Interview

‘A love for musicals motivated my studies’

The first genuinely “real” musical that Takeshi Ota ever experienced was Grand Hotel, playing on Broadway. At the time, Ota was a senior at his university in Kyoto, but he had a real hankering to travel in the U.S.

“I backpacked my way across America for two months and ended up in Times Square. A guy in the streets saw me, handed me a flyer and told me with a smile that it was ‘crazy good.’ I had no idea what he was talking about, but then I saw the words Grand Hotel.”

Ota promptly went to see the show and what he saw was “completely different from the musicals I was seeing in Japan.”

He decided then and there that he must become a composer of musicals and that someday he would return to Broadway.

Ota kept that promise. In 1996, he got a scholarship to the Mannes School of Music, where he studied under music greats like Carl Schachter and David Loeb.

Now in his 40s, Ota is a composer of musicals in his own right, mainly for Takarazuka — Japan’s unique, all-women theater troupe.

A native of Osaka, Ota is based in Kobe, which allows easy access to Takarazuka headquarters. He often travels to Tokyo for meetings and stage work too.

“I get to do a job that I love,” laughed Ota, who added he had always loved music and musicals. “I feel so blessed but I wouldn’t have gotten here unless I studied English.”

During his undergrad years Ota went to an English conversation school. He knew he was “really bad at listening skills.”

“People think that because I’m a musician, I can pick up a foreign language easily, but it didn’t work like that. Music is a language unto itself, completely different from learning English. There really were no shortcuts.”

Ota watched Broadway musicals on DVD and listened to songs, straining to make sense of the lyrics while analyzing the music as well.

“English is a muscle, and you have to train it the way dancers and singers train for a musical,” said Ota. “The other thing is to have confidence. Don’t be afraid to say what you think and never mind the grammar. Don’t get stage fright. Overseas, people will always commend you for speaking up, rather than keeping quiet because you were afraid to say the wrong thing.”

(Kaori Shoji)