

A CHIBA VENUE FOR 'CONCRETE WATER'

Modern opera finds reservoir of good will in Abiko

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ABIKO, Chiba Pref. — When Abiko Mayor Hirohiko Fukushima picked up his phone one evening in May, he had no idea what the person on the other end was talking about.

The caller was local artist Monique van Kerkhof, 40, making an enthusiastic appeal to let her group use the Araki Echigojiri Chosuichi reservoir in Abiko for their contemporary opera "Concrete Water."

For more than a decade, van Kerkhof and her partner, Rob Oudendijk, 42, who both studied modern dance at places like New York's Merce Cunningham Studio, have nursed the concept of the modern opera, which requires both concrete and water to be present on its stage.

The reservoir, 150 meters long, 60 meters wide and 5 meters deep, is designed to prevent flooding during the rainy season, but from its size it looks more like a dinosaur's swimming pool.

The Dutch couple, who have performed at such unusual sites as a synagogue, offices, cellars in New York and a gallery in Tokyo, at one point had their eye on a harbor in Koto Ward, Tokyo, as the venue for "Concrete Water." For seven years they talked to Tokyo Harbor authorities, the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and local politicians but were never able to win permission to use the site.

After experiencing such restrictions binding artists in Japan, discovery of the Abiko site compelled van Kerkhof to make the bold phone call to the mayor's home, even though she had only met him once.

"Although such an event is normally not authorized in Japan as it would be considered 'too dangerous,' I found myself instantly replying that it was a good idea," recalled the 44-year old mayor. "Maybe it was instinct, as I sensed good vibes from her and the project. I hope this event will grow to be held annually."

He pointed out that Abiko,



MONIQUE VAN KERKHOFF (second from left) shows teenagers their steps for a dance scene in the modern opera "Concrete Water" at the Araki Echigojiri Chosuichi reservoir in Abiko, Chiba Prefecture. YOSHIAKI MIURA PHOTO

as the birthplace of the Shirakaba, or White Birch, school of writers in the late 19th century, and where artists like writer Mushanokoji Saneatsu and ceramics artist Bernard Howell Leach came to settle, has always been open to art and culture.

After spending six years in New York, van Kerkhof and Oudendijk moved to Japan in 1990 to explore their interest in Japanese art and culture. They now live in Kohoku, Abiko City, with their three children, creating different forms of art while working as video and computer graphics artists.

"The reason why we became artists or why we are working on this project is to communicate to people to be more open to things," said Oudendijk. "The more open we are, the easier it becomes to open the minds of other people, let things grow and enrich ourselves. Then there is no need to fight, kill animals or destroy the Earth."

Many types of symbiosis based on specific relationships between species appear in "Concrete Water." Relationships between concrete and water, man and woman, young and old are constantly and indirectly suggested in different layers that interact with each other.

"Performing in the reservoir fit our concept perfectly, as concrete and water represent the many-sidedness of relationships between different species," said van Kerkhof. "A concrete water reservoir is constructed to control the flow of water. The eroding is stopped by concrete. The controversy is that concrete eventually gets eroded by water. For us the reservoir is a symbol of changing values, a crossroad of old and new values — a symbolical confinement of concrete ideas."

The 50 performers, coming from different countries, have unique backgrounds.

"A Buddhist priest, a Vene-

zuelan baritone, a Korean percussionist, local children and teenagers — all share art and create together," said van Kerkhof.

Local carpenter and farmer Keinosuke Oikawa, 54, is one of them. Ten years ago, he took up the role of volunteer matsuri dancer, or "hayashikata," who creates musical and vocal accompaniments for traditional matsuri festivals as a member of Furudo Hayashi Renchuu, a local folk entertainment group dating back almost 300 years.

Oikawa believed it was his mission to take up this role, as his community is a tiny farming village, and he said he "could not let the fire of traditions die out." Although the Abiko performance will be presented in a form of modern opera, he said he hopes to show the audience the spirit of Japanese tradition.

Deborah Pardy, 33, a Canadian opera vocal coach who sings in the performance, said, "Blending together dif-

ferent nationalities, art forms and styles, this is a unique project combining the 16th century opera 'Dido and Aeneas,' modern dance and video in a setting that brings to mind the ancient Greek amphitheaters, while making the most of the incredible acoustics of the reservoir."

Eynat Molenaar is an Israeli kabuki dancer. "While working as a ballet dancer at the age of 23, I had the opportunity to study Nihon Buyou (traditional Japanese dance) in Tokyo," said Molenaar. "Kabuki is officially only danced by men, but my fascination for its movements led me to incorporate it in the steps of Nihon Buyou" that she will perform in the opera.

Canadian video artist Michael Goldberg, 55, is making a documentary of the event. Goldberg, who has earlier made documentaries for NHK about prewar foreign wives in Japan, said, "I like to video record realities about foreign people who have adjusted and have been accepted in Japan," adding he hopes this documentary on the interaction of a foreign family and the people around them will also be shown on TV.

Yukiko Nagasao, 30, a freelance contrabass player who performs in classical concerts, was asked to help assemble the orchestra. Nagasao said this task was not easy because "in this country, the idea to support or participate in nonprofit art events has yet to be learned — not only among companies and organizations, but also among artists themselves.

"Those who decided to join are people who can truly enjoy the music and the time we spend together."

The show, which expects to draw about 400 people, will start at 6:30 p.m. Sept. 16 at Araki Echigojiri Chosuichi near Araki Station on the Narita Line. Admission is free. In the case of rain, the performance will be held Sept. 24.

Donations can be made to Concrete Water no Kai (representative: Monique) Kohoku Post Office 10500, account number 53613831. For information, call van Kerkhof/Oudendijk at (0471) 87-5666 or Kazuo Ichikawa at (0471) 88-3862.