

My Singapore

“How would you describe Singapore in one word?”

This was the last question of a long list sent by Singapore Tourist Board Tokyo Bureau for their interviews with Japanese performers Akira (Singapore Dance Theatre) and Chikako (Singapore Symphony Orchestra). I helped out as SDT’s coordinator last year. Just one word would be a challenge I thought, as Singapore offers so much! What would your answer be?

I discovered the joy of ballet here in Singapore. My husband and I were occasional ballet goers and a few years ago, it dawned on me that my husband secretly yearned to dance, so much so that he might even want to learn ballet (only a wife can tell ☺). Although he confessed his desire, he was too shy to look for dance lessons. So I started my research and quickly came across Singapore Dance Theatre. When I visited their beautiful studios, their receptionist cheerfully said “Oh, bring your husband over! He will appreciate you more as he will be surrounded by all sorts of ladies during class!” And that is how he became the only male student in his class and our Saturday routine was split. While my daughter and I went to the Japanese supplementary school, my husband went to SDT and discovered hidden muscles and studied the elegant movements of ballet. He had such an enjoyable time at SDT that we wanted to show our gratitude through a donation. Then one day, we unexpectedly received an invitation from SDT to the studio for a private viewing. We looked at each other “What shall we do?” We knew nobody and we knew so little about ballet. But fortunately for us, we decided to go.

The studio performance was absolutely eye opening. We were able to watch the dancers so close up that we could hear their breathing and the crisp sounds of their pointe shoes on the floor. We didn’t realise until then how powerful ballet could be and it was delightfully overwhelming. Afterwards, we enjoyed chatting with the friendly dancers over a drink and were fascinated by Janek, SDT’s Artistic Director, and his experience and knowledge. His passion for ballet and SDT was so inspiring that we wanted to listen to his stories more. He might also have been surprised to see how little we knew about the company.

A few days later, I was approached by SDT’s outreach department asking if I happened to be a teacher (and the answer happened to be yes). They explained that SDT had visited various schools in Singapore but had not been successful in reaching any of the Japanese schools so far. I thought this rather a lucky coincidence as I remembered my days as a volunteer interpreter at the Japanese primary school, helping teachers to organise school excursions. I remembered how difficult it was to find suitable organisations where children could learn about Singapore and

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have a glimpse of the real world. It occurred to me that SDT would be an ideal company as they are professional artists who made their dreams come true, and had several Japanese dancers in the company. They could inspire children and show them studying is not the only goal of school life! So my mission as an ambassador at SDT started with introducing new friends (SDT) to old friends (the Japanese community in Singapore). And after that, I started reaching out to other people and organisations to spread the good news about SDT and their inspiring dancers.

Regardless of the art form, either music or dance, art in Singapore still has some way to grow its roots into the daily life of the people. This is different to Japan, where art can be seen as part of everyday life, providing a bit of spice to daily lives. While interacting with different people around me, I came to realise that to the majority, the feeling towards art is still somehow distant in Singapore. Through our new friends at SDT (from Artistic Director, staff, dancers, musicians, supporters and patrons), we learnt not just about ballet and the art scene, but also about Singapore, and about life. When we meet them, it gives us a unique opportunity to see Singapore from a different perspective.



Welcoming His Highness Jun Yamazaki, Japanese Ambassador to Singapore. Studio Viewing in 2019 was a delightful occasion.

The art community here may be relatively small but we enjoy its friendliness and welcoming attitude, which means that the company and artists are closer to the audience than in other countries. I also support SDT because they try their best to educate the audience through their outreach programme. Their artistic standard is world class yet their friendliness makes them so approachable. In the end, we have received much more than we have given them. Through our role as members of SDT’s Ambassadors Council, we have been blessed with an insight into a new world, with amazing friends, unforgettable performances and invaluable experiences. My best memory of all is last year’s



Full rehearsal for Romeo & Juliet at studio. From right, Gabriel Hoe (pianist), Joshua Tan (conductor), Satoru and Min Yi, May, Artistic Director Janek and myself. Watching the rehearsal is always a wonderful treat.



Rehearsal with Metropolitan Festival Orchestra at Esplanade Theatre. Conductor Joshua taught us that playing music to accompany dancers is very different from a classical concert even if it is the same Tchaikovsky. The tempo and the pulse need significant adjustment to accompany the movements of the dancers.

Romeo & Juliet. My husband was given a character role and the whole experience was absolutely incredible and we cherished every moment of the production.

So how would I describe Singapore? My answer would be that Singapore is the place where I learnt the gift of meeting people. By meeting new people you develop as a person. People you meet carry gifts in different forms. Sometimes it is a hint how to live well; sometimes it is encouragement to be yourself.

Singapore's first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew described the future of Singapore as "A Tropical Global Creative Art City-State". As Artistic Director Janek explains, SDT's goal is to become an institution that represents Singapore as a cultural icon, producing performances, establishing an identity and educating future dancers and audiences that last well beyond the moment of presentation and performance. The art industry is still trying to reach its goal and we as an audience are in the fortunate position to be part of the growth. And it is comforting for me to see there are many Japanese professionals in the art industry in Singapore sharing this journey. Not just dancers with SDT, but musicians in orchestras and lecturers at La Salle Art College of the Arts. Perhaps it is because we came from Japan that has a long history and rich in culture, we appreciate the arts and are happy to be part of it in this young country.

If I meet a fellow Japanese who is new in town, I would suggest that she/he should embrace every opportunity that Singapore offers. If someone introduces you to something new, give it a try. If someone introduces you to someone new, go out and meet him/her. You never know what treasure you will find. I call it the chemistry of meeting

people. It could be a seed of growth or new discoveries of yourself. If you wonder where to start, the rule of thumb would be to start with what you enjoy most. I remember what Satoru, a soloist at SDT, told me during a recent interview; that he realised that if you keep doing what you love, sooner or later you will find yourself surrounded by people who appreciate you the way you are. Covid-19 has changed our daily lives. On the positive side, one of the good changes is the movement of #support local business #support local artists. We are fortunate to live in a city where there are professional artists to give colour to our lives.

This is my last article in this series for the Japanese Association. It was such a pleasure to meet you through these articles.

I am grateful to my editor, Kaoru-san who has been so supportive from the beginning and the editorial committee that checked my drafts so carefully every month.

Although we do not know how long it will take for the theatres to reopen, we know the day will definitely come and I hope to see you there in person. Thank you for being part of my journey ☺



Two Queens from Swan Lake (2019). Min Yi and Kana smiling in the studio. Min Yi became first Singaporean principal at SDT that year. (Photo by Jason Carter)



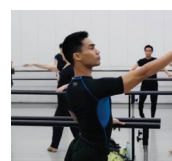
Final rehearsal on stage. Listening to Artistic Director's instruction (Romeo & Juliet 2020)



Rehearsal of Ballet Under the Stars (2019). The opulent combination of a ballet and picnic is the best way to pamper yourself.



Friendly atmosphere at the back stage (Romeo & Juliet 2020)



Singapore Dance Theatre Artists (courtesy by SDT) and newly joined John ☺

Yasuko Yeung

Ambassadors Council of Singapore Dance Theatre

Writing for dear friends and members of the Japanese Association was a blessing and joy. Thank you to all who helped me write these 12 articles. Thank you for sharing your experiences, knowledge and photographs. When Ambassador Yamazaki and his wife came to Esplanade to watch Don Quixote, my husband and I had the pleasure of welcoming them. I was nervous to introduce myself as an ambassador to the real ambassador but the friendly ambassador said "We all know how responsible ambassadors are, don't we ☺?"

I hope the current restrictions will help people realise how much art can enrich our daily lives.