



Saitama Gold Theater group photograph (2017)

A 63-year-old housewife joined a theater company and took to the stage. Since then, she has performed on many stages. Now 78, she is devoting her life to acting.

UNO MASAKI

In February 2006, an article appeared in a newspaper calling for people with or without acting experience to join a theater company being started up by Ninagawa Yukio (1935–2016), an eminent theater producer both in Japan and internationally. The theater company was called Saitama Gold Theater, based at Saitama Arts Theatre in Saitama City, Saitama Prefecture, and its members had to be at least 55 years old. The words “You will be trained as professional actors” in the small article caught the eye of Hyakumoto Natsue, now 78. Hyakumoto had been thinking that she did not want to live out her days as a housewife and was looking to find a clear purpose in life. Having a hunch that this was it, she cut the article out and placed it on her dining table. However, she dithered over whether to apply, not confident she would be accepted. Then her husband told her, “If you don’t hurry, you’ll miss out. Why not just try?” So she took the plunge and applied. It was the first step to a new life.

Aged 63 at the time, Hyakumoto was one of the 48 people selected to join the troupe out of 1,200

All photos: Courtesy of Miyagawa Maiko

applicants from Japan and abroad, and her life began to transform.

Every day for a year and a half, she commuted 90 minutes each way from her home in Tokyo to the theater, where she attended training and classroom lectures from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. In the summer of 2007, after two interim performances, the curtain rose on the company’s memorable flagship production entitled *Picnic on a Boat*. The play depicts the hopes and anxieties of life as it unfolds aboard a ship carrying people affected by mass layoffs who are on their way to find reemployment overseas. When the boat picks up a refugee from a foreign land, there is a sudden reversal of events. This was the challenge for the novice actors in their first major theater production.

“I was so nervous it felt like my heart was going to explode. As I performed, I did everything in my power to remember what Ninagawa had taught me,” says Hyakumoto, her words conveying the raw excitement of that time.

Under the strict tutelage of Ninagawa, who demanded performances that exude the rich life experience of senior citizens, Hyakumoto performed on many stages, both in Saitama Gold Theater productions as well as those put on by external theater companies. In 2013, she toured Japan and performed abroad in cities such as Paris, France.

Looking back on rehearsals with Ninagawa, she says, “We weren’t spared just because we were

amateurs. He was constantly hurling angry words at us, such as, ‘Cut it out!’ , or ‘You call yourself actors!’ He never hurled objects at us, though,” laughs Hyakumoto. “Seriously, though, Ninagawa drummed into us the need to become actors who can draw on the joys and sorrows we’ve experienced in our long lives and harness those emotions in our performance,” she says.

Ninagawa passed away in May 2016.

Hyakumoto says it was a shock for everyone, but “we were united in the belief that we had come this far because of our love of acting, and that we should continue in our efforts with Ninagawa’s teachings always at the forefront of our minds.”

Today, the group has 35 members; 10 men and 25 women. All were founding members. Some 15 years after the founding of the company, the average age of its members is 81.4 years, with the oldest a 95-year-old woman.

“Even if members leave for a while due to illness or other reasons, they always come back. Acting is their reason for living. For me, too, my life revolves around the theater company. Using my body has made me healthier than I used to be as well as more assertive in my daily life. Other people often tell me that I’ve changed, that I’m so full of life.”

In the midst of the spread of COVID-19, all performances for 2020 were canceled and the outlook for this year too remains uncertain. Even so, Hyakumoto says she wants to continue acting with Saitama Gold Theater.

“I’ve been thinking about what Ninagawa often used to say: 99% of your daily life is related to your acting. I want to put various experiences from my day-to-day life into the drawers of my mind and use them in my future performances.”

Theater-goers are eagerly anticipating the resumption of performances by Hyakumoto and her fellow senior citizens. They say life is just like a story. We are all protagonists in our own lives. Playing our part, we live our lives and weave our stories. **7**



From top, Scene from *Picnic on a Boat* (2007); Scene from *Wareware no moromoro* (2018); Hyakumoto Natsue