

the KODŌ beat

鼓童

See ya round Kaoru

After 9 years with Kodo, St. Louis-born Kaoru Watanabe is leaving to seek fame and fortune (well, rent money anyway) in the Big Apple. Fortunately for his many friends on Sado we will be seeing plenty of him next year when he returns as guest director for the big 20th anniversary edition of Earth Celebration '07.

In Kodo I play fue, taiko and dance, sing and do some composing. This is my 2nd year as artistic director of Earth Celebration and the main theme this year was *Dance*. Body expression, whether it be traditional, or modern, contemporary, improvisational, structured. I wanted to explore body movement and its relationship to rhythm and emotion and communication. I was searching around for different forms of dance, and this year's main guest *Tamango's* name kept coming up. His group *Urban Tap* is very percussion oriented. The main percussionist is a



*Kaoru playing nohkan
photo by Maiko Miyakawa*

Haitian voodoo drummer, known as Bonga.

I also wanted to explore a more improvisational aspect to Kodo. Kodo is known for a very disciplined and structured performance. If they were able to add to their intricacy and complexity - without

losing the strength of having the structure - an element of improvisation and spontaneity, well that would bring Kodo's performance to a different level. Through interaction with a group like *Urban Tap* - these people are fearless, willing to make mistakes and explore - I thought Kodo would find a different element to themselves and to their performance. I was very happy with the way things turned out. As to whether it was a

success...I would say it was less a success than the beginning of a process that I would like to continue. I tried to break into the loosening process smoothly, beginning a couple of months ago. I brought in a tap dancer from Tokyo who also does an improvisational act, just to give Kodo players a taste of what they might expect from Tamango, to sort of break the ice, get their minds in a different state. Especially after *Amaterasu* (see KB Vol. 77 Summer '06) which was all very structured, set out to the millisecond. I think they started to crack the mold a little bit and I think it



Tamango takes wing.

photo by Maiko Miyakawa

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showed to the Earth Celebration audience how on each day Kodo was able to loosen up bit by bit. Day 1 was still pretty stiff, Day 2 better than Day 1 and by Day 3 a lot of it was really flowing. The interactions, collaborations and the dialogue were a lot more natural, much more open, but I think again, that was just the beginning.

I was able to experiment more this year than last. The theme, 'Improvisation' was a big experiment for me. I had more courage to really improvise. Last year was my first time so I was playing it a little safe, but this year, visually, musically, rhythmically, conceptually I was experimenting more, making it more of a concert that I personally would want to see. The kind of Kodo that I envision seeing as opposed to what other people have envisioned in the past.

There are lots of technical things I learned this year too, that I want to bring to next year. The *hanamichi* (a ramp which extends deep into the centre of the audience) I want to double next year. I want to see the whole Shiroyama park, the whole space from the audience's perspective to try to make it as pleasurable and as comfortable as possible. We had a bigger audience this year, about 2,800 people came - it was a



Kodo women's wooden clog 'softshoe'.
photo by Maiko Miyakawa

bit cramped - so I'd like to open it up, and I'm going to do that through the repositioning of the stage. I want to try to utilize more of the park instead of one small isolated section. Obviously it's an outdoor concert, we are surrounded by trees, the stars are in the sky, there are insects, mosquitoes biting, so you are never going to think you are in a concert hall, but I want to try to allow people to really experience the pleasure and joy of being outdoors and listening to music, good music. Not just seeing a concert, but experience the space, sounds and the feelings that come from the concert and its unique environment.

The guest players loved it. They loved the whole

experience, they found it very spiritual. The saxophone player *Avram Fefer* had been to Morocco to play and he told me this



Vado Diamonde turns EC upside down.
photo by Buntaro Tanaka

experience rivaled that musically and was one of the most memorable experiences in his life. Everyone was saying the same thing, it wasn't just a gig, it was a very special life-changing event. Tamango was very into it. We are on similar wave lengths I think, about what we want in music, what we expect in ourselves, and what's going to happen on stage. And we saw the other was able to achieve what they wanted so I think we experienced a similar sense of fulfillment and joy. I think everyone at Kodo had a lot of fun with it too. They were blown away by Urban Tap. During rehearsals we weren't able to see *Vado*, the stilt dancer from the Ivory Coast, because he has to go through a whole ritual to change into his costume in complete solitude. In rehearsals he came out in his regular clothes and danced and marked where he would come in and how he would leave, but he wasn't on stilts. So the first time most of Kodo saw him was on the second night where half of the members were in the wings, half in the audience. When *Vado* came out they reacted as strongly as the audience. The players behind me were shouting and screaming. Also with *Ron Wood* the break dancer, people's eyes were bugging out, seeing him sliding in on his head and spinning around on his arms. It was a huge inspiration to see that level of accomplishment, technique and discipline. The same for Tomango's tap dancing and body movement and the fact that he switched so effortlessly from *digeridoo* and singing, beat boxing and tap dancing, playing drums and other percussion. When he is inspired by something he is able to run with it and develop it and with his control of the group - both on stage and off - he can hold everyone together.

I had fun making the music. I was trying to *get down*, well, trying to keep up. For the most part if you

connect with someone personally you are going to connect with them musically and vice versa.

I have officially resigned from Kodo. I am coming back to direct Earth Celebration as an outside consultant though. I made up my mind a year and 3 months ago, but I'm definitely glad I've been here this long and this Earth Celebration was very rewarding, personally, musically, every aspect, and I've really enjoyed my time on Sado, so no regrets. Earth Celebration basically embodies what I want to do on my own, collaborating, experimenting.

I think one of Kodo's greatest strengths - aside from the sound and drumming - is the resources. Having access to the knowledge, the know-how, the connections to put together an event like Earth Celebration. When you think about the lighting, stage building, sound, instruments, equipment, knowledge, the know-how of dealing with a large audience, the tickets, T-shirts, ferries, the whole industry, it's a great place to be, its a great resource to have which I won't have in New York on my own.

Doing next year's EC makes sense to me because eventually I want to be going back and forth between America and Japan. As a *fue* player I think it's important to spend time in Japan. Any instrument - if you take it out of that culture and sound - loses what makes that instrument special. I don't want to play the fue like it's a bamboo flute. I want to play the *Japanese fue*, and that entails having *that* sound, and *that* feeling. Being able to evoke that whole mood. If I start playing fue and it sounds like a flute, I may as well play the flute. It's very important for me to keep that essence. It's taken me this long to get at least some of that essence in my playing and I don't want to lose it completely. The same with language, I feel if I lose my ability to speak the Japanese, I'm not going to be playing the fue anymore, I'll just be playing a bamboo flute. And that's the last thing I want. So for me it's important to come back and forth. I came 9 years ago to get in contact with my roots, to see where I came from, and I think I did. My 2 years as an apprentice were great. I learned what I was capable of doing. I learned about perseverance, discipline, I became a different person I think, especially for those 2 years. I just focused on the moment, what I was doing at that

time, trying to excel. I couldn't make any excuses, I just had to wake up in the morning and walk outside the door, run for 6 miles, come back, eat, practice. It was very disciplined. I didn't have the leeway to even think about giving up or feeling tired or frustrated to the point of wanting to quit. I was on a mission.

And I learned the language. Being able to talk to my grandparents was a big thing. I saw a different side of my parents too. All those little quirks that my parents had that I thought of as eccentricities or mannerisms I realized were very Japanese mannerisms and traits. By being able to see where those came from and why those mannerisms exist, I was able to understand my parents better. Talking to their relatives gave me a perspective on who my parents were, what kind of people they were, what they had to go through



*Kaoru (aka Karl Watson) Watanabe
Illustration by Johnny Wales*

when they left Japan to live and raise kids in America. They came to study Western classical music at exactly the same age I came to Japan to study Japanese traditional music. It's funny, the whole situation. They couldn't completely *get* what I was doing at first.

After spending all that time and money on me studying jazz and flute - making me Western - here I am, turning it around, going back to the East.

This year was their first time seeing Earth Celebration and me directing it and they loved it. They were very happy, which made me very happy. I felt like I had finally begun to pay them back for all the support they have given me over the years, both financial and emotional.

Now I want to give back, to spread some of what I have been accumulating over these last 9 years. So in this next stage of my life I will be not only be playing music, but doing some teaching and workshops. Really a kind of an extension of what Earth Celebration is about.

In celebration of Kodo's 25th anniversary we are releasing, 'HEARTBEAT, *Best of KODO. 25th Anniversary*'. Our 20th CD, this collection contains 15 of our friends' and our personal favourites. On sale in Japan from November 22nd. For release dates in the rest of the world check our website or these pages.

A new project, KODO ONE EARTH CARAVAN kicks off in Vladivostok, Yakutsk, Irkutsk and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in Russia from October 31 to November 12th. Because of the expense of producing a full-scale Kodo performance there are many places we have wanted to visit that have been out of reach, particularly in Africa, Asia and Central and South America. With Kodo One Earth Caravan we hope to change that.

in brief...



upcoming performances

One Earth Tour Japan

October

12	Shizuoka	Actcity Hamamatsu	053-412-1010
14	Aichi	Kouta Chomin Kaikan	0564-63-1111
18	Gifu	Takayama Shimin Bunka Kaikan	0577-34-6550
22	Hyogo	Kato-shi Takino Bunka Kaikan	0795-42-7700
23	Hyogo	Ako-shi Bunka Kaikan Harmony Hall	0791-43-5111
24	Kagawa	Sunport Hall Takamatsu	086-224-6066
26	Kochi	Susaki Shiritsu Shimin Bunka Kaikan	0889-43-2911
29	Ehime	Uchikoza	0893-44-5223

November

1	Toyama	Crossland Oyabe	0766-68-0932
2	Ishikawa	Kanazawa-shi Bunka Hall	022-771-1432
3	Fukui	Echizen-shi Imadate Geijutsu-kan	0778-42-2700
5	Uozu-shi, Toyama	Shinkawa Bunka Hall	022-771-1432
7	Niigata	Itoigawa Shimin Kaikan	025-552-5900

December Concert Series



3,4	Sado	Amusement Sado	0259-86-2330
		Ticket sales start Oct. 17.	
8-10	Niigata	Ryutopia	025-281-8000
		Tickets are on sale now.	
12	Niiagata	Nagaoka Shiritsu Gekijo	025-281-8000
		Tickets are on sale now.	
15,16	Osaka	Osaka Kosei Nenkin Kaikan	06-6362-8122
		Tickets are on sale now.	
19	Nagoya	Aichi Kosei Nenkin Kaikan	052-290-1888
		Ticket sales start Oct. 18.	
22-25	Tokyo	Bunkyo Civic Hall	0259-86-2330
		Ticket sales start Oct. 24.	

Tickets for the December Concerts, except the Nagaoka performance, are available on the Kodo website.

One Earth Tour North America, 2007

January

30 Davis, CA

February

1 San Rafael, CA

2-4 Berkeley, CA

8 Escondido, CA

9-11 Los Angeles, CA

13 Mesa, AZ

16 College Station, TX

17,18 Houston, TX

20 Austin, TX

23-25 Dallas, TX

27 Fayetteville, AR

March

1 Cleveland, MS

3 Birmingham, AL

4 Columbus, GA

6 Greenville, SC

8 Chapel Hill, NC

11 Hampton, VA

13 Richmond, VA

17 Newark, NJ

19 Ottawa, Ont. Canada

21-23 Toronto, Ont. Canada

25 Montreal, Que.

Canada



photo by
Buntaro
Tanaka

Notice to Kodo Beat Readers

Kodo Beat is a newsletter focusing on the activities of Kodo and is sent quarterly to members of *Friends of Kodo*. *Friends of Kodo* is dedicated to bringing Kodo closer to our audience and fellow taiko enthusiasts. Membership is available to all. As well as receiving *Kodo Beat*, members also get special advance ticket reservations for selected concerts in Japan, the chance to buy original goods available only to them, and selected discounts on a range of Kodo goodies. For further information about these offers contact us or check our web site.

For those readers who only want the newsletter, an on-line version is available on the Internet.

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