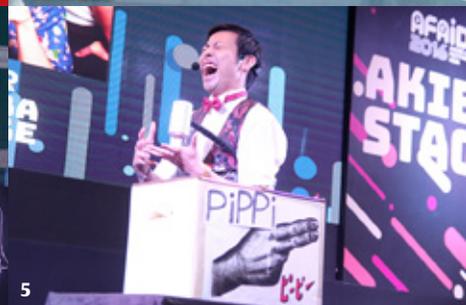




# From Osaka to the World



Japan's best-known comedy production line now extends to audiences overseas.

GAVIN BLAIR

THE Japanese government has energetically promoted measures to advance the overseas development of Japanese content. In May, policies for overseas expansion of content and strengthening related industrial infrastructure

were included in the “Intellectual Property Strategy Program 2017.” On 9 June 2017 the Cabinet approved the “Investments for the Future Strategy 2017,” which includes the government target of increasing overseas sales of broadcast content to 50 billion yen (450 million US dollars) by 2020 from 28.85 billion yen (260 million US dollars) in fiscal 2015.

Yoshimoto Kogyo is one example of how Japanese companies are developing their content business overseas.

- 1 Scene from the 9th Okinawa International Movie Festival (OIMF), April 2016
  - 2 “Sumimasu Asia Geinin” (comedians living in Asia)
  - 3 Genki (Sokorahen Genki in Japan)
  - 4 The Three
  - 5 Akira Continental Fever
- All photos: © Yoshimoto Kogyo Co, Ltd.
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Yoshimoto Kogyo is a major entertainment group with operations across numerous fields and representing many of Japan’s biggest celebrities.

According to Hiroyuki Tanaka, vice president of Yoshimoto Kogyo, the company has expanded its entertainment business chiefly through the *man-zai* double-act style of public entertainment which it was instrumental in popularizing – this based on celebratory performance traditions backed by music and using a *sensu* fan as a prop – but is also involved in everything from movie and TV production to venue and artist management.

Yoshimoto Kogyo has long been active overseas, and in 2008 signed an agreement with Hollywood’s giant Creative Artists Agency (CAA) for the mutual promotion of programs and talent. “When the company set out its vision for the next 100 years at its centenary in 2012, one of its pillars was to further boost its presence abroad,” explains Shizuko Yokote, president of MCIP Holdings.

MCIP is a joint venture, founded in 2014, between Sony Music Entertainment, Dentsu, Dwango, Aeon Mall, Jikei Group of Colleges and Yoshimoto Kogyo (Space Shower Networks joined the following year), with backing from the government’s Cool Japan Fund (founded in November 2013 as a public-private fund), to promote Japanese content in Asia.

In 2008, Yoshimoto announced a partnership with Second City, the Chicago group which is well known for its successful fostering of many famous comedians. Yoshimoto plans to nurture talent for overseas audiences by learning the know-how, particularly in improv, which is rare in Japan, through this agreement. However, it is not easy to disperse Japanese content. One problem is how to overcome the barriers of language and culture.

“Taking comedy, which relies on language, overseas is a major challenge, and is one of the reasons that other forms of entertainment produced in Japan have expanded more quickly into international mar-

kets,” says Yokote.

“One of MCIP’s first projects was “Sumimasu Asia Geinin” (comedians living in Asia), which entails sending performers overseas to live and learn not just the local language, but also the local culture and sense of humor,” explains Yokote.

Sixteen Yoshimoto comedians have been living in Thailand, Taiwan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines for the last two years. The five who live in Indonesia – where the project has been named Y-Boyz (Yoshimoto Comedian Project from Indonesia) – are two solo artists, Genki (Sokorahen Genki in Japan) and Akira Continental Fever, along with trio The Three. The trio has won fans among local audiences with its combination of “Japanese Reaction Performance” sketches and “Rhythm Comedy,” which utilizes music. “Rhythm Comedy,” in which the trio dance and get caught up in the beat, became very popular and led to The Three being invited onto local TV shows, where they won yet more fans.

The key phrase of Yoshimoto’s expansion overseas is “Laugh & Peace.” The company has continued to develop its business in the region, such as through the launch of the Huashan Laugh & Peace Factory in May of this year, a “J content” exhibition center in the Huashan 1914 Creative Park in Taipei, Taiwan. The Park is known as a cluster of the arts and pop cultures of Taipei. Meanwhile, a school of entertainment is scheduled to open in Okinawa, which is close to Taiwan, in April 2018, with the plan to accept students from both Japan and Asia.

Next year will also mark the 10th anniversary of the Okinawa International Movie Festival (OIMF), founded by Yoshimoto. The festival is now called “Shima Zenbu de O-kina Matsuri” (Big festival for all the Okinawan islands) and promotes not only film, but also comedy and other content both locally and across Asia. The “Laugh & Peace” slogan also applies to the OIMF.

Yoshimoto plans to continue developing its business across Asia and beyond by overcoming differences in language, culture and laughter. These efforts will play a key part in the expansion of Japanese content around the world. ■