



# Local Issues Take Stage – Culture and Community Revitalization

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In recent years, regional and community theatre are increasingly gaining attention in contrast to the hitherto almost exclusive focus on the capital's culture scene. The boom of regional arts and theatre festivals are a clear marker of this trend. At the same time, renowned artists of various generations are rushing into rural areas to produce art that gives local citizens and their issues a voice. My project investigates how the multiple challenges faced by the Japanese regions are represented and negotiated in performance and cultural production. Arts in general and regional and community theatre in particular can serve as a platform to retell people's stories and create a public sphere to foster collective experience and social debate (Forenza 2017).

## Research Questions

- How are the multiple challenges faced by the Japanese regions are represented and negotiated in the arts?
- What topics and issues are addressed and how are they realized?
- How do these art works participate in shaping public discourse on rural Japan between an idealized repository of nostalgia and a backward "other"?
- Have the cultural activities examined actually resulted in any revitalization (*chihō sōsei*) or triggered any change on the community and individual level? And what are the long-term perspectives?
- How do local and non-local actors collaborate and how do they rate their teamwork and results?
- What are the similarities and differences across investigated communities and what generalizations can be made?

## Methods

- Qualitative case studies, interviews and participant observation in various rural communities
- Investigation of the interactions between artists and organizations and individuals from various local communities
- In-depths analyses of representative art works and performance texts including the conditions of production
- Application of theory from various disciplines such as social studies, cultural studies and anthropology



KIAC children's project with the artist Moriyama Mirai

## Example

The Kinosaki International Arts Center (KIAC), which was founded in 2014 by Hirata Oriza (b. 1962), a leading figure in the Japanese culture and theatre world, in the rural city of Toyooka (Hyōgo Prefecture) is a prominent case in point. Hirata has the vision to develop this artists-in-residence program into "an Asian version of the Avignon Festival Fringe" and plans to move the base of his Seinendan theater company from Tokyo to Toyooka by 2020. His aims are twofold: first, to search for new ways to produce "works that relate to today's social and political issues and provoke discussion among people" (Tanaka 2018) by working closely with local individuals and institutions at a place he considers more suitable for artistic creation than the capital city. Second, to improve the quality of life and counter depopulation through the arts and enhance education and social services through drama. With his aim to create "an environment where people meet and find new perspectives of the world" (Kinosaki International Arts Center, 2013) Hirata's project goes far beyond a quest for aesthetic innovation or the engagement with discrete social issues.



Hirata Oriza

## Strategic Significance

In spite of the growing international interest in "socially engaged art" (Jackson 2011 and Bishop 2012), Japanese cultural studies have hitherto hardly taken into account the relationship between socially informed activism and cultural production. My project corresponds to this "social turn" in the arts and brings together expertise from cultural studies, social studies and anthropology to develop a wider methodology and to contribute to a better understanding of Japanese culture and society. The questions raised by local culture and community theatre (e.g. economic hardship, ageing, depopulation, and the consequences of the triple disaster) are based on challenges facing not only Japan but many other countries as well. In facilitating a greater understanding of these artistic responses to social changes and challenges, contemporary Japanese culture can be discussed as a role model for others.

## References

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