

To the Beat of their Own Taiko Drum

Tradition and modern entertainment meet in a new taiko touring group.

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Seattle has another opportunity to experience a Japanese performance. Following the October 19, 2009 performance of Kabuki at Benaroya Hall, Seattlites can soon experience "TAO: The Martial Art of Drumming."

Director Ikuo Fujitaka brings his drumming performance company to Seattle as part of its first lengthy U.S. tour, and looks forward to pleasing Seattle audiences.

"Ichiro [Suzuki] is one of the most famous Japanese persons whom all the Japanese can be proud of," Fujitaka says. "We would like people in the US to associate TAO with Japanese drumming just like they do Ichiro with Japanese baseball playing."

Fujitaka founded TAO in order to create what he calls a "modern respectable culture of drumming" using traditional Japanese instruments, techniques, and artists.

"I was captivated by the beat of the drums, which have strong power and which [convey] the spirituality of the Japanese drumming," Fujitaka says. "I wanted to create a new world-class entertainment with the multi-sound of the drumming beats."

But don't expect mere TAO to hew strictly to tradition. "The biggest challenge was to create a modern and outrageous drumming show with traditional instrument that go beyond tradition," Fujitaka says.

"We have tried different things such as modern music, pantomime and magic in our show," Fujitaka says. "TAO's original show sometimes has drawn some criticism from those who try to observe tradition because Japanese drumming has previously been recognized as a classical entertainment."



This focus has drawn a wide range of musicians to audition for TAO. Drummer Yoshinori Suito says, "I saw TAO when I was in a rock band. My intuition made me think, 'as a Japanese, I would like to express something with a traditional Japanese instrument, not with an imported instrument from overseas.'"

According to director Fujitaka, more than one hundred applications are received by TAO each year. "Physical strength and ability, sense of rhythms, and expressiveness are tested" for a full day, he says.

But "only four or five applicants each year can pass the audition," Fujitaka says, and even then, each new drummer is accepted only as a trainee.

"Artists share accommodations at TAO's home base, Grandioso," Fujitaka says. "They train themselves, and create music and shows amongst the majestic natural surroundings. TAO [drummers] train their psyches through communication with nature."

This training encourages experimentation as well as skill-building. Drummer Suito says, "I respect the way that TAO does not try to keep the old tradition but instead creates modern entertainment."

In its explorations of the boundaries of traditional Japanese drumming, TAO has also opened its auditions to drummers outside Japan. "We have had an English, Taiwanese and Korean artist," Fujitaka says.

"Unfortunately we have never had an American player. It would be great if this tour will be the opportunity to meet potential 'American' drummers."

Regardless, Fujitaka expects to inspire and motivate U.S. audiences. "The beat ensemble of our show gives energy, vitality and courage without any language," he says. "Audiences clap their hands, stomp, dance, and cheer."

But Fujitaka reports that audiences have found TAO to be more than mindless entertainment. "Our show also makes people cry."

"TAO: The Martial Art of Drumming" performs on January 29, at The Moore Theatre, 1932 Second Avenue., Seattle.