

Thoughts on “The Legend of Taro Shoji”

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On Sunday afternoon of February 4th, 2018, I attended the musical “The Legend of Taro Shoji” at the Warabi Theater in Akita city. This was my first time attending a theater piece in Japan, much less Akita, so I was unsure of what to expect. Since I had never heard the name Taro Shoji before, I spent the previous day doing some quick research. I found some fairly general information: Taro Shoji was born in Akita in the Meiji Period and had always had a passion for music. Before he made a name for himself, he’d attended university and worked temporarily for the Southern Manchurian Railway Company in the thirties. He eventually became well-known as a popular singer of nationalistic songs, which, because of their nationalism, would later be censored by the American Occupation after the war. This was the basic knowledge I had walking into the theater.

I arrived in Akita to study at Akita International University in late August and have since then spent five months visiting the region’s cultural sites, trying the cuisine, learning the history, and interacting with the people. So, I was excited to be able to attend a musical about a famous and historical Akita local. Even coming from rural Akita, Taro had big dreams from a young age. However, unlike a lot of other success stories, Taro didn’t achieve his dream so quickly and ran into several obstacles along the way: his parents’ wishes, a failed restaurant business, and even having to overcome cancer. This, in addition to having lived through a ferocious and merciless war and having had to mourn the death of several loved ones, makes the audience all the more astounded by his determination and his accomplishments. Even in the face of poverty, war, and death, he persevered because of one desire: to fill the world with music that would bring others happiness. His persistence and the passionate support he received from his wife and friends had me constantly on the edge of my seat, rooting for their success and grieving for their losses.

Aside from the personal side of this story, there was a certain historical sensitivity to Taro’s story as well. The early 20th century and the Second World War has always been a sensitive topic in Japan, as well as the American Occupation that followed. The war induced a huge amount of suffering in both China and Japan and had a major impact on Japanese national identity. The motivations for war, the consequences of war, and the radical changes made during the Occupational period brought the true meaning of “Japanese nationalism” into question, as it was no longer the same nationalism of the Meiji period. Having a genuine love

for his home, Taro continued to sing about his love for his country, perhaps in hopes for a better future after the devastation of the war.

The story itself was very moving, but this is also thanks to the talent of the actors. I had seen photos and videos of Taro Shoji on the internet before attending the show and I was surprised how much Kenya Takano resembled him in appearance and in behavioral. In fact, there was never a moment during the performance where you couldn't tell what the characters were feeling – the actors projected the characters' feelings through expert facial expressions and emotion-packed dialogue and musical numbers. Although the show only featured four actors for a variety of characters, there was nothing awkward about having the same actor for two or three different roles. Each new character was unique and dynamic, adding a richness to Taro's journey and all the different people he met and parted with along the way.

There were a few scenes that really stuck out to me. These were the transition between the yakuza scene and the proceeding scene, the war scene, and the scene at the end where Taro hears his loved ones speaking to him from the afterlife. What really struck me about the former was the way the traditional music didn't fade out immediately as Western-style music began to play. The dissonance from the two different music styles playing simultaneously felt symbolic of a time when Japan was grappling between its desire to modernize and Westernize and its desire to maintain its traditional cultural identity. Secondly, the war scene was memorable because of its intensity. Wazabi has a rather small stage and few props, but even so the actors and stage crew were able to transform it into a different scene each time. The war scene especially changed the entire atmosphere of the play and created a sense of urgency and despair that was intensified by Taro's sorrowful last song to his fallen friend. Thirdly, the scene where Taro hears his loved ones from the afterlife brought the musical to a poignant climax. Their final words reminding Taro of the reason he wanted to sing all along – to bring happiness to others – seemed to resonate in my soul.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, it was obvious that the audience loved the performance. As this story was not only a Japanese one but particularly a story from Akita, the audience was thrilled every time Taro spoke in his quirky Akita dialect, and moved when he contemplated the beautiful natural scenery of the Oga Peninsula. Throughout the performance, I heard a lot of laughs, which is how I know that even now Taro Shoji's music is bringing happiness to his hometown.