A vivid description of humans is one of the most important aspects of our dramaturgy.

What symbolizes the ordinariness is the phrase “*kono atari no mono de gozaru*” (we are locals from around here). It is a first phrase typically used to portray an ordinary person without giving any specific details. Kyogen is really about portraying ordinary people, transcending time, culture and language.

## **Japanese culture is built on respect for predecessors**

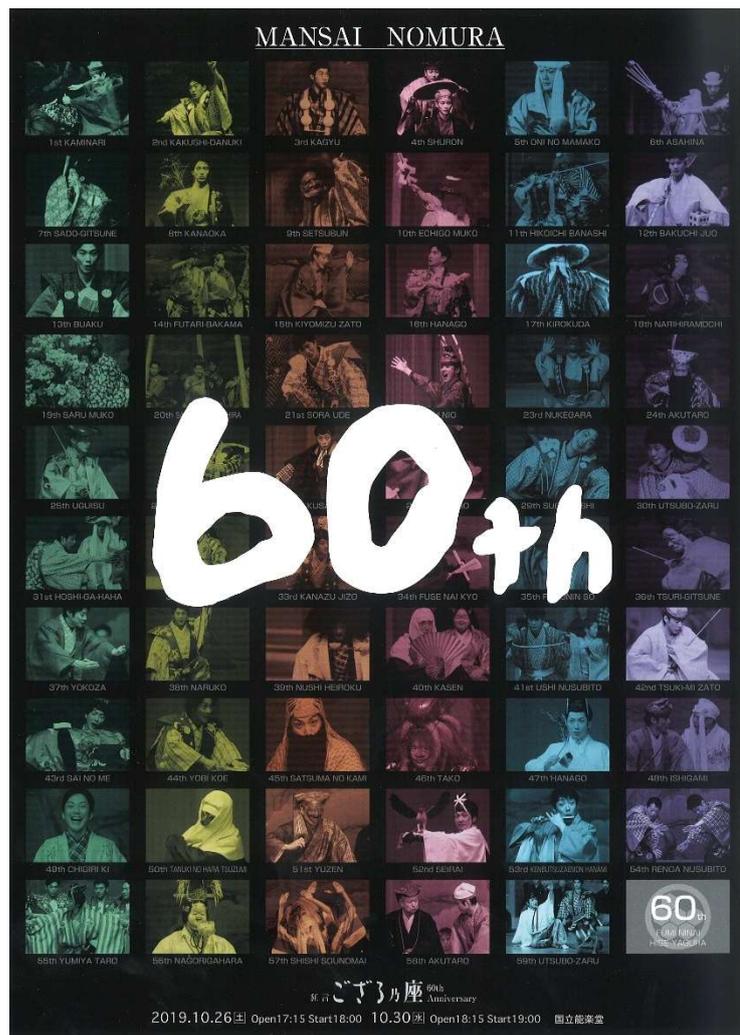
— —Kyogen truly represents the essence of Japan.

**Mansai:** I also believe that the presentation of such ordinary stories in a simple yet profound way is unique to Japan. The stages are simple and refined without being overpowering. This reflects the culture of the medieval period, which was influenced by the idea of zen. The stage direction of kyogen is also characteristic of Japan.

I find it unique how the culture of Japan has matured, while also being influenced by other cultures and inheriting culture from ancestors. The culture of the medieval period, influenced by the idea of zen, developed by incorporating the culture brought from the continent. After the period of rule by shoguns, the emergence of active merchants prompted people to behave oddly. The world of *bunraku* is known to portray human emotions. Culture developed in each period, accumulating and coexisting. I call it *hakko bunka* (mature cultures). The Silk Road helped bring many cultures, which created the multi-layered culture of Japan. Different cultures sometimes mixed to produce something completely new. It is interesting that the furthest point on the Silk Road is where the latest hybrids can be found.

--You have been active in a variety of genres including TV, film and modern plays, embodying the multi-layered nature of Japanese culture.

**Mansai:** I do so because my other intention is to make the most of the modern information networks. In the past, people were able to gather information on world affairs simply by reading the headlines of newspapers, regardless of whether they were interested. Now we have smartphones. While we can endlessly gather as much information on our favorite subjects as possible, we completely ignore everything else. I am mindful of raising awareness among audiences to whom I cannot reach if I remain within the bounds of kyogen. Besides, if I don't know about other genres, I cannot convince them that kyogen is great. I visit other countries and take on projects in other genres to open my eyes.



Poster commemorating the 60th performance by “The Mansaku-no-Kai Kyogen Company” directed by Mr. Mansai. More performances were held on October 26 and 30, 2019. Refer to the website of The Mansaku-no-Kai Kyogen Company for more details.

--Is there work in other genres that have influenced you?

**Mansai:** There are many, of course. The first was a film by Charlie Chaplin, which I watched with my father when I was an elementary school student. I hoped to become a world-renowned comedian like Chaplin, if I eventually became a kyogen actor. My mother loved the Beatles and the Carpenters, which prompted me to listen to Western music. I even dreamed of becoming a rock star at one point.

After I grew up, I visited theaters often because my father gave me tickets. I enjoyed many performances including Chinese traditional plays, a stunning avant-garde stage performance directed by Tadeusz Kantor, and *Boléro* choreographed by Maurice Béjart, which was so cool that I used to imitate his movements. I even imitated the dancing of Michael Jackson. If I am allowed to pick one more artist, it would be Spanish dancer Antonio Gades. He completely changes the atmosphere of theater simply by standing on a stage. Seeing true artists made me realize that I couldn't continue doing just silly things. (laughs)

## Spirit of the Olympic and Paralympic Games

— You have been appointed as Chief Executive Director for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games, which will be held next year.

**Mansai:** I believe they have appointed me as Chief Executive Director because they were hoping that I would embody the spirit of “kono atari no mono de gozaru,” which I mentioned earlier.

While I would like to ask you to wait and see the concept of the actual ceremonies, I would also like to ask you to broaden your perspective when looking at “kono atari no mono de gozaru.” I think what it essentially means is that “we are locals from around here—from Earth.”

If you try to see the bigger picture, you will realize that all living humans are equal, whether their social status is high or low, whether they are wealthy or poor, whether they are good-looking or not. I once again use kyogen as an example. The majority of kyogen characters do not introduce themselves, intentionally. It is the spirit of kyogen that tells us to view each character simply as a person without prejudice, no matter how famous the person is due to his or her high social status. Kyogen characters include not only humans but also animals such as monkeys, foxes and raccoon dogs. People in Japan have traditionally believed that a deity dwells in all things (*Yao yorozu no kami*: eight million gods or all the gods and goddesses). In other words, they see the importance of the existence of all things.

—The Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games are where you showcase that spirit.

**Mansai:** Yes, I think so. If I am allowed to take a grand-scale approach, I could say that we were born as a result of miracles. There was the sun and aqua planet, and then life appeared on Earth purely by chance. The Olympic and Paralympic Games are festivals where we show appreciation for that fact. Every four years, we celebrate our lives on Earth and the importance of existence by competing fiercely with others. The Olympic and Paralympic Games are distinctly different from other world championships in that sense.

Kyogen also holds such a view. While equality, symbiosis, inclusivity and diversity may appear to be current issues, Japanese people have embraced the spirit of “we are locals from around here” since ancient times. The spirit will be highlighted in many ways during the opening and closing ceremonies.

*Translated from “Kanto Intabyu—‘Chikyu atari no monode gozaru’: Kyogen no manazashi de orinpikku, pararinpikku no seishin wo egaku (Cover Story Interview— ‘We are locals from around here—from Earth’: Illustrating the spirit of Olympic and Paralympic Games from the eyes of Kyogen),” Gaiko (Diplomacy), Vol. 57 Sept./Oct. 2019 pp. 6–11. (Courtesy of Toshi Shuppan) [December 2019]*

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## **NOMURA Mansai II**

Born in 1966, he started studying under his grandfather Nomura Manzo VI and father Nomura Mansaku II when he was young. He graduated from the Special Course of the Department of Traditional Japanese Music in the Music Faculty of Tokyo University of the Arts in 1989 and accepted the name Mansai in 1994. The artist overseas training system promoted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs provided him with an opportunity to study at institutions in England that year, including the Royal Shakespeare Company. He performs many *kyogen* as well as *noh* plays both nationally and internationally, with a view to contribute to their promotion. He is active in a variety of genres including TV, film and modern plays in which he has the leading role. He has also directed performances by adopting classic techniques. Last year, he was appointed as Chief Executive Director to direct the opening and closing ceremonies of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

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