

insights

Volunteers record audio descriptions to enrich theatergoers' experience

Tiny Tokyo movie house caters to visually impaired

SAYO SASAKI
KYOTO

Listening without watching — that is what Chihoko Hiratsuka describes as essential for understanding the concept of her tiny movie house in Tokyo.

The theater, Cinema Chupki Tabata, opened last September near JR Tabata Station in Kita Ward as a "universally accessible theater," allowing people with visual disabilities and all others the opportunity to enjoy cinema by providing audio descriptions of scenes with the help of volunteers.

Customers can listen to the recorded descriptions of the characters on screen using headphones placed at each of the roughly 20 seats inside the forest-themed venue.

"Chupki" is a term that refers to natural light, such as moonlight or sunshine, from the language of the Ainu, the indigenous ethnic minority of Japan.

"I wanted to create a place where everyone can return under a single light," said Hiratsuka, 44, who heads City Lights, a volunteer organization for enriching the movie experience for the visually impaired. "Movies are for feeling and it's not just about seeing."

Hiratsuka said the organization's efforts to write and record audio descriptions are aimed at supporting the "subjective viewing" of people with limited or no eyesight, not about describing everything in a scene.

"An experienced moviegoer can find it annoying if we explain too much," she said. "Moviegoers can imagine what is going on through sound changes in the background, for example, so we should instead provide other information in such cases."

She has first-time volunteers simply listen to the sounds of movies to make them realize how much the imagination can cover, and what it cannot.

"This is a good theater," Kazuo Terai, a 70-year-old blind man, said late last month after leaving the theater in tears, clearly moved by the screening of "Yu wo Wakasuhodo no Atsui ai" ("Her Love Boils Bathwater"), directed by Ryota Nakano.



Cinema Chupki Tabata in Kita Ward, Tokyo, provides listening devices for people with visual or hearing disabilities. KYODO

"Growing up with radio dramas, I am used to (imagining), but I suppose younger generations may have a hard time following without audio descriptions," he said. "Japanese films tend to make actors express through facial expressions (rather than words), so having them described helps."

All movies at Cinema Chupki Tabata are captioned for people with hearing loss. There is also a small sound-proof screening room, if people feel the need to take their crying babies or misbehaving young children there.

The theater is a permanent version of a City Lights project that started in 2001, in which the organization would hold "barrier-free movie screenings" for the visually impaired. Volunteers would sit next to visually impaired people and describe movie scenes, much like a personal language interpreter offering a translation.

Hiroaki Sato, 27, the theater's manager, was among such volunteers and remembers the first time he gave audio descriptions to a man at a movie festival hosted by City Lights.

"I described a movie for this man and he just broke down in tears. ... I didn't think he would be moved in such a way," he said, adding the experience changed his views about people with disabilities and inspired him to engage more deeply in City Lights' activities.

Having been repeatedly hospitalized for illness and being isolated from his peers as a young boy, Sato said films were like his own voice, expressing his anger or pent-up frustration at times when he could not, and they also served as a guide to life as he grew up.

"I wanted to do something for people when they are at a low point in their lives, and since I only had movies, I thought I wanted to deliver movies," he said, adding it has been a driving force for him even after he joined Cinema Chupki as the manager.

Sato has worked on writing audio descriptions for some 20 films so far, while the theater has been holding lessons for



'I described a movie for this man and he just broke down in tears. ... I didn't think he would be moved in such a way.' THEATER MANAGER HIROAKI SATO

people to become audio description guides. "Creating audio descriptions is like creating constellations. You have to decide where you draw in the lines," he said. "And not all stars in the night sky are visible."

City Lights' activities have evolved over the years. In the early days, members would accompany people to theaters and individually "whisper beside them" to describe scenes, according to Hiratsuka.

However, they worried their voices might interfere with the other moviegoers and introduced a radio transmission system to allow a single person to give audio descriptions to a group through headphones.

Hiratsuka then thought of building a theater of her own, although finding the right building under the legal framework for a theater took months of searching, and raising the ¥15 million needed to pull off the project was not easy.

But through crowdfunding she managed to gather some ¥18 million from more than 500 people in just three months. The names of the contributors are written on the leaves

of a tree design near the theater's entrance. "I always seem to get just enough to do the things I want," Hiratsuka said, adding that whenever she needs help, the right people suddenly appear. "It feels like I have been led by something."

The theater receives support from a number of celebrities, including voice director Yoshikazu Iwanami, who oversees the theater's acoustic design.

Popular voice actor Daisuke Ono took part in narrating audio descriptions for an animated movie, while director Naomi Kawase has visited the theater to create a film on audio description guides and actor Masatoshi Nagase has become a member of City Lights.

Hiratsuka recalled the time when director Yoji Yamada, known for his popular series "Oroko wa Tsura yo" ("It's Tough Being a Man"), told her he respects the organization's work.

"He said, a good movie is made by a good audience, and you are creating that good audience," she said.

Chihoko Hiratsuka, founder of Cinema Chupki Tabata, is interviewed March 24 in the movie theater's seating area. KYODO

2017年4月26日