

THEATRE

埋火

SLEEPING FIRES

KURŌ TANINO



FREE
REPUBLIC OF
VIENNA
FESTIVAL

19 – 21 June
Odeon

It is the year 1840. Iku is a blind woman living on an isolated farmyard a hundred kilometres north of Edo (modern-day Tokyo) together with her husband. The villagers visit Iku for therapeutic massages because her touch relieves the ailments of the heart as well as those of the body. As winter arrives in the mountains, a young blind woman, Sayo, comes to learn the art of massage – and the tale takes an unexpected turn ... In *Sleeping Fires*, Japanese theatre maker Kurō Tanino narrates the encounter between Sayo, a woman injured by violence, and Iku, a woman who feels the pain of others more deeply than anyone else. Together with blind performers and in a realistic stage set of a rural, deeply spiritual world, Tanino – a master of everyday lyricism – tells a story that is as intimate as it is universal. It is a story of pain and of the hope that emerges when people ‘touch’ each other.

Language
Japanese

Surtitles
German, English

Duration
approx. 110 mins


barrier-free access

Q & A
20 June, following
the performance



Text, Direction Kurō Tanino **With** Susumu Ogata, Ineko Kawai, Takao Shibata, Rio Sekiba, Natsue Hyakumoto **Musical direction** Yu Okuda **Light design** Masayuki Abe **Sound design** Koji Sato **Video** Nobuhiro Matsuzawa **Costumes** Mariko Tomoyoshi **Assistance direction** Hatsune Sakai **Stage management** Masaya Natsume, Akari Kitano **Assistance stage management** Tatsuhiko Ito **Video operation** Azusa Saito **Surtitles operation** Saki Sahara **Company management** Chika Onozuka **Translation subtitles** Andreas Regelsberger (German), Richard Lee (English) **Surtitles** Saki Sahara

Production Niwa Gekidan Penino, Arche LLC **Coproduction** NO Limits **Supported by** Arts Council Tokyo

Sleeping Fires by Kurō Tanino was commissioned by “No Limits”, produced by Niwa Gekidan Penino.

executed by the team of the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) | Free Republic of Vienna

World Premiere March 2026, No Limits Festival (Hongkong)

埋火

INTERVIEW WITH KURŌ TANINO

What are the 'Sleeping Fires' of this play?

'Sleeping Fires' is a reasonably accurate translation of the Japanese title, Uzumibi (埋火, 'smouldering fire, embers'). That word describes a fire that is hidden underneath a layer of ash. At first glance, it seems to have died down entirely, while it actually still harbours intense heat inside.

In this play, it represents actual fire as well as the memory, rage, desire, pain and will to live that continue to smoulder within us. When humans are hurt badly, they sometimes pretend that they have forgotten their wounds. Or they are told by society to 'forget' or 'forgive'. In reality, though, such feelings don't just disappear. Deep inside, hidden inside memories, they maintain their heat. For me, Sleeping Fires describes those simmering embers. They can eat up a person. But they can also be the very flames that a human needs in order to keep living.

The play shows hurt, loneliness and rage. At the same time it is also about freedom, strength and liberation from social constraints. What connects these elements?

Rage and loneliness are more than just dark feelings in this work.

When a person suffers intense hurt, rage can sometimes be the last vestige of a certainty of one's own self. Of course it is true that rage is dangerous. It can destroy people or do harm to others. However, I also consider it a form of violence not to harbour any rage inside at all – or to not even be allowed to feel it. The young woman Sayo is a character whose fate was denied to her by society and by the men around her. Her desire for revenge is more than simple hatred: it is also a fire that enables her to go on believing that 'My life is not over yet.'

Iku, on the other hand, has a different kind of strength. She is blind and she is outside of what society considers its centre. However, she brought her own body, her own ability and her own time to the fore from that very place.

I did not want to portray people who are considered strong within society. Instead, I wanted to show those who live somewhat apart and who have attained a different kind of strength there.

So in this play, freedom is not the freedom of people who have never been hurt. It is the freedom of not simply handing

one's own life and one's own body over to others after having suffered injury.

The main characters are two blind women. Where did the idea of working with blind actors come from?

It wasn't really that I had decided to depict blind characters from the outset. What was much more important was my actual encounter with blind actors.

During the rehearsals with them, one thing after another that I had until then considered self-evident in theatre came to be questioned.

For example, the theatre world considers it vital that the actors see their colleagues, that they see the space and that they see the audience.

However, once you start working with actors who do not rely on seeing, you start to wonder in a completely new way about what 'seeing' actually means.

They perceive sounds, changes to the air, the presence of another body, the nature of the ground or a wobble in a voice with much greater sensitivity. It is not just about compensating the lack of sight with something else.

On the contrary: I became aware of how much we all depend on the visual. That nudged me towards the idea of blind masseurs during the Edo period (1603–1868) as well as the notion of people who read the world through touch. That eventually led me to the story about these two blind women. For me, the project was not about putting actors with impairments on stage. It was, in fact, an attempt to alter the way theatre itself is made by their particular body awareness.

How does the way this play is staged concretely differ from your previous works as a director?

Until now, I always worked out the stage design, the smallest details, smells, sounds and physical movements with great precision and care in my productions. In that way, this work is also connected to how I have worked before. This time, however, the work on staging no longer focused only on how things appeared visually. In order to be able to work with blind actors, the distances on the stage, the nature of the ground, the position of the furniture, the direction of noises, the breath of other people and

the moments of touch had to be planned with utmost exactitude. It was, in other words, not enough to only 'show' a space. The space had to be created as a space that the actors could actually 'feel'. That was a major change for me. In addition, the relationships between the characters are not established by eye contact but via their voices, hands, body temperature and spatial proximity.

The audience watches all of that. But the crux of what is happening on stage lies more in that which cannot be seen. From that point of view, it felt like this time I was moving from directing in order to make something visible to directing in order to create the premises for something invisible to take shape. That was quite a new experience for me, too.

What is it about the Edo period that grabs your attention? Can looking through the lens of the past help us gain a better understanding of our present?

The Edo period fascinates me in the way it had different ways of using the body, a different sense of time and a different proximity or distance between people than we are used to today.

Our present-day society is very strongly determined by visual information and speed. We see something and judge it, immediately categorise it and consume it on the spot. I think that life during the Edo period, by contrast, was shaped by much more darkness, a slower pace and a world that would first have to be physically examined.

Of course I don't idealise this era. There was a strict social order within a feudal system and it was truly a difficult time for women and for people with disabilities. However, it is also for that very reason that there were forms of knowledge and techniques around at that time that are different from those we have today.

For example, there is a long history of blind people working as masseurs, acupuncturists and musicians. There were even institutions like the Tōdōza organisation (the guild of the blind), which supported their occupational life. That obviously differs fundamentally from a modern welfare system. Yet it is nevertheless extremely interesting, because there was a fixed place in society for forms of professional expertise that did not rely on the ability to see. Depicting

the past is not simply to reconstruct old times. Looking at an era in the distant past allows us to recognise that much of what we consider normal today may be rather one-sided, after all.

From that point of view, the Edo period seems to me like a dark mirror that grants us a look at the present day.

A tanuki appears at the end of the play. I have heard that tanukis are heavily symbolic creatures in Japanese mythology. Can you tell us something about that?

Tanukis – raccoon dogs – are somewhat enigmatic creatures in Japanese folklore and legends. Much like the fox, the tanuki is considered an animal that can deceive people and change its shape. In Japanese tradition, it is known as a shape-shifter, rogue and trickster. Still, it was not my intention to reduce the tanuki to being a mythological symbol in this play. On the contrary, I wanted to show it as a creature that is part of everyday life – a mountain animal. The people in the story are full of rage, sorrow and desire.

When the tanuki appears towards the end of the play as a wild creature, it lends some perspective to the humans' drama. The tanuki does not understand their tragedies. It just is.

That is what was so important to me. Humans often experience their suffering as if everything was only about that. But at the same time, there is wind blowing in the mountains, it is snowing, the animals are living their lives.

Against the backdrop of the grandness of nature, human revenge, love and guilt come to seem both a little silly and a little sad. That is why the tanuki in this play is on the one hand a mythological trickster, but on the other also a different way of looking at the world: a way that comes from outside of this human narrative.

BIOGRAPHY

Kurō Tanino is a playwright, theatre director and former psychiatrist, born in 1976 in Toyama Prefecture. He is the founder, resident playwright and artistic director of the theatre company NIWA GEKIDAN PENINO. He founded the company back in 2000, whilst still studying medicine, and has since written and directed all of the company's works.

His productions have been invited to numerous prestigious theatre festivals in Japan and internationally, particularly in Europe. In 2014, Tanino was a guest at the Vienna Festival (Wiener Festwochen) with *Box in the Tree Trunk*.

Until 2015, Tanino was a Senior Fellow of the Saison Foundation. In 2016, he was awarded the 60th Kishida Kunio Drama Prize for his play *Jigokudani Onsen, Mumyo no Yado (Avidya: No Lights Inn)*. In the same year, he also received the Kita Nippon Shimbun Art Prize and the Grand Prize at the 71st ACA National Arts Festival. This was followed in 2019 by the Toyama Prize in the Culture and Arts category.

In July 2022, Tanino was appointed political advisor to the City of Toyama; since 2024, he has also been a member of the jury for the Kishida Kunio Drama Prize.

PUBLICATION DETAILS

Owner, Editor and Publisher Wiener Festwochen GesmbH, Lehárgasse 11/1/6, 1060 Wien, T + 43 1 589 22 0, festwochen@festwochen.at | www.festwochen.at **General Management** Milo Rau, Artemis Vakianis **Artistic Direction** (responsible for the content) Milo Rau, Artistic Direction **Translation** Nadezda Müngersdorff (wordsmithery) **Picture Credits** Cover © Star-Bound Goze (The Sorrow of Misao the Blind Itinerant Singer), 1971 Shinichi Saitō/Collection of Kurashiki City Art Museum, p. 3 © No Limits, Patrick Wai **Produced by** Print Alliance HAV Produktions GmbH (Bad Vöslau) **Design** SIRENE Studio **Layout** Valerie Eccli

15 MAY –
21 JUNE 2026

REPUBLIC
OF GODS



MAIN SPONSOR



PUBLIC FUNDING BODY



SPONSOR



MOBILITY PARTNER



CATERING PARTNER



COOPERATION PARTNER



MEDIA PARTNERS

