



## Japan Comes to Houston

NPN's Asia Exchange brought Faifai, a Tokyo-based multidisciplinary performance troupe, to the US for a four-city tour during November and December 2013, including the opening night of the NPN/VAN Annual Meeting in New Orleans.

Rachel Cook, associate curator at DiverseWorks, offers an analysis of their artistic process and a reflection on the company's visit to Houston.

Photos: Faifai, Anton, Neko, Kuri, performance at DiverseWorks December 6 & 7, 2013  
Images courtesy of DiverseWorks

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American Dance Abroad is an initiative to strengthen international exchange opportunities for American choreographers and dance companies by developing and supporting activities connecting them with dance professionals around the world.

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# Observations on a New Performance

by Rachel Cook, DiverseWorks Associate Curator

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This past December I had the pleasure of working with Tokyo-based theatre company Faifai. The company members met while in school at the Department of Moving Images and Performing Arts at Tama Art University in Tokyo, where they all studied different aspects of performance and art, from stage design to script writing. DiverseWorks (Houston, TX) was one of four presenters (the others being Legion Arts in Cedar Rapids, IA; REDCAT in Los Angeles, CA; and the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans, LA) on their first North American tour for the production of *Anton, Neko, Kuri*. What I was most struck by watching them rehearse, perform, and just be in the same space with one another was how the idea of collaboration and collective thinking was truly at work.

Established in 2004, the company members take various roles in each production, but at the start of each production a germ of an idea gets re-imagined and interpreted by each member differently. After a long process of rehearsing and thinking through different staging techniques, the full scope of the production is finally realized. *Anton, Neko, Kuri* stemmed from meditating on a stray cat suffering from leukemia that lived in director Chiharu Shinoda's neighborhood.

The performance is broken into a series of parts, each with its own distinct style and rhythm. One part is a body-word interpretation, another is a slice of life interpretation, and the other is a music score-word-singing technique. Each of these sections in the performance can go unnoticed on your first impression as an audience member; it is really the final portion of the performance, the talkback session, where these techniques are revealed. Faifai is interested in making theater accessible to a wide range of audiences while maintaining the integrity of theatrical research. To this end, they develop a variety of approaches as to how to tell a story and they consider the talkback session, which really functions as a sort of rehearsed question and answer session, as a way to make visible certain

aspects of their artistic process.

Through performative movements and thinking about how to best represent a daily action, for example brushing your teeth, Faifai constructs a visual and performative language. This language has a very different grammar than traditional acting techniques, such as "pretending," which gets developed and repeated through the performance. The viewer is pulled into the daily action of someone's routine of waking up in the morning and getting ready for work or coming home after a long day and the mundane-ness of making dinner for yourself and watching television. When you are in this section of the performance, you see a montage of projected words bouncing around on the wall with each performer acting out each gesture while repeating the words. One example of this technique is Kouji Yamazaki's infamous scene where he acts out making a pasta dish, becoming the noodles, pretending to be the pan that is sautéing the garlic and olive oil, his face morphing into each clam. His body techniques for telling the story exceeds any miming action and becoming filled with all the sounds you experience when cooking an elaborate dish. *Anton, Neko, Kuri* transcends language barriers through a hybrid style that combines eclectic choreography and multiple video projections of English-language text with a polyphonic soundscape.

The visual and sonic landscape that Faifai creates operates on two levels: one is to translate what the performers are saying (the whole performance is in Japanese), and the other is to create a projected cloudscape of words that become a backdrop of images. This way you have to imagine the neighborhood they are all living in: the old man walking across the street, the two motorcycle dudes who stay up until 4 a.m., the friendly store clerk that knows everyone who walks by, or the infamous old woman who is afraid of the cat.

The visual frame of reference of words opens up the entire performance and is stealthily controlled by Shiro Amano through a video game controller. Amano acts as both videographer and DJ by following a score of

words that translate the actors' words, but are visually scattered on the wall behind them, sometimes moving back and forth or mimicking what they actually mean. For example when one of the performers is acting out soap bubbles, the word bubble appears and pops in and out of the projected image just as a soap bubble operates. Together they paint a portrait of daily life in Tokyo from Faifai's perspective as well as describing a connectedness and distance that exists between people who live in densely populated urban areas.

Faifai uses unconventional performance techniques — including cutting up, sampling and transforming performers' words into music, and inviting audience intervention — in order to blend disciplines, generate new realities, and reveal the creative process. I was so interested in how the company manipulated all of these techniques through word play, acting or gestures that I felt there was as much a conceptual operation to the performance as a certain type of physicality. Additionally the company is a master at adapting any space to be configured to the performance. Ayami Sasaki, whose primary role is the stage design, has a great eye for understanding the construction of space and how the audience will be experiencing the work from each vantage point. She worked with us to help reconfigure our raw warehouse space into a ready-made black box theatre.

Faifai has successfully developed a new form of theater that is a cross between a play and a party/event, contributing their own unique vision and sensibility to the field of contemporary performing arts. Incorporating dynamic disciplines like electro music, video and dance, Faifai's work depicts human relationships in today's complex society with irony, sensitivity, and humor. It was a pleasure to work with them, and I can't wait to see their next production!

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## Welcome NPN/VAN's Newest Members of the Team!



Pictured: Steffani Clemons (left) and Anna Henschel (right)

by Mimi Zarsky, Senior Program Specialist for Convenings

For years, NPN/VAN has distinguished itself by having a pretty special group of folks on staff (an unbiased report). With the recent hires of Steffani Clemons and Anna Henschel, NPN is maintaining that tradition — and we wanted to introduce them:

Steffi, aka Goldie, is a native of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and studied English and American Studies at the University of Alabama. Last November, after a stint of festival planning at Kentuck Art Museum and working in the University of Alabama's Department of Education, Goldie set her sights on following her lifelong dream — moving to New Orleans. As NPN's administrative assistant, she makes good use of her easy-going spirit and snappy repartee to support the staff and receive visitors. She loves to cook, listen to music, and enjoys sharing a great cup of coffee. For her favorite easy and delicious recipe, click here <http://allrecipes.com/recipe/bacon-wrapped-water-chestnuts-ii/>.

A New Orleans resident since 2009, Anna moved to the city with a group of her Bard College classmates to form the Skin Horse Theater performance collective. With lots of experience as a freelance project, stage and events manager, Anna started her NPN tenure as the NOLA Annual Meeting site coordinator, but quickly filled in when Jenny Howell, the previous Convenings program associate, left NPN in the fall. Now the program assistant for both Convenings and subsidy contracts, Anna is looking forward to participating in NPN's long-range vision, and to connecting with the members of NPN/VAN's community. Take a look at her "Learning to Say Ya'll" blog about her move to New Orleans <http://newyorkneworleans.wordpress.com>.