

Roko Kawai: an artist's workbook

BELONGING AND SOLO 07

IZU HOUSE 08

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← Dance Ideas 8

Ks

Kazu-sensei. A quick abbreviation I used often in email.

8.18.05

yesterday afternoon, I was literally falling asleep during Ks' lessons (with other students). could barely keep my eyes open. then my turn was next. uh-oh. her comment: "you looked exhausted. makes your dance not a child's dance style. the style is getting older and older."

part of it is, that i'm trying to "perfect" the form. to take out the zappy "american-ness" out of my dancing as i refine. but in so doing, i guess i'm losing the zappy 12 y.o. feel. well, this is what the lessons are about. as Ks says: we play "catch ball." the student "researches" & tries new things. then Ks has the opportunity to give feedback. she gets really pissed when some students don't do their homework. gives her nothing to work with.

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Background image: Roko preparing backstage on Shitazarai (dress rehearsal day). Our wigs and costumes are fully prepared for us to try but full make-up will happen only on the day of. August 2005.

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7.1.05

it's really tricky though. we only have 1 shot at performing it. sometimes, during the lesson, i blank out entirely. how to "let go" into the dance without letting the dance go...

7.14.05

over here the classical dance is going extremely well. the apprentices actually all sit tight watching earnestly during my lessons. i can feel their admiration! since it's a comical piece, i know the advanced students are looking at nuances like timing, release in certain body parts.

kazu-sensei seems proud. she keeps saying: "you've got to CONVERT to japanese dance!" she gives me many corrections still, but largely about how to "hold onto" what's good, how not to ruin it. she said this is the stage where the more accomplished dancers get lax. they start taking unconscious shortcuts, adding too much of their own elaborations, or simply getting autopilot. i can see this danger. i'm starting to make mistakes i've never made before in stupid places. good to flub up now.



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on july 21, the professional koken (stagehands) will come to rehearsal. for me, he is a critical partner to hand me masks and props. for others, he will do the famed "hikinuki" (onstage instant costume change). timing and spacing is everything. kazu-sensei said to think of the dance but as a duet. (*Just Standing*). on aug. 4, the live musicians come to watch a run through. they won't play but will take notes. aug 10 is our dress with live music. ahhhh! they watch every move you make and adjust the meter to your personal speed and dynamic. if you "get into it," they get into it. a live collaboration sans rehearsal! so wonderful to be able to refine and refine. roko

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Background image: One of Kazu-sensei's young apprentices demonstrates her use of the decorative umbrella at a blocking rehearsal with koken (professional stagehands). July 2005.

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Just Standing



2:42

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Just Standing



0:04

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she says such good things: don't force the masks to dance, just let them dance. you're not "dancing," you're storytelling/communicating. don't lose the words of the song.

6.3.05 : HOLDING PATTERN 2

the tremors seem to have subsided for the moment. there was one brief one in the middle of the night last night.

after a few days of "playing with" the masks on my own, i had a lesson again. i got worse! Ks said "too much research." now it looks like i'm trying too hard to MAKE the masks expressive. "looks noisy," she said. even recommended that i go back to dancing without masks, but really establish exactly where my eyes are focusing at each moment. it's all about the eyes, she said. i'm so lucky to have someone who works at this level.

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Background image: Playing with Hyottoko mask at home in my Tokyo apartment. Hyottoko is one of the three folkloric characters featured in *Mitsumen Komori*, the piece I was learning from Kazu-sensei. May 2005.

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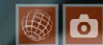
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6.1.05

struggling still with the masks. very hard! the hard part is to not make it hard. Ks' feedback is very good: "don't dance it so much; breathe behind the mask; follow the rhythm of the Japanese language (snappy & accentuated, not so slurred & lilting like English); be more 'simple(-minded)' like a child just picking up a mask from the floor and fooling around." how to balance that playfulness with the exacting stylized movement vocabulary and hitting definitive musical cues! roko :)

okame, plump & warm-hearted

5.17.05 : SOBOKU

goofy Hyottoko. yesterday was the first day when the practice costumes/props came out. whoa! heavy kimonos, shinto bells, dancing barefoot, working with the masks. challenging, but what a treat! the preparation toward performance has begun. her main comment to me is to "dance less." for the folk-mask Kagura dances, it's more alive if you keep it "soboku" or simple(-minded?). she danced a demo of Hyottoko, the most comical of the 3 masks. and it's really true. less, less, less.

sawako-san 52, sensual beautiful dancer; ayana-chan 6, just loves loves dancing; kazu-sensei 60, still going still going

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Background image: Hyottoko, the buffoon, and one of the three masked characters I portrayed in the Japanese classical dance piece *Mitsumen Komori*. May 2005.

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movement vocabulary and his okame, plump & warm-hearted

Kagura
Kagura are folk myths that are performed in Shinto shrines and in the countryside, often with colorful masks. The classical piece that I was learning, "Mitsumen Komori" is based on a little girl's mock play with three kagura character-masks.

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5.7.05

Ks challenges each student by their current ability and pushes areas she feels could be awoken. what's most interesting to me is her concern with the purity of each dancer's intention—that they're not getting overly cerebral, or uber-diligent, indulgently expressive, or tightly *isshokenmei*—cuz it kills the dance. she wants each dance to be as vibrant as the laughter of a baby.

was tossed awake at 5am this morning by a pretty violent but short tremor.

6.24.05 : A BETTER DAY

i had a much better day today than i've had in a while. going to okeiko, and staying there all day, was really good for me. feeling like a part of a community. so important. had a wonderful lesson—through the eyeholes in my mask, i saw Ks smiling sincerely, and a bunch of kids laughed outloud at the comical parts of the dance. a real feather in the cap! the dance is starting to touch people.

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Background image: Okame, the homely young maiden from Japanese folklore and one of the three masked characters I portrayed in the Japanese classical dance piece *Mitsumen Komori*. May 2005.

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Isshokenmei
Isshokenmei translates to mean "with all your might." Normally used as a positive remark about someone's well-meaning efforts to do something well. Kazu-sensei taught us though that "too much might" in a dance makes the audience cringe – it makes the dance too hard and a bit fussy to watch.

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okeiko

Okeiko means lessons – which are marked by visits, not hourly instruction. If you go to okeiko you may be there all afternoon, even until midnight, observing other lessons and absorbing the social etiquettes and relationships in the space as part of your training. Your actual lesson may be as short as 15 minutes or as long as one hour – it's all up to Kazu-sensei in the moment to decide what you need that day.

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6.24.05

when my landlady stopped by we chatted. she saw the yukata hanging; i told her about my upcoming performance. where? "national theater," i said enthusiastically. "ohhh! will you wear yukata?" "no, we're doing full production! make-up, kimono, musicians, etc!" i added for spice. then i realised that what comes across as colorful conversation in the US (fun details of the production, etc) is heard differently here. it's like you are flaunting money—like "my prom is going to involve 9 limos, an after-banquet at an expensive hotel, etc, etc." as usual, with no shift in her facial expression or voice, she added: "japanese dance is so much money." i changed my tune, "yes, (wink, wink) actually they are giving me a huge discount. and i am excused from having to pay all the obligations to the headmaster." she breathed a visible sigh of relief, and said, "it's stupid money. please don't melt [sic] into those people."

this business about "stupid money" or "flaunting money" ... i can feel a vibe whenever i return from a trip—that maybe i should downplay. "trips" seem to flaunt wealth maybe because you have the TIME not to slave at a job, more than how much you spend? even though my trips are pretty low-budget-low-frills compared to what most japanese think of as comfort & entertainment while traveling. amidst all the "welcome backs" & delighted "aizuchi" over trip tales, i also get: "wow, you're going on a lot of trips aren't you? most japanese haven't been to [shikoku](#) or [hokkaido](#) yet." and this is from Ks' community which i understand must be in the upper brackets of wealth. it will be interesting my going to Korea in July.

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aizuchi
In a conversation, audible indications that you are paying attention. While important in American English, it is imperative to participate with aizuchi in Japanese.

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Shikoku

The fourth and smallest island of Japan.

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Hokkaido

The northernmost island of Japan.

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9.25.05

Azumabashi Dance Crossing was great to see. I took along my modern dance (as in Graham/Limon) friend Satomi. she's young, open-minded and honest, and said she didn't care for most of the show. she wanted more "dancing," more "expression/sentiment," more "story." the gap betw modern & "contemporary" is huge here. a lot less cross-over, if any.

Azuma was curated by the dnc critic Keisuke Sakurai, a leading voice in the alternative perf scene here. he's very dismissive of traditional dance/arts & very critical of most butoh. i'm on the fence about him, but i'm still interested in his viewpoint. He seems to like things that are rough but engaging, if not downright "baka" (stupid, ridiculous, non-sensical). bad dance that is good performance. dance that can be technically crafted, but doesn't take itself too seriously. lots of campy music selection one after another (gets annoying). like anything, this is all great in the beginning, but when you see so much of it, it's a killer.

but there was one EXCELLENT duet called, "Tissue." just brilliant. 2 women standing close to each other in office lady uniforms, having what seemed like just a chat betw jpn co-workers. but nothing they said had any content or consequence! funny, stiff, jerky japanese gestures & pauses (which became gradually but still subtly distorted and abstract), and lots of vacuous "aizuchi" (uh, huh/is that so/oh really/ah yes!). could've been a one-liner but done so so so well. it's very inspiring that this "dance" won the 2005 Toyota Choreography Competition, one of the highest awards in Japan. that the "establishment" in Japan took note.

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Background image: Detail of Asahi Building, Asakusa, Tokyo. Easily recognizable, the public speculates whether the golden form is a symbol of stylized beer foam or a decorous poop. September 2005.

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Azumabashi Dance Crossing

New edge dance series curated by dance critic Keisuke Sakurae whose writings are influential with the younger generation of contemporary dancers. The showcase I saw was provocatively memorable – with a focus on the spirit of baka (idiot) – looking at the irreverent potential of the ludicrous and the absurd.

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9.20.05

from Leah: "performance rescue, recovery, & damage control"

I did a masters exchange at Susan Hess' with Siobhan Davies last week. Choreographing and directing sure is different than the dancing place. Basically, she led me to my strengths and challenged me to write down my strengths as a dancer and to really honor and appreciate them. She said to pick a few that really attracted me right now and to work with them. AND, she said, make a list of the things that I was not good at, the places I was weaker as a dancer / performer and to take one or two and throw them in the mix as well. At the end, I said thank you so much and she said - (in her english accent) 'oh its easy really, its all about love'. (What could be LESS Japanese???? in terms of mentor to student???? maybe this is true ultimately in Japan, but no one would EVER EVER say it, I am sure'. pass that along to you anyway in terms of how you go about making solos—or even improvising; your entire dance making process. I think its relevant always, even across cultural convention and tradition.

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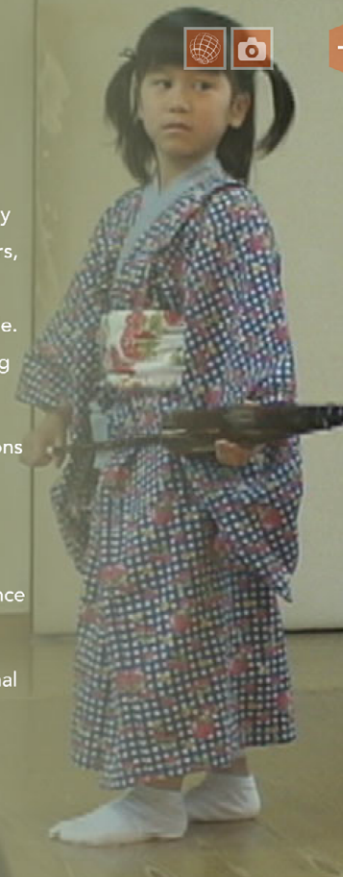


3.20.05

the next day, i consulted with K-s. was [*Mitsumen Komori*] the best choice? i want, after all, to hone, not scrap, my technique. she took my dilemma seriously. but assured me that "scrapping" wouldn't necessarily apply to me, still a beginner. actually, to learn a child's dance will help me get the "kaishoh"—block letters, before learning cursive—of the movement. she emphasized that doing "cursive" too early won't "mi-ni tsuku" (stick to my body). she was talking more about an advanced dancer, like her most advanced disciple. *Kazu-ayaki* danced beside me in my lesson as a model. but in an off-moment, she got yelled at for twisting at the waist too far—transforming herself suddenly from 12 yo girl to alluring geisha!

in this way, we all learn—beginners and professionals. K-s wants me to "stand-in" on other people's lessons too, miming their movement, absorbing their corrections. I will also integrate more "refined" characters into my training. and *Mitsumen Komori*, she encouraged, is a famed dance, one of the tokuchoh (specialties) of her colleague and idol, Toshinami Sensei, a reputed performer. At 82, she still gathers trusted directors, dancers, musicians to her studio monthly to get feedback for her Komori (the sister-dance to Mitsumen).

by standing-in, the other benefit is you don't sit as long observing long hours of lessons in seiza (traditional sitting posture). the first day, my legs burned and went numb as i sat from 4p–10p. with this burn, i imagined butoh dancers "destroying" & transcending their physical bodies, hanging upside down from skyscrapers like sankaijuku; dancing naked on rooftops.



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Background image: A lesson at Kazu-sensei's Kichijoji studio. October 2005.

Roko Kawai: an artist's workbook

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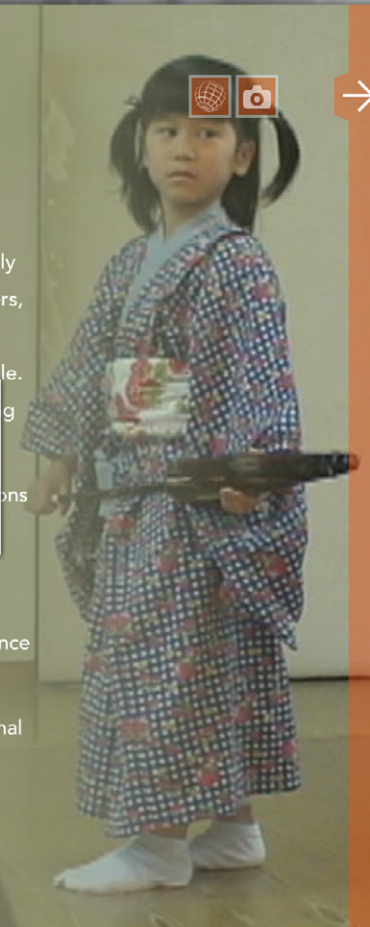
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Mitsumen Komori

Originally created for Segawa Kikunojo V by Tsuuchi Jihei, with music by Namizaki Tokuji in the tokiwazu style. First staged in 1829. *Mitsumen Komori* is a popular Japanese classical repertory piece depicting the comical antics of a 12 year-old babysitter girl from the Edo Period (1603-1867). Trying to soothe her crying baby, she uses three masks to play-act a funny skit. This was the piece that I would work on intensively with Hanayagi Kazu for 5 months.



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Background image: A lesson at Kazu-sensei's Kichijoji studio. October 2005.

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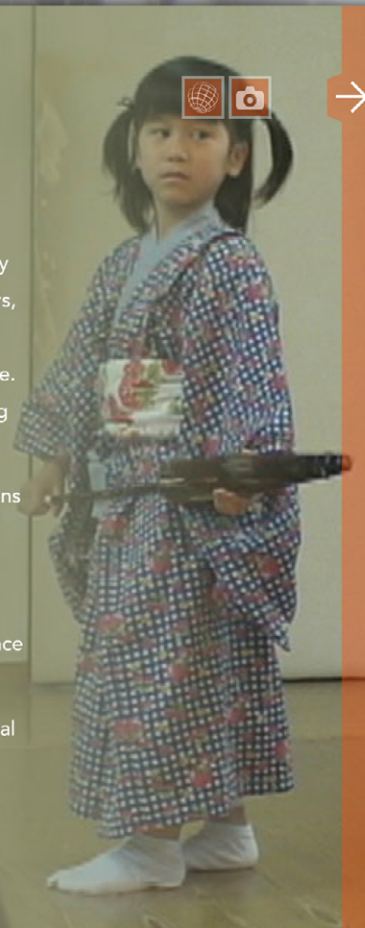
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Kazu-ayaki

In 2005 Kazu-ayaki was one of Kazu-sensei's most advanced apprentices. Kazu-sensei had been teaching her mother and then began teaching Kazu-ayaki when she turned five. As with many of her apprentices, Kazu-sensei has watched her young dancers grow as people as well as artists and she tailors her teaching style to each person accordingly.



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Background image: A lesson at Kazu-sensei's Kichijoji studio. October 2005.

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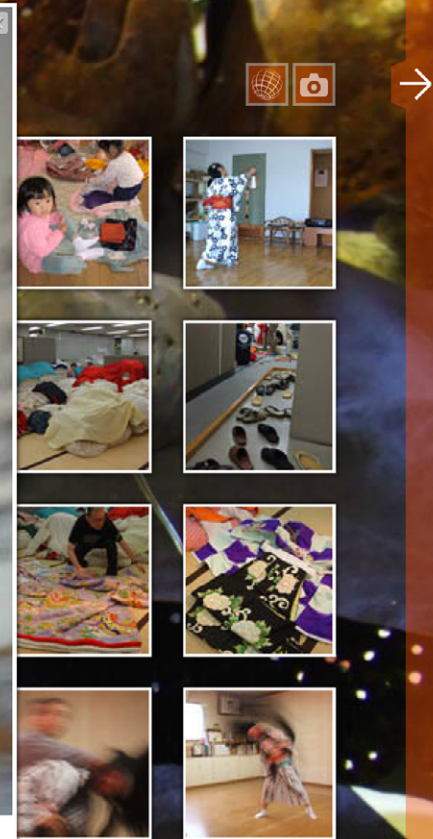
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Okame, the homely young maiden from Japanese folklore and one of the three masked characters I portrayed in the Japanese classical dance piece *Mitsumen Komori*. After Kazu-sensei's critique that I'd over-practiced my mask work, I decided to simply play with them at home in my Tokyo apartment. May 2005.



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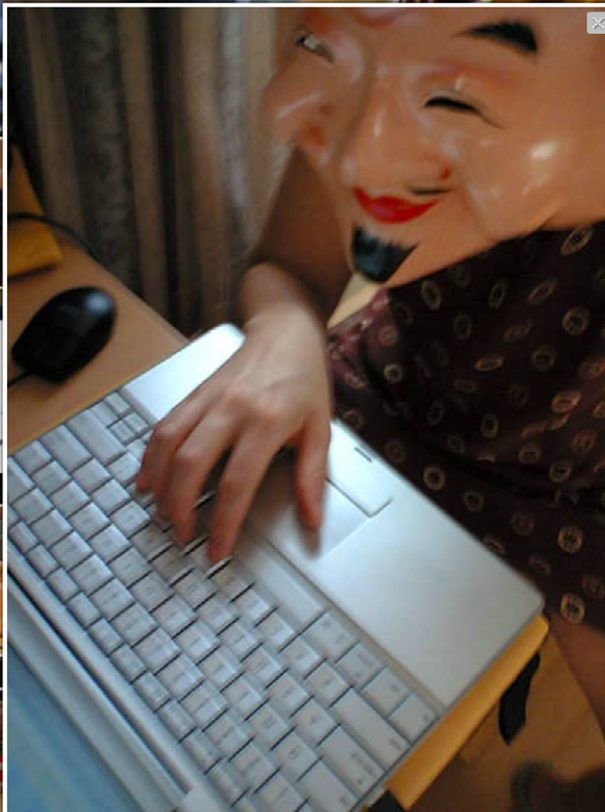
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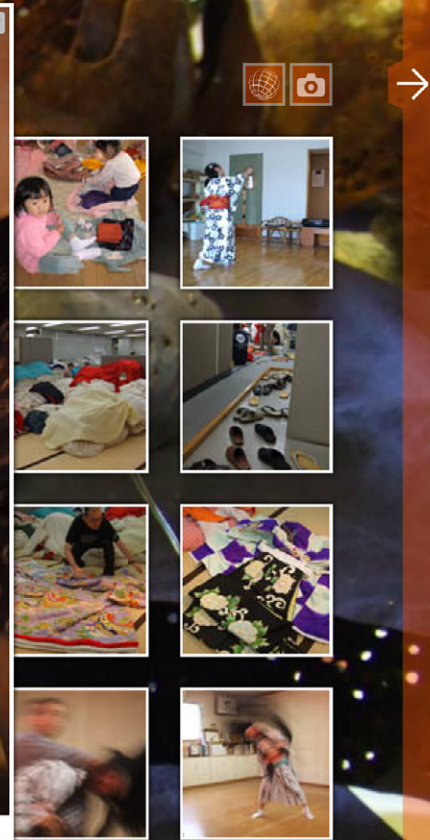
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← Dance Ideas 18



Ebisu, the jolly tipsy Shinto god of good harvest and one of the three masked characters I portrayed in the Japanese classical dance piece *Mitsumen Komori*. After Kazu-sensei's critique that I'd over-practiced my mask work, I decided to simply play with them at home in my Tokyo apartment. May 2005.



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Kazu-sensei with wig masters backstage preparing to go on stage. April 2005.

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An advocate for making Japanese classical dance accessible across populations, Kazu-sensei teaches at several satellite sites including university dance departments as well as municipal community centers. Here she teaches youngsters at Mifuji Kindergarten, in the Nasu-Shiobara countryside two hours north of Tokyo. This boy respectfully reaches into a box of dance fans, careful not to rush because Kazu-sensei has told them that fans are delicate beings that will disappear if disturbed. May 2005.

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Getting ready for Kazu-sensei's dance class at Mifuji Kindergarten, in the Nasu-Shiobara countryside two hours north of Tokyo. May 2005.

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Kazu-sensei teaches at several satellite sites including in the Nasu-Shiobara countryside two hours north of Tokyo. She set up a second studio there for graduates of the Mifuji Kindergarten where she has taught for 30 years. May 2005.

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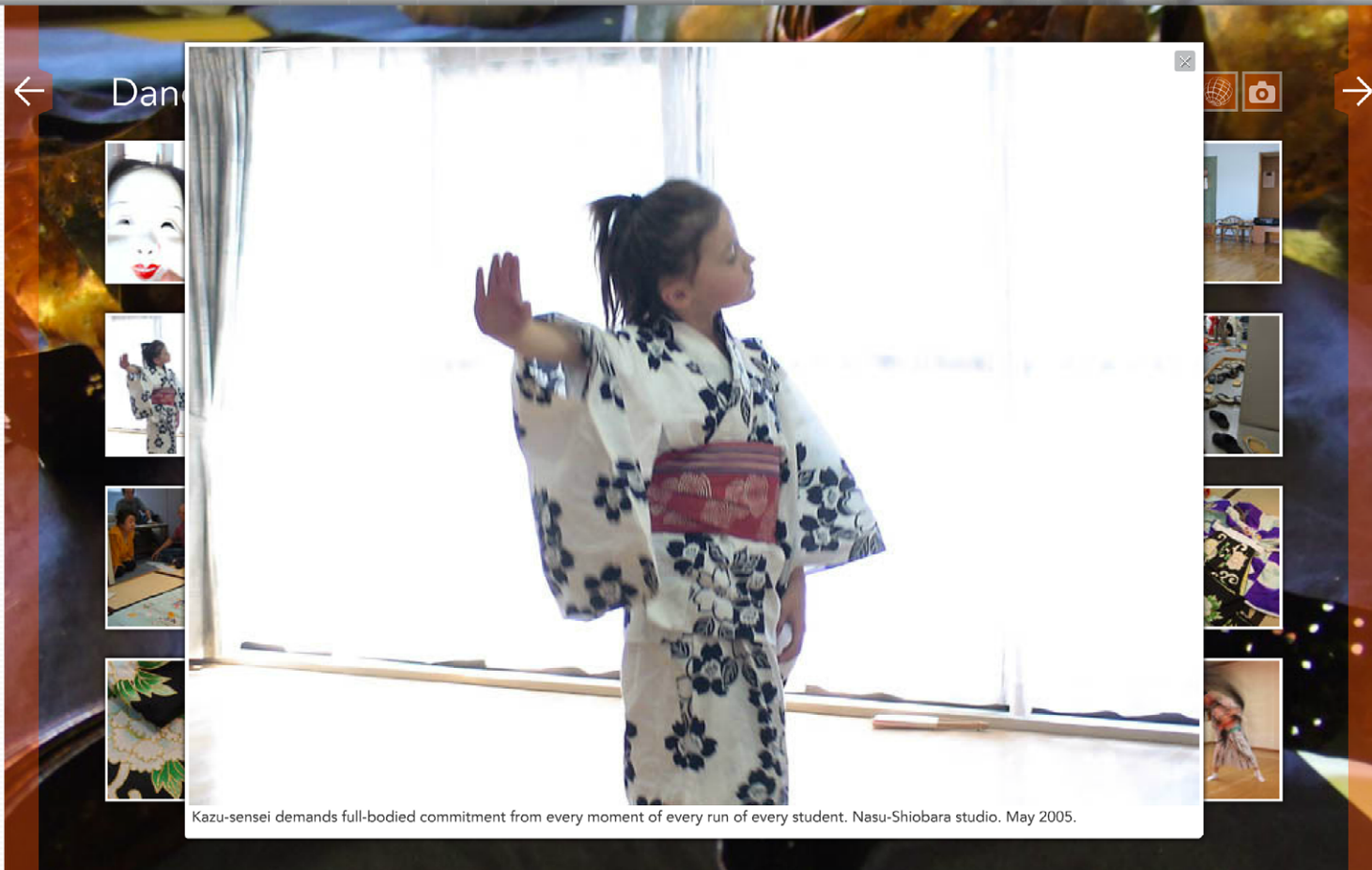
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Kazu-sensei demands full-bodied commitment from every moment of every run of every student. Nasu-Shiobara studio. May 2005.

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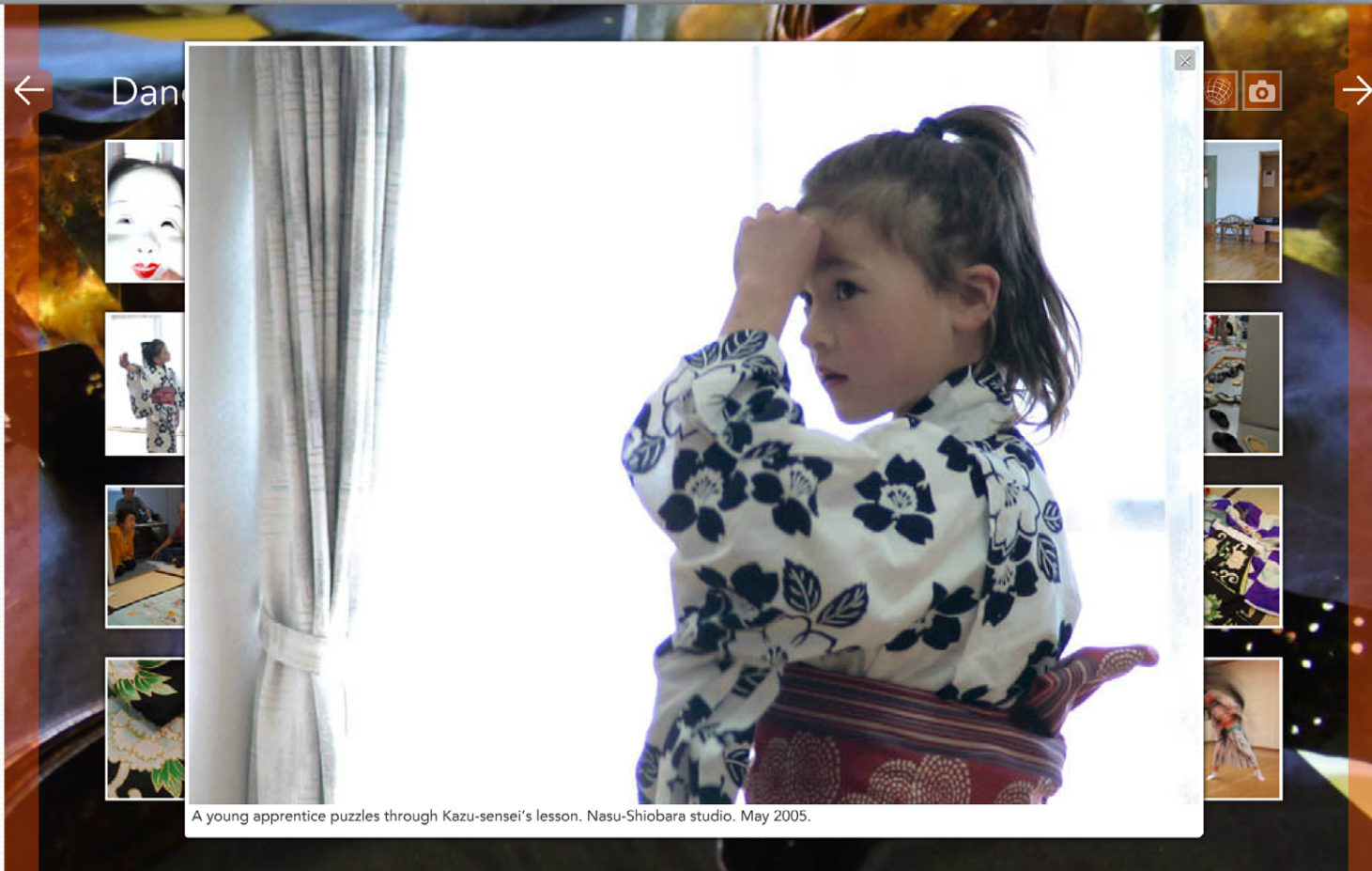
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A young apprentice puzzles through Kazu-sensei's lesson. Nasu-Shiobara studio. May 2005.

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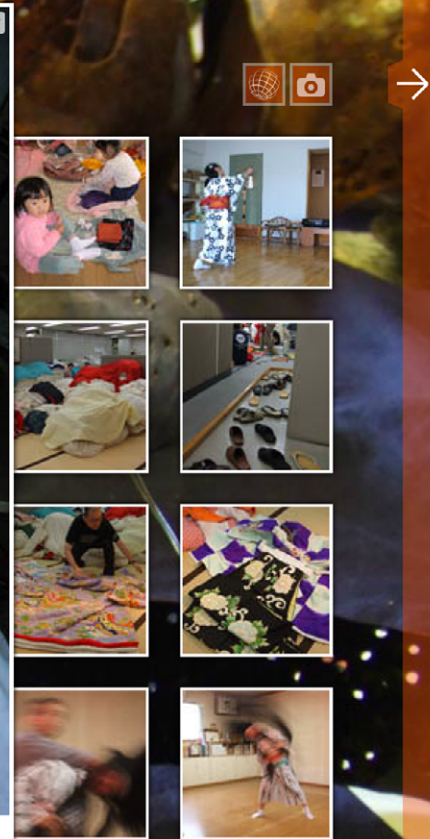
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← Dance Ideas 18 →



Hyottoko, the buffoon, and one of the three masked characters I portrayed in the Japanese classical dance piece *Mitsumen Komori*. After Kazu-sensei's critique that I'd over-practiced my mask work, I decided to simply play with them at home in my Tokyo apartment. May 2005.



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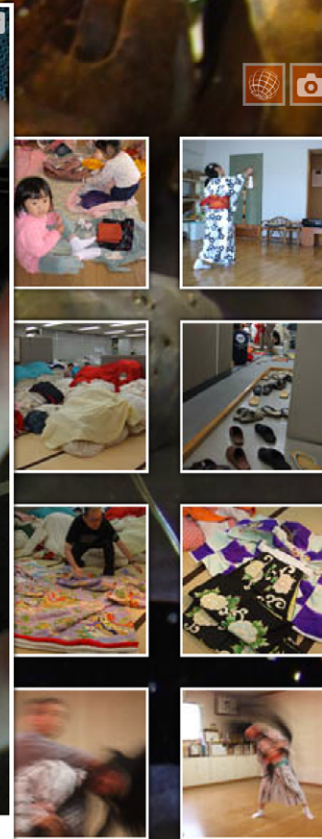
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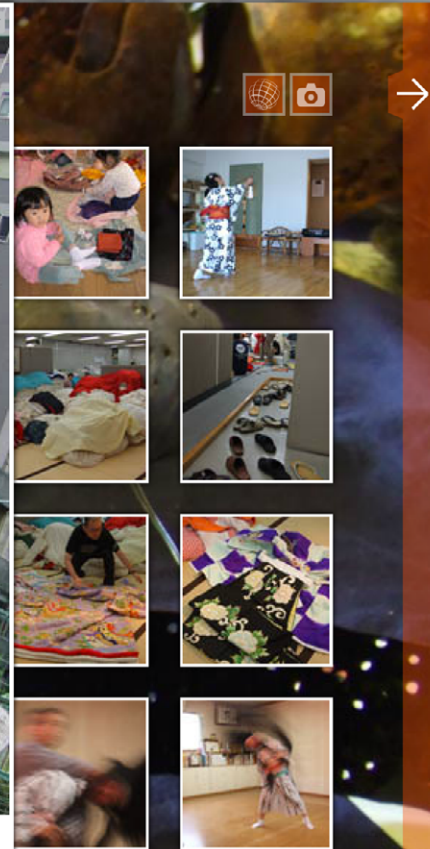
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Kazu-maika, one of Kazu-sensei's lead apprentices, on our visit to Shochiku Isho costume shop. This was a rare privilege to join Kazu-sensei and her own mentor Takubei-sensei to witness (and photograph!) the process of selecting costuming for the classical repertoire her apprentices would perform later that summer. July 2005.



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Inside Shochiku Isho costume shop. This industry serves Kabuki and classical dance productions. The costumers are specialists and learn their craft through the apprenticeship system. These bundles of costumes are set aside for upcoming productions. July 2005.

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Inside Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.



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Master costumer and apprentice. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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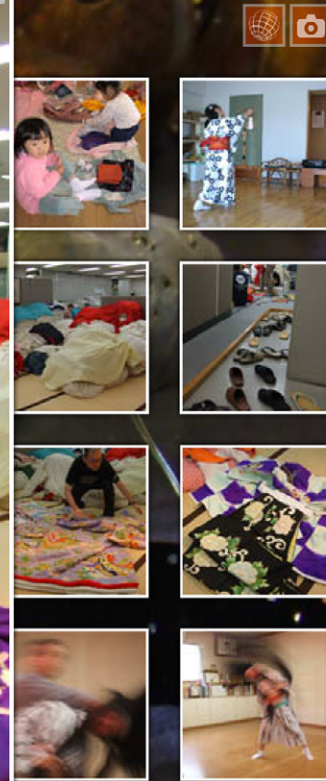
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Apprentice at Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.



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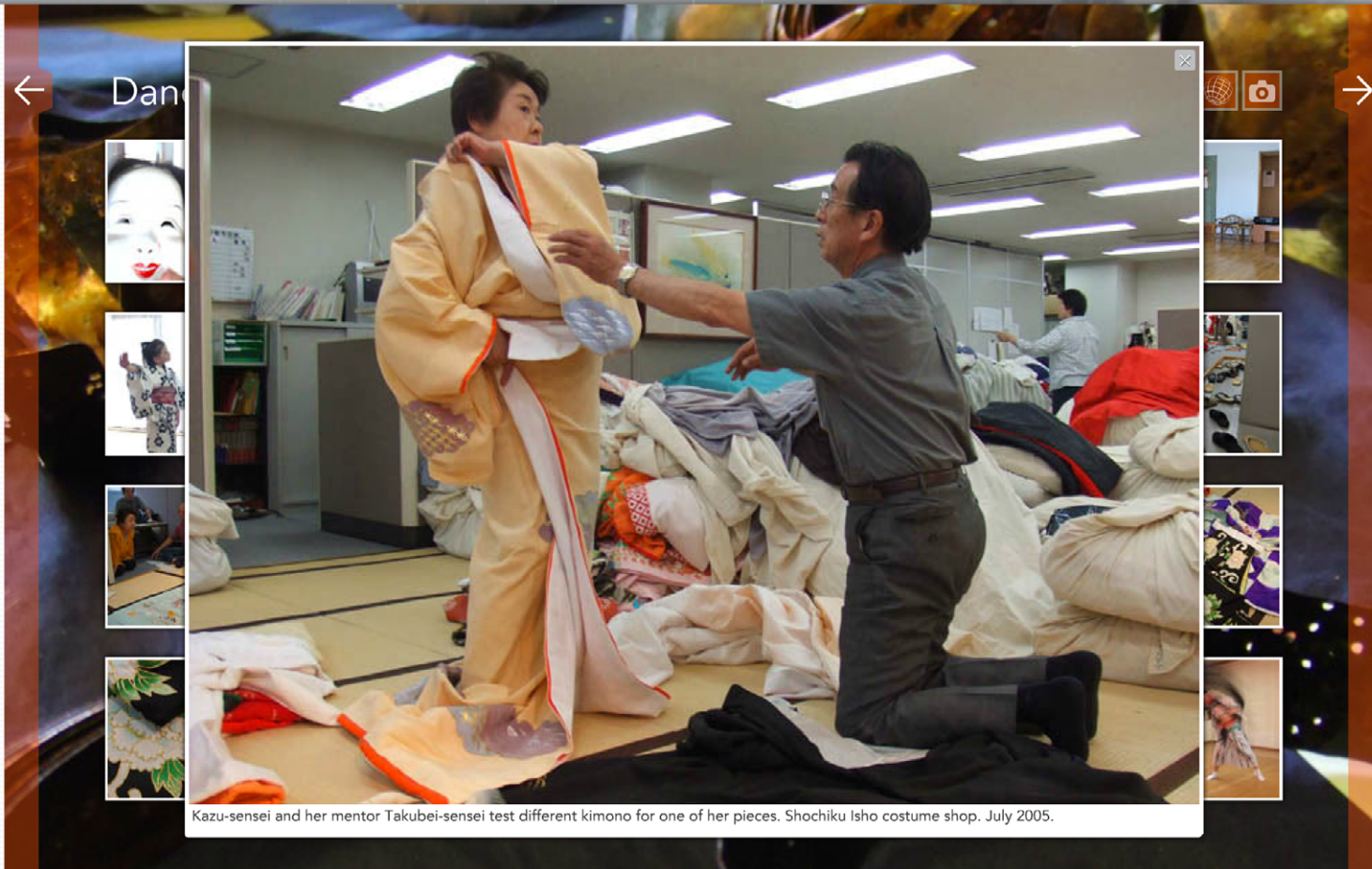
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Kazu-sensei and her mentor Takubei-sensei test different kimono for one of her pieces. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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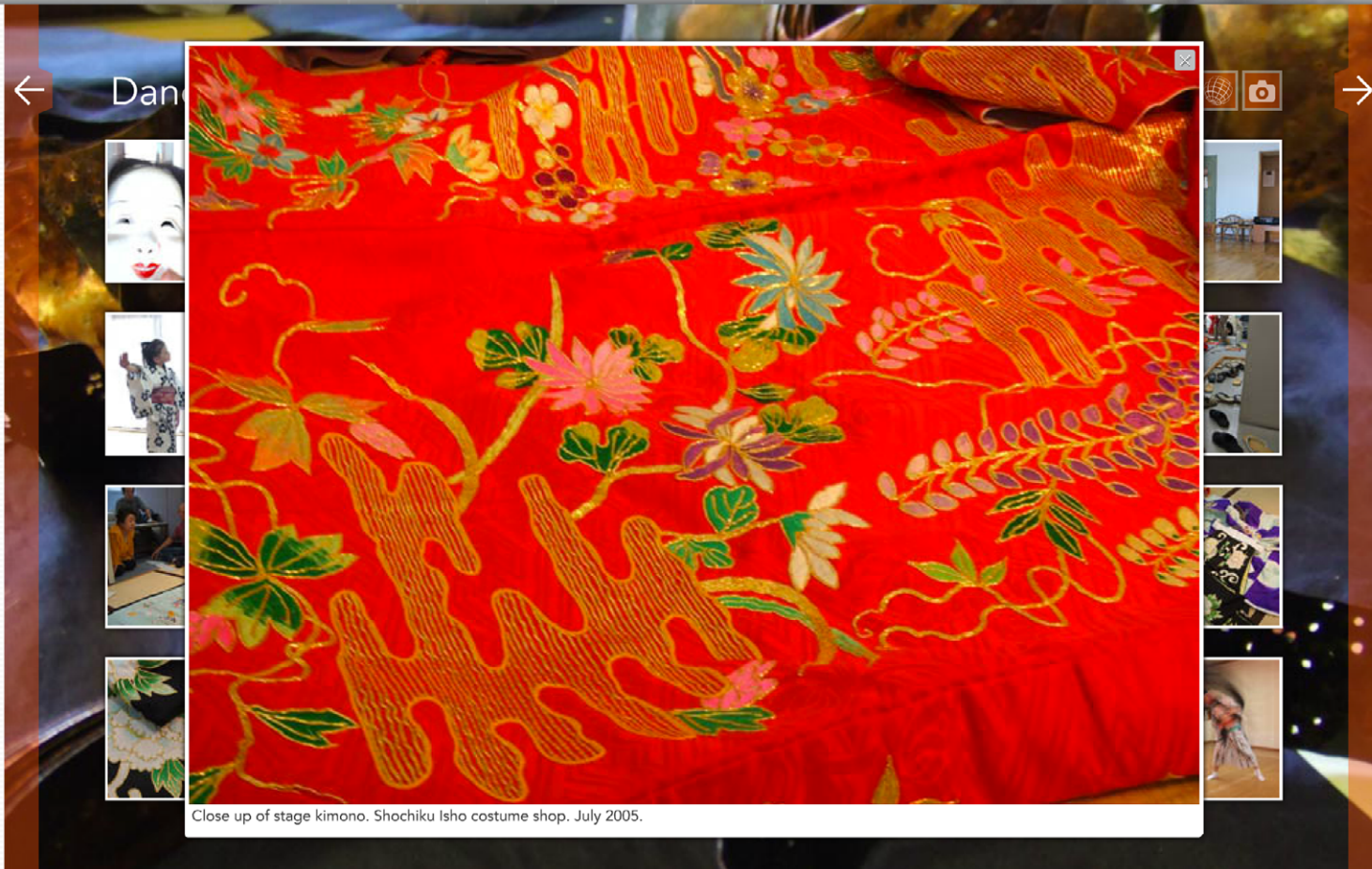
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Close up of stage kimono. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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The apprentice lays out a stage kimono for consideration. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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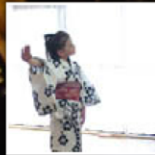
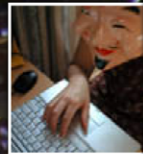
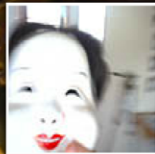
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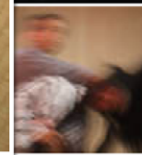
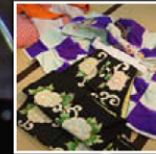
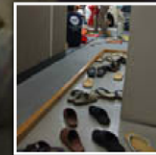
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The top and bottom chosen for the classical piece *Renjishi*. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.



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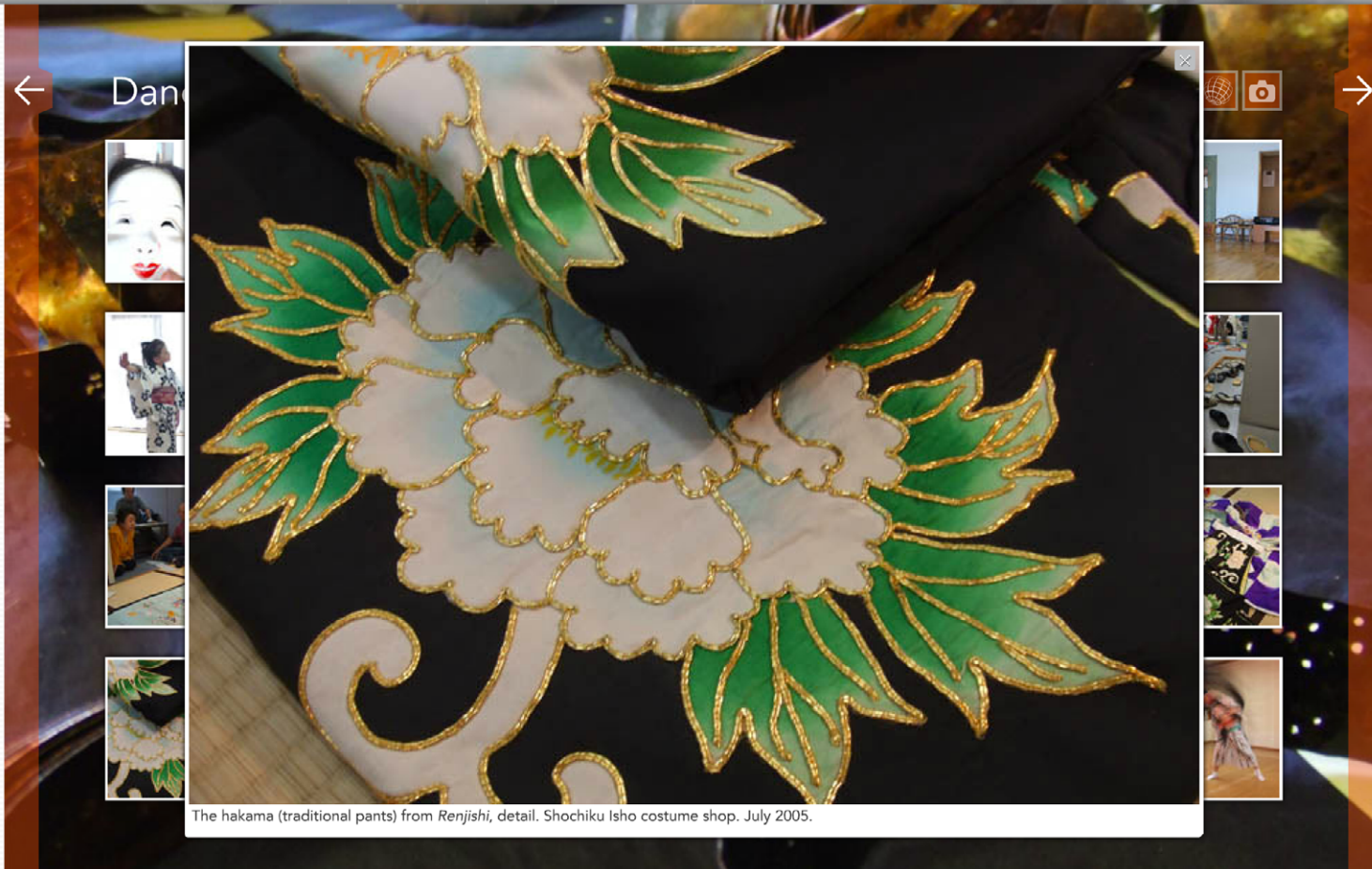
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The hakama (traditional pants) from *Renjishi*, detail. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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Noting the particular tint of pink on this piece, I was told that this color was unique to this shop. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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As we drew closer to the Kazu-sensei's performance date, the koken (professional stagehands) came to work with those apprentices whose dances required manipulation of major stage properties and costumes such as this giant lion's wig for Kagamijishi. Goro-sensei helps affix a practice wig on apprentice Kazu-maika. July 2005.

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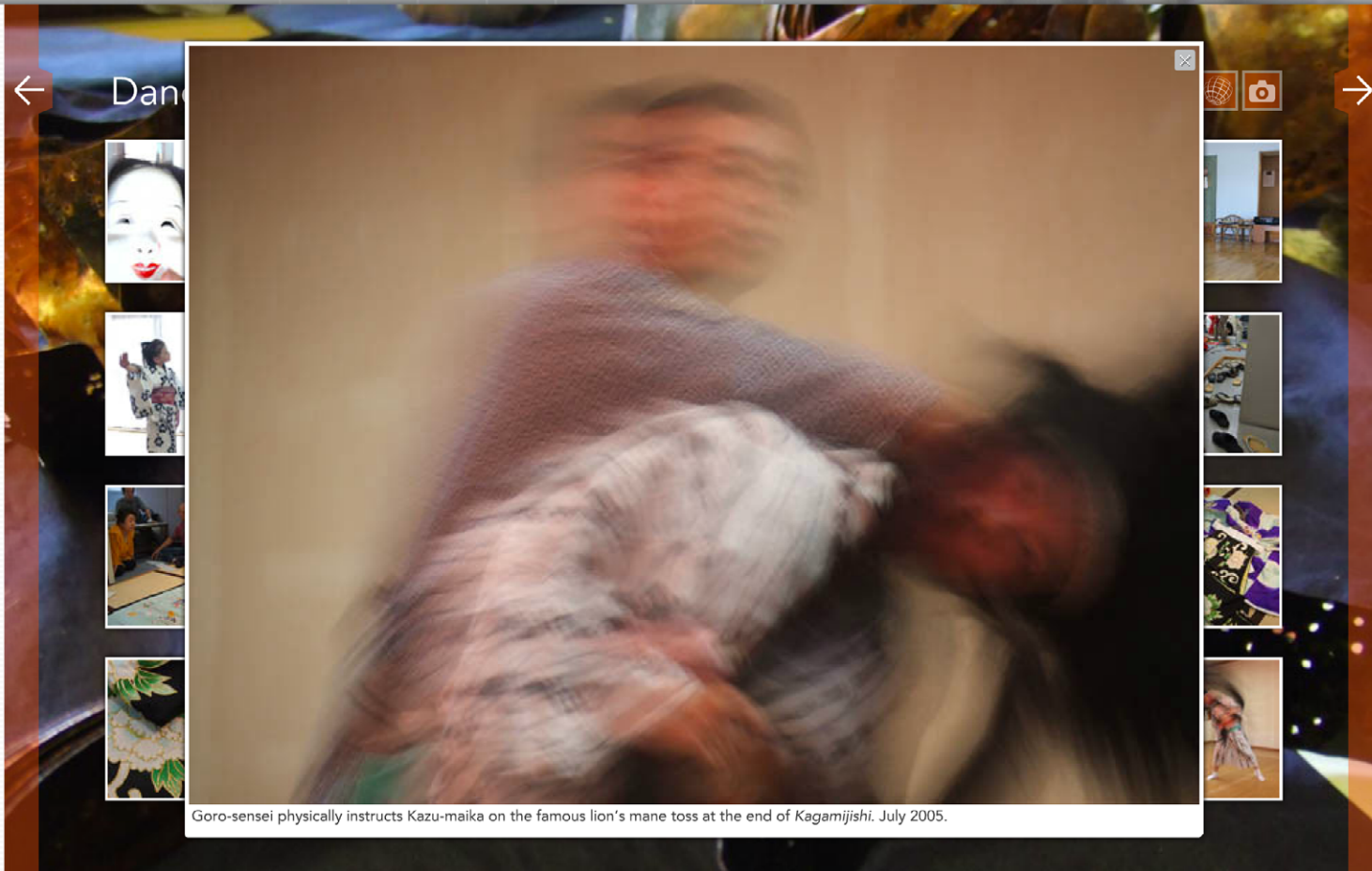
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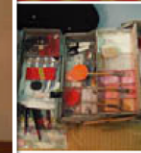
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Goro-sensei works with Kazu-ayaki on the climactic hikinuki (instant kimono change) in *Sagimusume*. Here he instructs by dancing her dance while explaining that an upstage sleeve gesture must be both beautiful and precise so that the koken can secretly pull threads that will release the top kimono. Koken must master not only their own roles as prop and costume manipulators, but also have intimate knowledge of the choreography as well. July 2005.



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Kazu-sensei's young apprentice prepares with total commitment. Kazu-sensei is renowned for the numbers of children who come to her for lessons, and for the vitality with which they dance and perform. Many other teachers are able to attract mostly retired hobbyists. For productions that include dance pieces that require children's roles such as this *Kagamijishi*, other teachers sometimes borrow Kazu-sensei's child-apprentices. July 2005.



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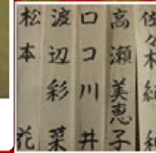
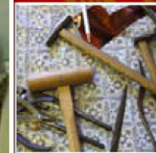
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Dance Ideas



Kazu-sensei with two young brothers who joined her studio after becoming excited by a one-time workshop for children at the local community center. A scene from *Hashi-benkei*, which is pictured in the Kagura photo gallery as well. July 2005.



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Background image: Close up of stage kimono. Shochiku Isho costume shop. July 2005.

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← Dance Ideas 19



While some took their turns running through their pieces with the koken and prop masters, others went into another room where the wig-builders were fitting the wig-bases (helmet-like structures made of copper) to each dancer according to the character she will portray. July 2005.



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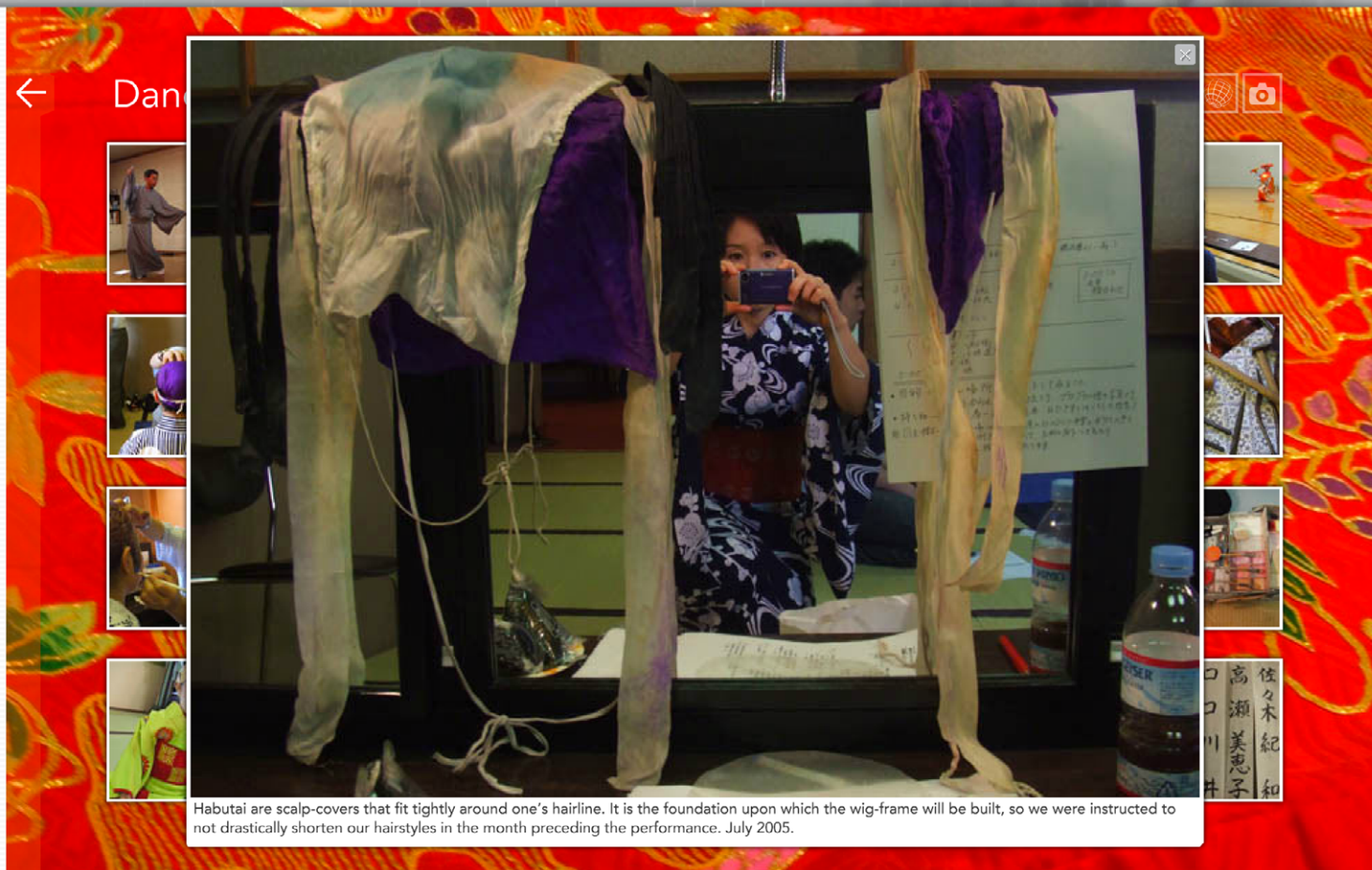
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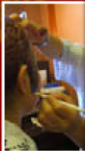
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← Dan







Master wig-builder uses industry specific hand tools to pound the exact curvature for each dancer's head. July 2005.

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Wig-building elements—the different components that are fitted together around the skull. July 2005.

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Roko preparing backstage on shitazarai (dress rehearsal day). Our wigs and costumes are fully prepared for us to try but full make-up will happen only on the day of. August 2005.



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