

Matthew Pullen - Pembroke Players' Japan Tour 2013

This year I was lucky enough to be selected as the Tour Manager for the Pembroke Players' Japan Tour. Now in its seventh consecutive year the tour gives Cambridge students from across all different colleges the opportunity to take a Shakespeare play to Japan, to perform it at universities and professional theatres, and to deliver educational workshops in schools and universities.

Since the most obvious choices of Shakespeare's works had already been performed on previous tours, I decided on the oft-overlooked *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* for this year's incarnation. I feared that some of Shakespeare's comedies, with their reliance on highly complex character relations, would only serve to exacerbate the language barrier, so the relatively simpler plot of *Two Gents* would be better suited. Also, with *Two Gents* being the shortest of all Shakespeare's plays we could perform it with fewer cuts, while under the strict time constraints of our venues, than other choices would require. A Director and an Assistant Director were appointed after interviews in February and auditions were held in March. However, with Easter and exams soon following, the play came together from scratch in an intense three weeks at the end of August.

At the start of September we gave preview performances in Ely Cathedral and the Round Church, Cambridge before we left for Japan. In the second week of September we flew out to Tokyo and were accommodated in the Tokyu Inn in the neighborhood of Kichijoji, close to our principal sponsor, Seikei University. For the first seven days we spent all our time with Seikei. We met the adorable children of Seikei Elementary, who sang Japanese songs, performed martial arts and danced for us. In return we performed an a capella version of *Stand by Me*; the students have since learnt it in their classes! The next day we gave presentations to classes in the secondary school on topics such as British food, our home lives and Cambridge University. At Seikei University we ran a class on general acting skills, and gave lessons on the use of slang and comparisons between Britain and Japan.

In the evenings we explored the local areas of Shinjuku – with little bars with only enough room for four or five people, around the corner from massive, multistorey arcade complexes – and Shibuya, where we ate takeaway sushi while watching the famous crossing. We got to know the university students well through the classes and workshops. They held a surprise farewell party for us after the show – featuring a very competitive game of Musical Chairs – and then we terrified our kind hosts with our enthusiasm for karaoke and Japanese Pop.

After the first week with Seikei we moved to the National Olympic Memorial Centre in Sangubashi, where the athletes were housed for the '64 Olympics. We gave workshops on the themes and characters within *Two Gents* and a performance at an international school, The American School in Japan, before we helped to run the Yokohama Drama Festival, devising short pieces with 12-15 year olds using a line from the play as a stimulus.

The following day we performed at Daito Bunka University, who thanked us with a lively party afterwards. Then, that evening we caught an overnight bus to Kyoto, an ancient, cultural city and home to over 2,000 temples and shrines. When we arrived – sleep deprived but very excited – we rented electric bikes and explored the east side of the city. Our favourite sight of the day was the Silver Temple, with its beautiful Zen garden. That evening I visited a local onsen, which boasted a herbal bath, warm and cold baths, an outdoor hot bath and an electric bath! This ominous sounding

creation had electric panels on either side of a narrow channel, where you could sit, such that a current passed through the water in between and yourself. At a normal distance to the panels it just caused a funny buzzing feeling in my arms; but when closer my fingers seized up, involuntarily curled into my palms, before my wrists bent in on themselves. It was such a strange feeling!

The next day we bought a bus pass to see the main attractions dotted all over the city: the Temple of the Golden Pavilion was stunning in the sunlight, the Kyoto Imperial Palace was an interesting glimpse into the history of the city and the Fushimi-Inari Shrine, with its iconic red gates stretching into the distance, made for a good climb. In the evening we walked around the traditional Gion District, where we spotted geishas, and then had some delicious yakitori (barbecue chicken) for dinner.

When we returned to Tokyo we performed at Meiji University, whose students then took us to visit the Studio Ghibli Museum, which featured fascinating recreations of their artists' studios. On our last two days in Japan we gave evening performances and a matinée at the Nigiwai-za, a professional theatre in Yokohama. On the last night the Tour treated us to a trip to an izakaya, a restaurant/bar with unlimited food and drinks during a fixed time slot. This was a great opportunity to try all different sorts of sushi, sashimi, more yakitori... as well as different types of sake!

Once back in England, when term had begun, we gave five performances at the Corpus Playroom, ending on a high with a full house for the Saturday night show.

I'm very grateful for having had the opportunity to go to Japan, particularly doing what I love doing. The Tour wouldn't be possible without the continued interest from our host universities and venues in Japan, and the support I've received from Pembroke College for my own expenses comes much appreciated.