

NONNATIVE CREATIVE INTERVIEW
SAYA SUETSUGU
(video transcript)

Alisha: On this episode of Nonnative Creative, I'm talking with Saya Suetsugu.

She is the President of TIP, Tokyo International Players.

Saya: I want English language theater to be more accessible for everyone, and to continue to be that way.

We become more and more digital, and it's great, but being able to be in a moment and sharing it with a room of 100 or hundreds of people is something that not many people do anymore.

So I think that's something that's also incredibly special.

Alisha: How did you first get interested in doing international work, or in doing things more outside of your home country?

Saya: I was in nursery kindergarten.

Because of my father's job, we moved to The States. So, that's when I was first exposed to English.

And at that young age, you don't really know what language you're speaking or anything. I just got thrown into the local school.

So then, by the time I returned to Japan, I was already speaking English without really thinking about how to learn English or anything like that.

Then, my parents wanted me to keep up with my English, so I went to an international school and I went to all throughout high school, graduated, went to an international university. And so on and so forth.

Alisha: How did that kind of contribute, then, to your interest in working in like, more creative pursuits?

Saya: When we were living in New York, my parents were not shy about exposing me to all sorts of arts and letting me take all the classes that you can take, like ballet, tap dance, gymnastics, etc.

And I went right into it. I never--I got into it, and I never really stopped.

When I moved to New York to go to college, that was another thing. That I wanted to see Broadway shows.

As much as I said, "I wanna go to New York to study," I actually really wanted to just go see a bunch of Broadway shows, haha!

That...that had me...that got me really hooked. To be able to have theater in such a close proximity of, "what are we gonna do over the weekend?" Oh, let's just go see a show. And that was incredible.

Alisha: How did you kind of carry that with you and bring it back to Tokyo, then?

Saya: Out of college, I got to work in New York, and I was working in television. I started to become the person that was the "Broadway expert" and so I got to, at times, incorporate what I knew and what I did outside of work into my actual job.

And when I came back to Japan, I had wanted to continue to do theater.

I also knew that I could not perform as a living. I don't have the skin for it. You have to be really, really thick-skinned, I think, to make a career out of being a performer.

And so I kind of took the safe route, as you might say, to have a "regular job" and to be able to do that on the side. And that's where I found TIP.

Alisha: What's the current production that you're working on?

Saya: Right now we are working on Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. It is one of his lesser-known works, I guess, or his earlier works.

And we have an all-female cast to perform this show. And they are incredible. They are so talented, and they're very funny, and I've had the pleasure of being assistant director for this production.

Alisha: Is an all-female production fairly common for TIP?

Saya: No. This is the director's vision to do it with an all-female cast. So at the moment, we're doing three shows per season, and the seasons are like an American school year, so it's from September to June.

For this season, we started out with *Sweeney Todd*. And the closing May production is *The Who's TOMMY*. Both are very, very male-heavy casts.

Depending on the production, there are restrictions on whether or not you can gender swap.

Some shows may say, "for this role, it doesn't matter," or "for this role, it has to be a male," or "it has to be a female playing this role."

So, based on that, it was great to have our director have this vision of wanting to do an all-female cast.

I think in this day and age, and it's a great thing that we're doing.

Alisha: Where are you holding these rehearsals for volunteer performing?

Saya: It might depend on the production, but for the production that we're working on right now, our stage manager and the producer of the show sit together and they work out the rehearsal schedule.

And because our producer is the owner of a space called Our Space, which we frequent the most for doing our rehearsals. And if other groups have reservations, then we go to other places, like kumin centers, or civic hall centers for rehearsals.

Alisha: What are the rehearsals like?

Saya: Usually, we have auditions maybe 3 to 4 months in advance of the production. And then, once we start rehearsals, we rehearse about 3 to 5 times a week, and weekdays, obviously it'll be in the evenings.

And then weekends is whatever time that's most convenient for the majority of the cast members that are involved.

And as you get closer to production, then those weekend rehearsals might be a little longer; you might have ones that are 1 to 10 PM.

Alisha: You mentioned that you're doing 3 different shows each year, and then you decide which shows to do at the beginning of the year. For the course of the year. So, what's the process of approving or rejecting a show?

Saya: The directors submit a proposal, and on that proposal they list their production team, and they also have images of what type of set and costumes, etc. that they want to use. What are some of the restrictions? What are some of the things that they need to look out for when putting together this product? Etcetera.

We don't focus so much on how many audience members we can bring in. Rather, we want to make sure that it is something--it's a show that, you know, the director is most passionate about.

For musicals, the rights cost is EXPENSIVE. For a TIP schedule, we either do 5 or 6 shows in the run. For 3 to 4 months of rehearsal. You can only do it 5 to 6 times.

And each show, for a musical, can cost up to maybe \$600 to \$1000. So that's how much we're paying in rights to be able to do that show. So, you know, it can get expensive. And that's why we might, you know, prefer to do a Shakespeare, where it's not gonna cost as much.

Alisha: I remember when I first came to Tokyo, and I heard about TIP, and I--In my head, I heard, you know, "community theater" sort of thing. And I think that in some cases, the word "community" has sort of that..."homemade" and not in a good way...like, the way that you would think of a homemade sweater by your grandma, sort of thing. No offense to grandmas who make sweaters; I make sweaters!

But like, that was the image I had, but then when I went to my first TIP show, I was blown away! I was like, "this is a proper production!" It was really good!

Like, the space that was used, the theater was amazing, the costumes were amazing, like, there was lighting and sound and, like, it was real! And every single production that I've been to is of that quality.

So hearing about all of the different things that go into doing that is...and for free, too. You know, it's all volunteer. That just amazes me.

Have you found there's something that's really, like, kind of special about working with people from different countries or maybe from different backgrounds?

Saya: What we all have in common is the passion for theater. Regardless of whether you're a performer, or you're working the sound or the lights or anything. And what makes it so special is that everyone who is involved has a different background.

Not all of us have studied theater. Including myself. To be a professional. But then, there are people who have done that.

So then being able to learn from them and then apply those skills...it's incredible.

When you're a performer, your focus is to get on stage and learn your lines, and you know, learn all these different things, and what sometimes we all forget as performers is that you actually do have a huge group of people who are supporting you to make sure that you're lit when you're on stage.

You actually have costumes that you wear. And all these different components. And to be able to learn all of that is one thing, but you also have to make sure that you remember everyone is donating their time. Nobody is getting paid.

So it's...a wonderful group of people.

Alisha: I want to ask a little bit about the audience side, too.

What kinds of people do you generally find come to watch TIP shows?

Saya: For a well-known show, it is easier to draw in a Japanese audience. In general, I think it can be a little more challenging to bring in audiences for lesser-known shows.

For example, we did Sweeney Todd in October. And because Sweeney Todd is a musical that's better known in Japan, it was, I think, easier to bring in more Japanese audiences. And also because they know the show and they know what to expect. And even without an audio guide, it's easier for them to understand.

Alisha: Okay, what's the audio guide?

Saya: We tend to do this more for straight plays rather than musicals because it's a little harder to do it for musicals in the first place. But we, like, if someone would go to see kabuki, they would get an earpiece, and they get kind of a scene-by-scene description summary of what's happening onstage in Japanese.

Not necessarily to bring in more Japanese audiences, but to assist with their theater experience.

Alisha: So that's an additional component that has to be prepared for these shows. That's tough. And that's something that you're doing, right?

Saya: Yeah. Haha! We now have a translation team, and they're awesome, and they're wonderful. What happens recently is that the director goes through the script, and they write down all of the key summaries that they want used in the audio guide.

And then he sends it to the translation team, and then the translation team would go through it, translate it, and then it comes back to the production team, and the production team then reviews it and those who are bilingual and know the show will go through it again.

And then after that, we record it. That's where I've been most involved recently; to be the voice on the audio guide.

Alisha: Would you like to have a wider audience?

Saya: Absolutely! If you're able to come and see the show, we would love for anyone to come and see the show and be a part of the experience because the production team as a whole has been working on this for at least 3 to 4 months. And the directors have been working on the show for, you know, maybe over a year.

From the start of when they think about, "ah, maybe I want to direct that show," to the point of actually getting it up on stage.

We welcome anyone to come and see it.

Alisha: If someone wants to come and see a show, how do they find information about it?

Saya: If you go to our website, which is www.tokyoplayers.org, you can find us on social media and all of that as well.

Alisha: OK, cool. And then for every production you do, too, there's a chance to kind of interact with some of like, I think you said like the director, the assistant director. There's a sort of Q&A session as well, so people can participate in that too?

Saya: Yes. What has become a tradition now is after the Saturday matinee show, we have a director's talk. We do a Q&A and the core members of the production team get on stage and sometimes some of our cast members would as well.

And we have a session of Q&A. That's usually the time when we have the most school groups come in as well. So then they get to ask questions and learn a little bit more about the process. "How do you learn your lines?" "Who designed the costumes?" Whatever that is that they're curious about.

Alisha: I look forward to the next time to come see a show, and I hope lots of other people come and check it out as well. It's fantastic! So, thank you so much for chatting with me today! I really appreciate all of your insights.

So thanks very much for watching this episode of Nonnative Creative with Saya Suetsugu, the president of TIP, Tokyo International Players. Please be sure to take a look at their website and all their great resources so that you don't miss a show next time you're visiting Tokyo. Thank you! Bye bye!

Director: It's kind of our idea of what an old-timey "Renaissance"-esque world might look like.

Saya: I think it's something that you really have to be there. You hear people say that conversations, like "ah, you had to be there!" But to experience that moment, you had to be there.

Because it's not gonna be the same later that evening or the next evening. So I think that's really cool.