

Japan Week at the MAC:

Enjoying the difference of a culture and its fusion

Story by Lisa Norman

It is customary to remove one's shoes before entering a house in Japan. I visited Dr. Shozo Sato's house on the Mendocino Coast to interview him about the Mendocino Art Center's upcoming Japan Week program and noticed his style of removing his shoes, somewhat varied and more refined than what we practiced in Hawaii growing up as kids. I would kick mine off before I ran into the house, without particular regard for how the shoes landed. If they were off, sort of in a line or pile not too close to the door to prevent accidents upon entering, not tripping into the house, the manner was neat enough. But I watched Sato carefully turn his back to the entrance, remove his shoes placing them precisely together a step or two away from the door, and then turn to enter the house. I told him I noticed he turned his back to remove his shoes.

Understanding the question, he says, "In case you have to leave in a hurry." Shoes would be facing the right direction.

Best to be prepared, I surmise. This is funny to me not having thought that far ahead of my visit. But later Sato and I reflect, a lot of Japan's customs have been accepted into America's modern day culture and not always in the precise manner in which they were presented. Twenty years ago, who would have thought you could buy sushi in the grocery store, and not just vinegared rice with raw fish in seaweed, but the "California roll." Nowadays the "fusion" of cultures is ever-present and we see wasabi served in an artistic drizzle on a plate, not just as a ball in the corner, we have soy sauce on our dinner tables not just salt and hear the words head "hancho" even refer to our "boss."

The upcoming week-long presentation of Japan's culture at the Mendocino Art Center is a celebration of Japanese traditions. It is an opportunity to participate in workshops, demonstrations, lectures, performances, exhibits and more—teachings that have imbued "American" traditions in the United States. Many of the artists and visiting instructors are American, says Sato. They have genuine interest in the Japanese culture, have taken it in and studied it to the point of becoming experts, surpassing even those who are by nation, of Japan. This distinction, Sato offers, is why guests to the event should be confident that they can also learn and even master what may seem foreign at first.

An Imperial Performer

Sato has long had an interest in promoting the art and culture of Japan. In 1967, he was invited by Bill Zacha, to the North Coast. He taught classes in the Japanese art forms, ikebana and sumi-e, and would later retire to the coast with his wife Alice, with a commitment to share the art and culture of Japan with the coastal community.

His past is colored with distinctions. Sato received a degree in fine arts from Bunka Gakuin college in Tokyo, holds the highest degrees in Japanese tea ceremony, ikebana and Japanese dance. His dramatic training took place at Toho Academy in Tokyo. In kabuki, he was a special student of Nakamura, Kanzaburo XVII (Living National Treasure). He is a professor emeritus from the School of Art & Design, University of Illinois, and was artist-in-residence at the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, Urbana-Champaign campus. In theatre, he is internationally known for his productions: Kabuki Macbeth, Kabuki Medea; Achilles: a Kabuki Play, and others. Most recently, he received honors from the Emperor of Japan for his promotion of Japanese art in the United States.

Each year, each minister of culture applies to the imperial household for the distinction. Five persons from all over the world, mostly in the United States, received awards this year—one each from Oklahoma and Houston and two from Illinois; plus one from Brazil, the acting ambassador of Japan. The Consul General of Japan in Chicago knew of professor Sato's forty years of work representing Japanese culture and applied in his behalf. In Sato's case, the imperial honor gives recognition of him as an artist, the first ever decorated in that field. Recognition has often been given to those in government and science-related work

—the president of Toyota, high-ranking business men and scientists. “So as an artist, this is a unique experience,” Sato states.

Still active in the theatre arts scene, Sato will revive one of his works, *Kabuki Lady Macbeth*, opening in Chicago next spring. The manner of presentation will be innovative, says Sato. There will be a fusion of theatrical forms, kabuki and Shakespeare, and he promises it will be something that’ll “knock the socks off” theatre patrons.

Top-notch Agenda

Sato’s talent as a performer may be seen during the August 8 performance of Japan Week. His traditional Japanese dance performance will accompany a shakuhachi (vertical bamboo flute) concert by David Wheeler and koto (13-string zither) and shamisen (3-string lute) concert by Yoko Hiraoka. Sato, who has helped arrange the agenda of performers, lectures and workshops, is confident that the caliber of the week-long event is topnotch. The agenda, he says, draws from Japanese literature and visual arts and people can enjoy and take part in them applying them to their own daily life.

Among the exceptional artists, Wheeler started his studies in Tokyo under Junsuke Kawase III in 1977 and received his Master certification in 1984. He received his master’s degree in Japanese Music Theory from the Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music in 1985. According to Sato, since 1982, Wheeler has been performing, teaching, lecturing and writing about the shakuhachi and Japanese music and culture. His performance activities cover the full range of music today, from Japanese classical to Western to the avant-garde.

Hiraoka, Sato describes as a master singer and performer of the koto and the shamisen. She has been performing her art for almost thirty years. As a Jiuta singer, she draws on literary sources as varied as the *Kokinwaka shu* and the *Tales of Genji* and *Heike*, performing classical pieces from the early seventeenth century onwards. Her wide-ranging repertoire also includes twentieth century contemporary Japanese works for koto and shamisen as well as avant-garde microtonal composition for koto and collaborations with Western musicians.

August 8 will also feature children’s workshops from 1:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.; they meet simultaneously. Children are invited to move freely among the activities which include origami with Susan “Spirit” Tanaka, *gyotaku* (fish prints) with Lynda O’Neil, *kumihimo* (braiding) with Laine Escola and *dogu* and *haniwa* (ceramics) with Margaret Paul.

The TAIKO performance the night before, August 7, will thrill audiences. KOKORO Shasta Taiko Small Ensemble, Russel Hisashi Baba and Jeanne Aiko Mercer, will present an evening of original music with roots in Japanese taiko and American jazz. Baba is a critically acclaimed saxophone/flute player and composer, and Mercer is a respected and honored American taiko pioneer. Their music, they describe, “is about living today in two worlds—traditional/modern, East/West, form/freedom, and mind/heart—reflecting the duality and balance we all experience.” Spirit, a Japan Week programmer, describes them as musical and visual. “They draw from their extensive backgrounds in jazz, world music and taiko, combining fresh compositions and improvisation that range from the subtle reflection to the powerful dynamics that taiko possesses.”

Spirit has also gathered troops for an entertaining Japanese festival, *Nippon Matsuri*, which opens the art center event, August 7 and 8. It will feature Japanese inspired arts and crafts of pottery, fiber, textiles, handmade paper, *sumi-e*, music, food, *saké*, Japanese soda and beer, plus a demonstration by the Mendocino Recreation Martial Arts Dojo.

Lectures and demonstrations include *ikebana* with Reiko Granade, *urushi* (Japanese lacquering) with Natsuki Kurimoto, bamboo basketry with Jiro Yonezawa, *sumi-e* with Betzi Robinson and tea ceremony with Sato.

Special this year is also a tour of Sato’s traditional tea garden with tea ceremony. Groups of five are invited throughout the day to enjoy the hospitality of Shozo and Alice Sato at their home north of Forth Bragg. Their gardener Lichen will be there to guide guests through the garden. Participants of Japan Week are also invited to view and purchase a variety of bonsai plants at Albion Ridge Nursery hosted by gardener

Greg Ross.

Japanese landscaping is especially valuable to North Coast residents and those with similar climates, says Sato. It is important to incorporate Japanese landscaping since the temperature is so agreeable for many of the plants, he adds. James Bier will also conduct classes with slide lectures on the different forms of Japanese landscaping during the week. Participants will be given tools (tray, rock, sand, plants, clay, etc.) for creating a miniature landscape to actually experience the building of a three-dimensional design and an understanding of the format for composition.

Bier, Sato says, is a well-known cartographer at the University of Illinois. He has had a life-long devoted interest in Japanese landscape and has created several Japanese gardens in the Midwest. A most recent grand scale landscape was created for the gardens of the new Japan House on the campus of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. This encompasses a tea garden, dry landscape and other styles of Japanese gardens.

Other workshops scheduled for the event are Japanese Fiber Arts with Misao Tsubaki and Japanese Calligraphy with Eishi Sakuta. Tsubaki presented a program with foremost Tokyo designer Henri Sato for the first Japan Week; Henri's design's, specially made for the art center event, will be flown in for the fashion show which takes place August 8. His clientele includes the royal princesses of Japan, ambassador's wives, actresses, dancers and the like, in Japan. Concurrent with Tsubaki's classes in two- and three-dimensional art will be an exhibition of her work, along with the work of Sakuta, Lee Gurga (former president of the Haiku Society of America and associate editor of Modern Haiku) and Natsuki Kurimoto. Well-known silk painters from around the country will also showcase their art in the main gallery. Sato notes that Tsubaki has won grand prizes for her work in oil painting but her contemporary work is the use of fabric and stichery to create dynamic works of art. She has had numerous solo exhibitions and group exhibitions. Her work and techniques have been written up in numerous publications on textile arts and fiber arts.

Sakuta's slide lecture on calligraphy will allow participants to learn from the "foundation of the creative process of calligraphy." On the final day of the workshop, participants will learn to mount their pieces in the traditional ura uchi method.

Sakuta is president of Naniwa Shodo Association, one of the largest organizations in the art of calligraphy, with headquarters in Osaka, Japan. His works, adds Sato, will be available for purchase.

The gala reception which includes music, food, dance, a fashion show, an exhibition of work by visiting artists and the opportunity to meet and greet them, is August 7. The final event, August 14, is a performance by Theatre Yugen of San Francisco. They will perform an evening of comedy skits "kyogen" in English.

A pass to all the Japan Week events, exclusive of the adult workshops taught by Tsubaki, Sakuta and Bier, can be purchased for \$200. Phone the art center at 937-5818 to order a pass or individual event tickets.

Further information, including time dates and times of the events, is also available at that number or at www.medocinoartcenter.org

Contemporary culture, art, lifestyle is becoming almost without an international line, notes Sato. "France, Germany, New Delhi, Hong Kong, New York—it is about the same for the youth. However, mature society still sees the value of tradition. They can enjoy the difference of an individual culture and its background." He adds, "Promoting a better understanding not through politics but through arts becomes more important because traditional art has the true voice of people and culture. Contemporary art has no border; it's a very single statement."

"So, it is a very short one-week art festival," continues Sato. From children's activities to refined music to informational workshops of different forms of Japan, all very important activities.

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