

Non-Verbal Theater GEAR in Kyoto

---Created in Japan and first of its kind in Japan---



https://youtu.be/Lu_dVgt9urg



Have you heard about the GEAR non-verbal theater? Located in the Sanjo area, which is affectionately known as the navel, or center, of Kyoto, GEAR has been performing long-running non-verbal entertainment for 12 years (as of 2024) in a retro building constructed in the early Showa period (1926–89). Specialists in their respective fields of mime, break dancing, magic, and juggling engage as personified robots (Roboroids) in an entertaining and moving story centered on a Doll. The Roboroids and the Doll do not possess any language, but without speaking they draw the audience into the theme of “What does it mean to be human?” The visual effects using projection mapping and LED dresses are wonderful too. I had already seen the performance a couple of times in an individual capacity, but on my third visit, as part of my reporting, I was also given special permission to attend a feedback meeting after the performance. Let me introduce you to the attractions of GEAR.

Story

There is a rundown, forgotten factory with no humans around. Not knowing anything, personified robots, or Roboroids, continue making toy dolls there. One day a toy doll, the size of a human being, appears. While ruffled by this immensely curious Doll, under her strange force, the Roboroids themselves begin to display individual power. The Doll also plays with them and gradually draws closer to being human. And then . . .

Characters and cast

Like the special-effect heroes that are so popular among kids, the characters have costumes that are colored according to their abilities. The red Roboroid is the leader and does mime, the yellow one performs break dancing, the blue one does magic, and the green one juggles. And the Doll is white. Each character is performed by five to seven cast members who play the role in turn.

In my reporting this time, I was able to meet the cast on that day. Here are their photos and the comments and messages that I asked each one of them to give about the attractions of GEAR.

Comments from the cast



Yuka Hyodo (Doll): "Let's have fun together, regardless of nationality, gender, or age!"



Ryutaro Okuma (mime): "The rundown factory art is amazing!"

Tatsuya (break dancing): "We deliver a thrilling performance."





Yuki Matsuda (magic):

“Pay attention to the fusion of story and performance!”

Naoto Miyata (juggling):

“The individuality of the cast is attractive too.”



Evolution and deepening

GEAR places a lot of importance on audience questionnaires. When I looked around after the performance, many audience members were enthusiastically replying to the questionnaire. The questionnaire response rate is 80% on average, with more than 97% of respondents saying they had enjoyed the show. The theater has a capacity of 72 seats. Unlike large theaters, the distance to the stage is small, and there is a lot of (non-verbal) communication with the cast. Maybe that is why audience members want to convey their feelings so much. Moreover, receiving those sentiments, the GEAR cast and staff try as much as possible to reflect this feedback in the next performance.

The name of GEAR’s director is given as On Kyakuyou, which means the audience. Actually, there is no director. With reference to the audience feedback, the cast, technical staff, stage staff, and sometimes production and floor staff meet and think about improvements. After each performance there is a feedback meeting at which they look at a video of the filmed performance and the audience questionnaires and discuss



improvements. At the feedback meeting that I was allowed to attend, the participants, for example, watched the video of a dance scene, and someone said, “We want more energy here!” And viewing a scene that leads to the factory getting out of control, someone else said jokingly, “For example, maybe this could fall to the floor and move around. Magician, can’t

you do something here?” To which the magician immediately quipped, in the Kansai dialect and laughing, “No way!” The performance videos and meeting videos are shared among not only those present at the time but all cast members and staff. Amazingly, this custom continues even today, after more than 4,500 performances.

In this way, GEAR’s performance is evolving day by day. When I asked Ms. Hyodo, who plays the Doll, what is most impressive in this evolution, she unhesitatingly answered, “The movement of the Roboroids!” Come to think of it, although the cast members, apart from the mime actors, are all professional performers, they are amateurs when it comes to acting. It must take a lot of effort for them to move around awkwardly in step with the machine-like sound effects.



In the materials that I received from the production staff, it was written that a document called “Concept Notes” is shared among all related persons in GEAR. This document cannot be shown to outsiders, of course, but it describes the concepts contained in each scene. Cast members do not have to follow these notes word by word, like a script. As long as they are in accordance with the concept, I was told, it is okay for them to change the form of expression as they like. When I asked what kind of things are written in the “Concept Notes,” I was given one example: “People learn and grow through curiosity and playfulness.” Well, certainly there were scenes like that.

Some people apparently ask GEAR whether there will be any sequel or different version. But the aim of GEAR, I was told, is not only to evolve but also, precisely because it is a long-running show, to deepen the sentiments incorporated in the “Concept Notes” by thoroughly concentrating on the fine parts and refining the essence.

Bequeathed sentiments

The founding producer of GEAR is Keito Kohara. I was not able to meet him this time, but as I read the materials, his reason for creating the show came into view.

In his younger days Mr. Kohara had questions about life and traveled to India, where he visited so-called holy persons and learned about Indian philosophy and Oriental thought. Interestingly, he was told by the holy persons, “If you haven’t studied Zen, what are you doing here?” After returning to Japan, therefore, Mr. Kohara studied

Zen. Having learned about Oriental thought, his belief seems to be that two opposing elements, such as light and dark, movement and stillness, male and female, and life and death, blend into a single harmonized notion.

Furthermore, Mr. Kohara used to be involved in Kabuki, and the GEAR show is peppered with various aspects of Kabuki. For example, the gear-shaped revolving stage at the center of the stage setting is said to be modeled on the revolving stage developed in the eighteenth century, for the first time in the world, as a Kabuki stage mechanism. There is no singing in the non-verbal GEAR show, but it does have the dance techniques and acting, as well as the acrobatics and magic-like quick costume changes seen in Kabuki. Also, Kabuki has continued for more than 400 years with the same plays being performed by various actors and appearing quite different depending on the actor. Likewise, GEAR has adopted this approach in a long-run formula too.



In addition, there is one more episode that concerns Kabuki. When the Nakaza Kabuki theater in Osaka was demolished, Mr. Kohara got an old large mirror that was about to be thrown away. Knowing that numerous famous actors had used this mirror before going on stage, and believing that their souls dwell there, he installed it backstage at the GEAR theater. I suppose Mr. Kohara is reflecting, in the GEAR spirit, his belief that even if people are no longer with us, their bequeathed sentiments remain.

Although it takes Kabuki as a model, however, another characteristic of GEAR is that it does not include Japanese elements in its music or costume. Nevertheless, foreigners apparently often say that it is very Japanese. Maybe this is because GEAR places importance on the very Oriental and Japanese concept of “balance and harmony.” In other words, even if opposing things exist, everything comes together as one. As long as we have mutual acceptance, ambiguity is fine.

What does it mean to be human?



The name of the non-verbal theater, GEAR, apparently means creating a big force by harmonizing several differently shaped gears. Hearing this explanation, I pictured the various gears in a watch intermeshing to measure the time. A quiet harmony is maintained there. “Sometime words spark a reaction,” says Mr. Kohara. Maybe that is why GEAR, in its quest for harmony, is non-verbal.



Human beings make no appearance in the GEAR show. It attempts to depict humans through the Roboroids and Doll. Certainly, the scenes where they interlock like gears, and the scenes where they reach out to one another, suddenly give you a feeling of their humanity.

Although my explanation above has been maybe a bit too grandiloquent, as evidence that the show can be enjoyed without this background knowledge and regardless of age, at the performance I saw this time it was undoubtedly the children in the audience who laughed the most and seemed to be having fun.

Anyway, go along and see for yourself!

Interview with foreign visitors

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGb95Y7jh9A>



Cooperation:

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Cast and Staff members

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Promotional Video commemorating the topping of 4,500 performances:

https://youtu.be/9AH7S7YrSvk?si=OX_XHIqtuVnBBBMs

