

**Date:** December 3, 2011  
**Place:** Royal Theatre, Victoria, BC  
**Interviewer:** Allana Lindgren  
**Interviewee:** Yukichi Hattori  
**Transcribed By:** Kathleen Jerome  
**Interviewee has read the transcript:** Yes

**Introduction:**

This interview was held with Yukichi Hattori, a dancer who moved at the age of thirteen to from his home of Japan to Germany to attend the Hamburg Ballet School. Yukichi joined the Hamburg Ballet Company as an apprentice and soon became a soloist with the company. In 2006, he moved to the Alberta Ballet where he recently performed the lead role in the Elton John inspired ballet *Love Lies Bleeding*. In this interview Yukichi discusses his journey as a dancer, the struggles he faces as a 5'3" Asian male dancer, as well as his future plans as a choreographer and teacher, and how to live as a creative person.

**Rationale of editing/transcription choices:**

The following transcription has been edited for clarity, though the content remains an accurate reflection of the conversation.

**-Interview-**

Allana: Today is Saturday December 3<sup>rd</sup> [2011]. I'm at the Royal Theatre here in Victoria with Yukichi Hattori from the Albert Ballet. Welcome.

Yukichi: Hi. Thank you.

Allana: So you're one of the main dancers in the company, a principal dancer, and you're also a choreographer.

Yukichi: Yes.

Allana: Can you tell me a little bit about your background, your training and how did you get into dance?

Yukichi: My parents are both actors. I was born into theatre, per say. My grandfather was a pop music composer in fifties. My uncle and my cousin are composers as well, so we're a very arts oriented family. So being in the arts was definitely not a question.

Allana: And where was this?

Yukichi: In Tokyo, Japan. And I started ballet training when I was six, in Japan. I stayed there until the age of thirteen. That's when I moved to Germany – Hamburg – and that's where I had my ballet education, at the Hamburg Ballet School. And then 1999, I joined the Hamburg Ballet Company as an apprentice. In 2003, I became soloist there and then 2006 I moved to Albert Ballet.

Allana: So why dance? Because it sounds like you have musicians and actors in your family, but why ballet?

Yukichi: Well, when I was five I showed the most interest in musicals, which my father was participating in, and I said that I wanted to be part of that kind of show and they thought to begin with ballet, which is the hardest art form to achieve unless you start very young. So in their, in my parent's minds, singing and acting you can start a lot later and still achieve a certain level of quality, so they thought to put me into ballet first and I just started it.

Allana: And how did you make the transition from Japan to Germany? You left home, how old were you at that time?

Yukichi: Thirteen.

Allana: Thirteen.

Yukichi: Yeah.

Allana: So what was that like?

Yukichi: Well I was never really into academics to begin with, and well, the Japanese ballet scene was very strict, but not necessarily in the sense that it would provide better quality. It was strict in a sense of it was bound by tradition. Of course, there is the very good aspect of being disciplined and, you know, having respect for your colleagues, and teachers, and mentors and things like that. But I felt like I wasn't really exploring to my fullest abilities. So when I saw Hamburg Ballet touring Japan and I was one of the kids in *Swan Lake* and I saw how, how much there is out there, and I just couldn't hold myself back to ask for permission to go to the school.

Allana: And what's it like being at a [ballet] school? You're boarding; you're away from your home. It's a professional school, so can you speak a little bit about that?

Yukichi: Well I definitely had to adapt. You learn the language really quick and...

Allana: So you knew no German before you went?

Yukichi: I spoke a bit of English because my mother was—she had the foresight to teach me English in Japan in case, just in case, this happens. [Laughs]

Allana: [Laughs]

Yukichi: So yes. So having a little bit of English did help, but there was barely any Japanese students of my age, so it was kind of essential that I learn German and learn their way of living, speaking, behaving to each other and things like that.

Allana: What was the syllabus that they were teaching at that school?

Yukichi: Our school does not have syllabus. Every teacher comes from a different background – Vaganova, Bournonville. We didn't have RAD or Cecchetti although, but every single teacher knew each other's methods inside out, so we were able to really fuse them together which I find now that I know there are all these syllabuses and different aspects of ballet, I can actually adapt to any style, so it was very ideal.

Allana: What did you take away from that school experience? Most of all?

Yukichi: Rigorousness is definitely a key, because all of my teachers, they're very very hard about being disciplined and being respectful of the art form itself. [Dance] is something you need to be just as precise about as a scientist, yet just as free as musicians and composers. The daily work matters, but you can't be too strangled by the theory as well. It's a very hard balance to achieve, which I'm still trying to do. But because I have the ideal branded into me I can, without having them around me constantly, I can still feel like I'm being guided by them.

Allana: What was it like being in the company in Hamburg?

Yukichi: Well, I am only 5'3" and I'm Asian. I don't have particularly long legs or things like that, so it was very hard for me to ... [Sighs] find the—it was essential for me to survive for the—to convince the artistic director to find a necessity to keep me in there, because of my physical state. So I had to have some kind of strength that no one else had, and that being my acting background from my parents, or knowledge of the music from my composer family members, or, you know, I worked on the technique that no one else would and I—yeah, I just had to find my own colour really. But, now that I am a little bit more mature artist, I do realize that no matter how you look, you still have to find that colour of yours to really become an artist of your own.

Allana: Why did you opt to leave and why did you come to the Alberta Ballet?

Yukichi: I moved there when I was thirteen and by the time I was, you know, in the company I've already been there for five years, and I spent another seven years in the company. And I felt a bit too comfortable, like I knew pretty much how things worked at that place and people knew what I was good at and I never felt like I was being challenged in the thing that I'm not particularly strong at, because there are enough dancers and so many talented dancers, and you know, that whatever I didn't do good enough I didn't have to do it so....

Allana: So what kinds of things did they have you do and what kinds of things did you want to do?

Yukichi: It's not so much about wanting or not wanting in the sense of me growing as an artist, but all I was assigned was tormented contemporary characters that I was able to build upon my acting background. And the choreographer and I, John Neumeier and I, were really able to have a mutual relationship in the sense that he would give me a theme and I would build things around it to my character so it becomes something a little more than just one person's point of view. It was very, you know, profound and multi-dimensional. So in that aspect, I learned a lot from

him; the building of the drama and the character and how much work is involved in choreography before they even step into the studio. But I was never being able to do partner work or really very classical work, I was never really a part of—like I would do Bronze Idol for *Bayadère* and Alain for *La fille mal gardée*, things like that—but that being still character artists more in a sense. So I just had to leave my artistic father [Laughs] and explore.

Allana: And so why the Alberta Ballet, or *how* Alberta Ballet? How did you find them? How did they find you?

Yukichi: Well, it was just coincidence, you know. I go for auditions and it, again with my physical limitation, it was very hard to find a company that would hire me, even after I accomplished a few more things than when I was nineteen. So, this is the place that they accepted me.

Allana: They came to Germany or you knew about them or...?

Yukichi: Well, my wife is from Edmonton, so she was just home visiting and found out that they were interested so we said sure why not?

Allana: What's it like with the Alberta Ballet? What keeps you there besides the fact that it's home for your wife and so on?

Yukichi: I think it's the possibility that I'm able to explore. Because, although Europe has a very high standard in, you know, theatre, art and well art in general really, like they breathe and live art. I did somehow—sometimes feel that there's so many things that already pre-programmed that there was too many taboos and there too many things that shouldn't be done, and art needs to be this way and that way and thing like that. But here I feel a little more ... that I can be a more experimental in a sense that maybe I can find something new and maybe I can do something that I'm good at. [Laughs.] Because my grandfather, he was a jazz composer and he always produced a little more pop-jazz kind of thing, so I'm, I have that entertainer side in me that I feel very comfortable in. I like to make people laugh, and in Europe it's a little more intellectual art that is cherished and adored and things like that.

Allana: So what are some of the works you've done with Alberta Ballet that you've really enjoyed doing?

Yukichi: Oh, like ... I enjoy finally dancing classical ballet for one. [Laughs.]

Allana: [Laughs.]

Yukichi: It's something really that I never thought of even worth trying because of, you know, European audiences have this particular vision, like a prince has to look a certain way and a princess has to look a certain way, which is great. It's a tradition that needs to be kept. I'm not saying that every single rule has to be thrown away, but for me personally it was a challenge. I wasn't able to squeeze into that little bit of [Sighs] tight space there.

Allana: Is ballet racist? Do you think classical ballet is racist?

Yukichi: Well ... it's definitely an aristocrat's art and I don't want to call it racist because ... of course you can do *Othello* probably in a way that colour doesn't matter if you wanted—if that was the goal from the beginning. It's always how you approach it. It's just that it is a fantasy and it's a fairy tale and I think that certain illusions are better kept a certain way than. You know, the superficial things in dance are definitely a part of it. ... So it's a fine line I guess. We do judge people by their techniques and their, you know, body lines and it. It's like painting a picture so like certain things, yellow has to be yellow you can't paint ... Yeah, you can't paint purple and try to convince people it's yellow. Of course you can draw a purple sun and, you know, that might be interesting, but of course that becomes a contemporary art rather than a classic, yes.

Allana: So what are some of the roles that you have dances that you really enjoyed?

Yukichi: Well...

Allana: The specific roles.

Yukichi: Right. Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, that's the only one that I can actually get into because Puck is definitely [a role] shorter dancers can do and ... so that's a ballet I was able to do in Hamburg as well and that was classical ballet and I enjoyed that a lot. And there are a few roles that I created with John Neumeier. I did Stanislav Nijinsky in his ballet called *Nijinsky*. He was the brother of Vaslav Nijinsky and he was I think—he passed away in an asylum, so I had—I get to dance the solo that is me being tortured by visions of war and things like that, so that was definitely something that really made me grow as an artist. And I was only twenty-one back then—no, nineteen I think.

Allana: Wow.

Yukichi: Something like that, yeah.

Allana: Now you've really become the public face of the Alberta Ballet and many way, particularly recently. Can you talk about some of the work that you've done recently?

Yukichi: Well yes, *Love Lies Bleeding* the Elton John ballet, definitely has made us popular like ... very popular. Me as well I guess. Like we're going to be broadcast on CBC and things like that so, yes. In Hamburg I had a kind of reputation for dancing Puck and dancing Stanislav Nijinsky, things like that. I guess because of my physical state it is easy for people to recognize me on stage. I seem to have learned from all of my fellow artists how to entertain people, I guess...

Allana: [Laughs.]

Yukichi: ...I would like to believe, yes.

Allana: Can you talk a little bit more about the Elton John piece? What was it like to create? What's it like to perform?

Yukichi: Mmm.

Allana: Have you met Elton John?

Yukichi: No I haven't actually. To me, this piece is a lot more than just Elton John anyway. It's more about artists in general, having different lives going on at the same time and how you have to balance that and how dangerous it is to be tipped to one or the other side. And it's really any artist's life in a sense. I approached it more ... towards that bigger picture so that the piece itself becomes a lot more about just dancing to Elton John's music. So that's definitely a challenge and I guess I'll be working on it until I stop dancing.

Allana: It's a demanding piece. How long is it?

Yukichi: It's about one hour and forty-five minutes without intermission.

Allana: And you're onstage. You're onstage the whole time. So what's that like?

Yukichi: Well I've done pieces that I'm on stage all the time, a few of them actually, and it's always demanding, but in Hamburg we did a piece that is to a Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, which is about four hours long and every single dancer's on stage all the time, dancing or not dancing. I mean define dance, sitting can be dance as well, you are always present on stage so ... That alone teaches you a lot and I think that kind of experience made it easier for me to be on stage constantly and not run out of steam for the entire two hours. And physically it's always easy; any athlete can achieve it. You just train yourself – practice, practice, practice and you get used to it after a while. [Laughs.]

Allana: Well you make it sound easy but... [Laughs.]

Yukichi: That's the thing – everyday practice it. You know, the first key to really try to achieve a mastery in art is definitely that you work. The work you put in every single day and how much you put it in, is definitely entirely proportionate to how much you can grow.

Allana: What about your own work because you are also a choreographer? How'd you get into choreographing work?

Yukichi: Well the Hamburg Ballet School has a choreography class, so I started there and...

Allana: That's mandatory or you can just take it or not take it?

Yukichi: Oh it's a mandatory class. Some people hate it. [Laughs.] There's a lot of dancers who are just like, "Well I will just dance what I've been told" and I disagree, but anyway. So that's how I got into choreography. And again the first piece I made was because I had nothing to do, because there are few productions in Hamburg that were not very balletic so I wasn't cast for

anything. So I might as well do something and there was a competition coming up so I did a little solo and that got an encouragement prize, so I started to think maybe I could do this. In Japan I was lucky enough to find an agent and produce a show and things like that.

Allana: In Tokyo?

Yukichi: Mhm.

Allana: Can you talk about that a little bit more? What pieces did you do? What was the response?

Yukichi: Well ... the pieces were—well every single summer we would do like a different type of piece. The first one was based on mystery novels. I approached them to do that piece, but of course it wasn't like Sherlock Holmes kind of thing. I really liked the motive of the criminal and what the victim went through and things like that. That drama was very emotional and danceable so I wanted to do that. And that one was a very big success and I feel like I was guided by something else to make that piece because I still haven't quite reached that kind of intensity in drama in my other pieces yet, so that one is definitely a hard one to beat. I've done dances to my grandfather's music, which is very popular in Japan. I've worked with different kinds of dances: street dances, contemporary dances, things like that. And I had orchestra on stage and we would dance in front things like that, yeah.

Allana: So if you come from a musical background do you start with music, or do you start with a narrative, or do you start with some sort of intellectual idea, or does it switch up depending?

Yukichi: Yes, the starting point is always different. I just have my radar open and see what catches me.

Allana: Where are you now in your career? You're thirty-one years old?

Yukichi: Yes.

Allana: So, where do you see yourself in five years?

Yukichi: Well I'm starting to teach and in Japan I'm doing a workshop with younger dancers. I'm really trying to find the new way of creating dance works and to find new ways to present theatre productions because I feel like ... it hasn't developed so much from [Jiří] Kylián and [William] Forsythe since those two has established this new, neo classical-contemporary fusion. I feel like it hasn't really moved on yet. I find Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi [Cherkaoui] very interesting and I'm trying to learn from them a lot just by watching their work and things like that. And I feel like Crystal Pite is very, you know, a step forward especially to the Canadian contemporary scene as well. Sadly, she's in Frankfurt.

But communicating with younger dancers I feel is like the key to stay fresh and to know what's being asked by the generation that is up and coming and try to find a new language, a new way of working. Beause the work ethic I find is very different between my generation and the generation that is coming now.

Allana: More casual now?

Yukichi: Yeah. The rigorousness isn't really working.

Allana: Even in a professional context?

Yukichi: No. I'm having hard time dealing with that. But I don't want to be this old grouch...

Allana: [Laughs.]

Yukichi: ...that just says, "These young people they don't know how to do anything." I want to understand why that is and where it's coming from and what benefits could that, you know, mentality bring to the art and try to have an open ear, so that ... the classical ballet state right now I find is kind of closed up in their own tradition and never has really opened up to see where this can go. So I don't want to make the same mistake with myself and my art. So I'm trying to grow from a "me and my art" to "us and our art" kind of thing.

Allana: So then, I think it's sort of implicit in what you're already saying, but if you had to define it, what makes a good teacher?

Yukichi: Ideally I think a teacher should be able to change his approach to the individual student. In Japan that's why there lots of things that are only taught from one person to another; there's only the mentor-protégé relationship. And I think if you really want to pass on everything that you have, then that's the best way to do it, but that'd be taking too much time and [Laughs] generations really blossom so. What I'm trying to do is really make myself grow through communicating with them rather than teaching them...

Allana: Mhm.

Yukichi: Of course when it comes to ballet technique it's only one way. They have to listen to what the teacher has to say and form their body into that, you know, shape. But when it comes to being an artist I think it's always about communication rather than teaching and learning.

Allana: You've had so many different aspects to your career and you've been with the company here, with the Alberta Ballet for...

Yukichi: Six years.

Allana: ...six years. So, you're qualified answer to this question then—what's it mean to be an artist in Canada today?

Yukichi: ... I feel like the countries are diminishing regardless. I like to think that we're all just people living on earth. So to me the answer is simply what it is to be an artist...

Allana: [Overtop] Yes.

Yukichi: ...in this world. And I think you have ... to live it to be it. Because it's really not just what you do onstage, it's about who you are and you're supposed to be inspiring the audience so you yourself have to be following the ideal that that you're aiming to become the human being that you want to be and that straight, you know, that transfers straight into the work that you do. And yes, I think unless you are not living to be an artist, of course you can't you know, take the hints and inspiration that is out there, and transform that into a theatre production or painting a picture that has been taken by the camera, things like that so.

Allana: Do you think we're lost sight of that and it's about popularity or being seen on a poster, or do you think that people really—I mean because what you're talking about is a lifestyle, and a focus, and a discipline right?

Yukichi: Mhm.

Allana: So do you think we've kind of lost sight of that? I mean artists.

Yukichi: I don't think so because there are great artists all over the world and it is just that because there's the, you know, flood of information these days we just see a lot of bad ones and of course there is more dilettantes around out there than true professionals and that's always the case. So we just have to educate ourselves to really decide for ourselves what do I like, and what do I not like, and why do I not like this, and why do I like this. I think even though you do not create art you can live as an artist. We can actually make so much more because the world is so much smaller and we—like I'm sitting in my apartment and I'm able to watch the art that's been created in Australia, Asia, or Europe, anywhere. So that's a great thing that we can be all inspired by the entire world anytime anywhere. The only question is, you know, how much do you [Sighs] how high so you aim as an individual and that's and that should be transferred to every single person in this world regardless of who you are and what you do. And I feel like trying to say that in an art piece is a little bit selfish. I'd rather show my actions than things like that.

Allana: It sounds like you have very high standards for yourself.

Yukichi: Mhm.

Allana: But ballet in particular is an art form where you never can achieve the ideal. So, how do you—that can be quite frustrating [Laughs]. So how do—what does that dilemma mean for you...

Yukichi: [Overtop] Right.

Allana: ...How do you deal with it? For some people it drives them insane and they have to stop, right?

Yukichi: Of course.

Allana: So how do you deal with that?

Yukichi: Well it became so much clearer to me and easier for me to accept that I will never reach perfection since I started teaching. You pass on to the next generation, making sure that they've learned from our mistakes and what we did right and that they will take that in account, you know. Like we're all part of history, we're all part of one big river that keeps flowing; there's no stopping it and of course if you just think about yourself. ... Of course nothing is—nothing makes sense, why do you even live if it's just for yourself right? Because the minute you're gone everything vanishes, but if you think about the bigger picture that's not the case. You're part of this amazing thing. And if I can contribute only 0.01% into that then I've done my job, because that means the snowball just got a little bit bigger. And that make me a part of, you know, this big piece of art.

Allana: Well as a teacher once said to me, a good dancer can produce one good dancer, but a teacher can maybe produce twenty good dancers.

Yukichi: Mhm.

Allana: Will you always be wedded to ballet, or do you see yourself moving to contemporary dance or?

Yukichi: Well I myself do contemporary street dance...

Allana: Street dance?!

Yukichi: Yes. I try to.

Allana: [Laughs.]

Yukichi: I have lots of street dancer friends.

Allana: You mean like hip hop or break—

Yukichi: [Overtop] Yeah!

Allana: Really?

Yukichi: [Overtop] I...

Allana: [Overtop] Where do you do that?

Yukichi: Well I just...

Allana: [Laughs.]

Yukichi: ...Sometimes I just look at YouTube and learn the steps and just emulate it. Well, of course, I have friends that are break dancers and hip hoppers and I just ask them like, "So how

do you do this?” and they would give me lessons, things like that. And that will, you know, humiliate me sometimes. [Laughs.]

Allana: [Laughs.]

Yukichi: Keeps me humble. But that definitely develops my dancing in general, so I would like to, as a dancer, I would like to have every single genre inside of me so that I can actually make something new out of it. So I’m trying to learn tap dancing right now. [Laughs.] Yes. And, of course, I’ve done Noh Theatre and the Japanese traditional dance form and things like that as well. So it’s all, it’s all part of living as an artist.

Allana: Right.

Yukichi: [Laughs.]

Allana: Very good. Is there anything that you’ve never been asked that you’ve always think, “Why doesn’t anyone ever ask me that?”

Yukichi: Oh!

Allana: I’m sure you get similar questions all the time but...

Yukichi: [Overtop] Right, right.

Allana: ...but what are things that people should know about dancers and the life of a dancer that, you know, people just don’t ask the question—the right question?

Yukichi: Hm. [Pause] I think I will know that when I will be asked. [Laughs]

Allana: [Laughs]

Yukichi: Wow. I don’t know.

Allana: Okay. Is this an art form that you want your children to participate in if you’re—you know, it’s in your DNA...

Yukichi: [Overtop] Mmm.

Allana: ...so—to be an artist—presumably your children, if you have them, will be artists so is this the art form that you would recommend?

Yukichi: Hm, if they, if they’re serious about it, yes. But if—like I think anybody should do what they really truly desire from the bottom of their heart and that’s also part of what makes my life easier to live is that I know no matter what you do, and it doesn’t have to be an art, but you can still, you know, make a change, make something different. Even as a construction worker or mechanic. So, I think what I’m trying to pass on is more the way to live, you know, the way to

approach things, the way to live your every single day rather than the art form itself, because I think that's what we're ultimately trying to become is, you know, a better being that can inspire everything—anything and everything.

Allana: That's wonderful, Yukichi. Thank you very much.

Yukichi: Thank you.

Allana: Thank you.

**-End-**