

The drive to create

Scenographer Junpei Kiz on Hokusai's creative impetus and art as a uniquely human endeavour

Junpei Kiz is an architect by training. However, a long collaboration with theatre director Satoshi Miyagi has seen him design theatrical productions around the world. *The Great Wave* is his first project for Scottish Opera, and – speaking via translations provided by Akiko Sugiyama, producing the opera with KAJIMOTO – he finds a special sympathy with Ōi, daughter of Katsushika Hokusai.

'The relationship between Hokusai and Ōi is a core part of *The Great Wave*,' Junpei says. 'Mr Miyagi is an incredible director with such a great imagination, vision, and capacity to inspire creativity in those he works with.' The experience of being on his team is one Junpei finds mirrored between father and daughter, both accomplished and genre-redefining artists, in the opera.

Junpei became involved with *The Great Wave* when Mr Miyagi approached him with the project. He was immediately attracted to the idea of working on a world premiere. 'There is no correct answer to what the stage should be like, or how the opera should be presented,' he says. 'To be able to be the first one to challenge this, to have no other precedent for this opera, was an opportunity I could not turn down.' Despite the excitement, the project is not without pressures or challenges: the topic is Hokusai, arguably Japan's most famous artist, and audiences will expect to see *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* in all its familiar glory.

'Everyone in the audience will have seen *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*,' Junpei says. 'It is such an iconic piece. There is going to be anticipation of how it will be presented on stage.' Junpei's first hurdle is answering this public expectation; his second is making his presentation of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* somehow surprising. It is no small feat, and not something that can be left wholly to modern stage technology; while digital powers and capabilities may help, he seeks an answer that eschews superficial surprise value in favour of something 'in-depth and integral to the meaning of the artwork within the production.'

Finding the dramatic purpose of art on stage is key to *The Great Wave*. 'If the idea is just to show the great works Hokusai created, that is fulfilled by going to a museum,' Junpei says. 'We are using artworks by Hokusai in the opera, but it is more important to portray his creativity, energy, imagination, lifestyle, and other things integral to his creativity. Hokusai had a very long life and career, and his art is notable for its quantity and quality. The question is how was he able to find this energy to create all this art?' This central interrogation drove production conversations with Mr Miyagi, and through the opera, they seek to explore Hokusai's wellspring of creativity for the audience. This takes *The Great Wave* beyond biography or exhibition – on the operatic stage, Hokusai will come to life through the interpretations of composer Dai Fujikura, librettist Harry Ross, Mr Miyagi, Junpei, and their many collaborators on and offstage at Scottish Opera.



Louis Guy paints a portion of the set of *The Great Wave*.

This interpretation is based on lots of research, and Junpei was surprised by the variety in styles, genres, and techniques of Hokusai's art across his career. 'He always retained this high quality throughout the works he produced,' he says. 'He also changed his name many times. Hokusai is the name he used before he created *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, and then the name was sold to someone else who used it while creating completely different artwork. Despite these evolutions, he always continued creating – often in different ways under different names, but always to the same high quality and with the same energy.' Block prints, paintings, and manga – black and white sketches, perhaps the origin of the word associated with comics today – all came from Hokusai's studio.

Junpei is also interested in Hokusai's graphic design credentials, pointing out that he created many famous kimono patterns. To Hokusai, artist and designer were the same occupation, something that Junpei feels a kinship with across his own multifaceted career. He points out that, if you put two prints of *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* side by side, the large wave on the right print would continue unbroken from the swell at the right edge of the left print. 'As a shape,' Junpei says, 'the wave is something Hokusai thought of in terms of repetitive design – perhaps as a kimono or textile pattern – that can be used in sequence.' You will see these repetitive forms in his scenography for *The Great Wave*.

Another surprising fact that turned up in research was that Hokusai, despite his skill, industry, and fame during his lifetime, often struggled to make ends meet. For much of his life he lived in a tiny, rented house with Ōi. It is no wonder he found a calling through this dual role of artist and designer, working on commission based on commercial demands as well as his own creative impetus.

But historical accuracy is not the most important thing. Junpei is keenly aware he is a 21st-century designer creating an opera for a 21st-century audience, where everyone brings their own contemporary perspectives. But this does not mean he must modernise designs to fit modern understandings of Hokusai. His goal is to create a production that would be intelligible to someone from Hokusai's period and captivating to someone 100 years in the future. By prioritising storytelling and melding the past and present, 'perhaps we arrive at something that does not change through time, becoming classic rather than new or old,' Junpei says. It is a theory he keeps in mind whenever working on historical material. 'History is not the story itself, because history only becomes a story when recounted by someone. In this case, *The Great Wave* is recounted from Harry Ross' perspective. This means something that should not change becomes diversified depending on each person's perspective, including the audiences' perspectives.' It's a dichotomy of two extreme points: the inevitability of interpretation and the immutable facts of history.

Junpei's scenography is drawn as much from Mr Miyagi's interpretation as it is from historical reality. 'As a designer, it is my responsibility to research and understand historic backgrounds, but it is dangerous to think that what I have come across in my research is the true version of what happened 200 years ago,' Junpei says. Being aware that his work is merely his interpretation – filtered through many other interpretations – is key to his process and makes *The Great Wave* unique among explorations of Hokusai's life and work to date.

If designing iconic artworks with rich histories is not enough, Junpei also must create a set that can fit into two very different theatres in two weeks. Thankfully, he and Mr Miyagi have extensive experience designing site-specific productions, and the tools and techniques they have developed when suiting a production to a space – even unconventional, outdoor spaces – equips them to approach existing theatres and connect their unique features into adaptable stagings and designs. 'Each theatre has a different capacity and layout – how the seats are angled, the height of the auditorium, the width of the stage,' Junpei says. 'Productions I design are catered specifically towards the atmosphere of the theatre and the physical perspectives.' Here, Junpei's architect background is very useful. 'Designing for a theatre is not just creating something to sit within the proscenium, but to fit with the actual theatre itself so that it becomes an entire environment,' he says; this allows each seat in the house a unique perspective and building a holistic world for the performers on stage.

Anyone who has been to both the Theatre Royal Glasgow and Festival Theatre Edinburgh knows these are very different theatres: one smaller with curved seating around four levels, the other wider with a flatter audience perspective. 'It is impossible to design something adapted into different theaters and expect it to be reproduced in exactly the same way,' Junpei says. 'It is better that we do not need it to look the exact same in different spaces. We should anticipate it looking different in each unique venue, and that each different physical setting adds to the design. The ideal situation is to know the different theatres in advance, so the designer can research and understand the different spaces and adapt the production to each setting.' Luckily, this was the case with *The*

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Great Wave, and Junpei visited both theatres before beginning his design work. He recommends people see *The Great Wave* in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, if possible, as there will be unique elements that only come to life in each theatre's different structures.

Junpei hopes audiences of *The Great Wave* are surprised by Hokusai's and Ōi's immense creativity and industry and take away a new appreciation of the ubiquitous titular print. He also hopes they get a sense of these two figures as individuals – even via many interpretive perspectives and the performances of Daisuke Ohyama and Julieth Lozano Rolong. Lastly, he hopes audiences rediscover their belief in human creativity. 'In these current times of generative AI, I am worried human beings will lose the belief that they are able to be creative and imagine things,' he says. 'Things we have done on our own are being taken over by technology, and people are losing faith in the innate abilities and creativity we have in ourselves. We do not want that.'

Theatre is a physical, tangible medium, and Junpei stresses the importance of tactility and physicality in creative processes. 'Artificial intelligence mimics the human brain, but it does not actually have an actual physical body that goes along with it,' he says. 'As an artist, creativity is not conceptualised only by the brain but is also a response to the physical body. Sometimes a line drawn by the hand unconsciously makes one aware of what this line could possess, but your mind only catches up to what is possible after you draw the line. I feel this as a designer and an artist. We strongly hope that the people who see this production realise that only humans can use their imagination to create something entirely original, and we all have this capacity.'

The core of Mr Miyagi's vision, Junpei says, lies in interrogating the source of Hokusai's creative energy. Junpei will not reveal the staging secrets, but he hopes that, through their combined vision and the great artist's legacy, everyone leaves the theatre ready to start their own creative journeys.

The Great Wave: see page 27 for dates and booking information.

Anonymous

My parents first took me to Covent Garden when I was about 15 years old to see *Tannhäuser*! Terrible choice for a first opera. After I married we went to Covent Garden occasionally in the gods. Then moved to Glasgow with three small children in 1970 and started going to Scottish Opera. I have been going to the opera ever since.