



# World Ballet “Superpower” Sends Message of Peace

**Ballet legends Morishita Yoko and Shimizu Tetsutaro continue to perform – and teach – with peace in their hearts.**

**ROB GILHOOLY**

**T**HE performers take their places, their colorful, finely decorated costumes reflecting endlessly in the mirrors that cover the walls of the Matsuyama Ballet Foundation studio in central Tokyo. Right on cue, they respond with light-switch immediacy to the rousing music, a shimmering, harmonious wave of graceful body arches and feather-light limb movements, twenty-two ballerinas come together as individual, yet inseparable parts of a living work of art.

At the center emerges Morishita Yoko, who glides effortlessly *sur les pointes* as choreographer Shimizu Tetsutaro, the Foundation’s Executive Director, moves purposefully from ballerina to ballerina, making minute adjustments to positioning and posture that are unidentifiable to the untrained eye.

Morishita and her partner Shimizu are towering figures in Japanese ballet. In the 1970s and ‘80s they

wowed audiences far and wide, with Morishita’s emotion-laced bravura earning her plaudits even in the established power houses of Europe. Her performances also secured her a gold medal at the prestigious International Ballet Competition in Varna, Bulgaria—the first time for a Japanese national to win a major European competition.

She subsequently became the first Japanese ballerina to gain recognition on the international scene, earning her the sobriquet “Prima Ballerina of the World,” and “Pearl of the Orient.”

Her success in Bulgaria came in 1974, when Morishita was just 25, but by then she had already been lacing up her pointe shoes for 22 years having been sent to ballet classes aged three by her parents to make their sickly child stronger.

Then, the ballet climate in Japan was very different, says Morishita, who continues to hone her art as prima ballerina at the bustling Matsuyama Ballet Foundation, which she runs with Shimizu.

“Our *senpai* (seniors) only had music scores to work from, which must have been a struggle and nothing like today when everything is available at the press of a button,” says Morishita, who was born



Video by Satoshi Tanaka

in Hiroshima just two years after the very first performance of *Swan Lake* by Japanese performers.

“But they took it very seriously and studied meticulously with great sensitivity, processed it and passed it on, which is a strength of the Japanese, I think.”

This ultimately created something that, while still highly “technical” at its core, was less weighed down by centuries-old rules, etiquette and status, partner Shimizu adds. “I think that’s why it has flourished here,” he says.

Ballet dates back to the Renaissance courts of fifteenth-century Italy, but didn’t make its way to Japan until the beginning of the 1900s. Then, classes were offered at the opera department of the Imperial Theater in Tokyo, with instructors often Russian artists who had fled the social and political unrest of the time.

But it wasn’t until after World War II that ballet began to find a wider appreciation. Schools opened up one after another, and by the time an 11-year-old Morishita had persuaded her parents to let her move to Tokyo to study at a ballet school, it had started to thrive in the capital.

One of the first schools to open after the war was the Matsuyama Ballet Foundation, which was founded in 1948 by Shimizu’s father, Masao, and renowned ballerina Matsuyama Mikiko. Morishita decided to join the Foundation because she was so impressed by Matsuyama’s dancing.

Today, there are around 4,500 ballet schools across Japan attended by more than 400,000 students, according to the Association of Japanese Ballet Companies. The numbers show Japan is an unparalleled “ballet superpower,” Shimizu says.

This is also reflected in the increasing numbers of Japanese who have found success on the international stage. While Morishita and Shimizu blazed a trail in the 1970s, performing alongside some of ballet’s greats, such as Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn, today there is barely a ballet troupe worldwide without Japanese members.

The principal of the Royal Ballet in London and the Polish National Ballet are both Japanese female dancers. And Japanese ballerinas regularly stand on the winners rostrum at contests around the globe. In 2012, of the twenty-one finalists at the prestigious Prix de Lausanne competition, five were Japanese nationals.

That same year Morishita Yoko was awarded the

Shimizu makes some minor adjustments



Ballerinas in rehearsal



A children's ballet class

Praemium Imperiale to add to her long list of accolades, which include the Laurence Olivier Award in 1985.

After accepting the award in Tokyo, she commented that “flashy” dancing alone could never guarantee success and ballerinas aimed to “inspire hope, dreams and courage,” she said.

“When we take to the stage we ballerinas don’t perform just to show off our skill and art,” says Morishita, who still rehearses six hours every day. “There’s still conflict in the world, and we perform with a message of peace in our hearts. Ballet is the international art of peace.”

Her humble dream is that ballet will become a lingua franca for peace. **W**