

JETAA.NY

Newsletter for The
Japan Exchange
and Teaching Program
Alumni Association,
New York Chapter

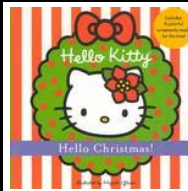
FALL 2004

Vol. 13, Issue 4

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Holiday Memories from Japan

Living in Japan gave us some unique challenges during our favorite holidays. But we know that's also what brings the best out of us. Below are some of the ways your fellow alums celebrated the traditional holidays in Japan.

Lyle Sylvander

I had Thanksgiving at the ambassador's residence with about 100 other JETS from the Tokyo area. Ambassador Howard Baker, former Senator from Tennessee and Chief of Staff under Reagan, and his wife Nancy Kassebaum who was a former Senator from Kansas, greeted us as we entered the door. It was a real Thanksgiving feast with a choice of Turkey, Roast Beef, Ham - all layed out in display style. After dinner, we got to mingle with the ambassador and his wife as well as talk with numerous marines who were also invited. The ambassador and his wife were both very down to Earth. We could also see the room where the famous picture of MacArthur and Hirohito was taken.

Nicole Hebert Saga Ken 1998-2000

My most memorable holiday had to be Thanksgiving. A group of us from AJET decided to put together a Thanksgiving Dinner just for us- the *gaijin*. We ordered food about a month in advance from that foreign food shop in Kobe...or was it Osaka?? Surely you know what I'm talking about. It was an ordeal to find a place in my city that would hold us all for some reason that had a working kitchen and *tatami* room available. Eventually, a JET in another town found one through her Board of Ed. We had it all planned out, how much was needed for the lot of us and it looked like had enough food. Al-

though it was two days after the real holiday, we were all dying for a real turkey with all the trimmings. The turkey was well on it's way in the oven brought in specially brought by one member and we all chipped in and cooked for hours. Sure enough, two members of that town's Board of Ed showed up uninvited while we were cooking and asked if they could take home some turkey because they've never had any!! It was quite surprising not to mention embarrassing because we only had enough for the people involved, and the town's JET was not having it. She told them sorry, that it was all accounted for, and turned them away. Needless to say, I don't think she was approved for much *nenkyu* that year!

Karen Sumberg

My first year in Kochi, I had the privilege of working with a Japanese Teacher of English who lacked a backbone and chose not to support me in times of classroom conflict. This presented a problem since, at this point, my Japanese was non-functional at best. It did work to my advantage in some ways, I planned all the lessons and got to do what I wanted. *Ibuki-sensei* was a bright, but insecure Japanese woman with a serious Korean fetish and boyfriend. She was also a proud Christian. When I arrived at school one day, I found a man at the gate passing out copies of the

("Holiday" Continued on page 8)

The "Focusing on What's Important" Holiday Issue

It's holiday season, and as *rai-nen* approaches we often start thinking about what's important to us. For some of us it's finding a job. For some of us it's what we can give back to others. And for many of us it's simply being grateful for what we have and reflecting on some of our great experiences from the past.

This Newsletter issue wants to help you keep the faith. There are still jobs out there, tough as the market may be, and there are JET alums out there willing to help you. And whether you have a job or not, volunteering is a great way to expand your horizons and expose yourself to new opportunities while doing something beneficial. Not mentioned in the issue's article on volunteering is JETAA New York, an organization that depends entirely on volunteers. We're doing more things and doing them better than ever thanks to our wonderful leadership. But the growth doesn't continue unless new people step up and get involved. It can start by coming to a happy hour, a business meeting, a contribution to the Newsletter, or by helping to organize a JETAA New York event. There are lots of great ideas out there, but a dearth of people willing to organize and see them through. We especially need people to step up now and help replace the current leadership as they prepare to step down in the coming elections.

So Happy Holidays and *Rai-nen mo Yoroshiku Onegaishimasu*. Let's make a better JETAA New York in the next year. It's all in our own hands.

Steven Horowitz
Newsletter Editor

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than to receive***

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JETAA NEW YORK SOCIETY PAGE

by Yoku Shitteiru



In the Spring Issue ("Politics") we talked with former JETAA Hawaii President **Nadine Nishioka** who ran for a seat in the Hawaii State House of Representatives, 24th District.

On November 2, Nadine lost her very first election for a seat in the State House of Representatives to incumbent Kirk Caldwell by a margin of 59.3% to 36.3%.

JETAA New York is proud to have a fellow alum fighting the good fight. And something tells us this isn't the last we'll hear from her. *O-tsukare sama deshita, Nadine. Kore kara mo ganbatte kudasai!*

Clara Kuhlman organized the most recent **Nihongo Dake Dinner**. This one went a little further off the beaten path, using **Rose of India** on 6th St. in the East Village (aka Curry Row) as its venue. Yoku Shitteiru heard there was a good mix of JETs, Friends of JET, and some **New York de Volun-**

teer people thrown in as well. There was no known *nijkai*, but the dinner itself was tasty and cheap! JETAA glitteratti in attendance included **Brian Hersey, Abel Vela, John Hyon, Lane Rettig, Tabitha Tsai** (her first JETAA event ever), and vetran FOJ **Nina Morgenlander**.



JETAA Treasurer extraordinaire **Jo Sonido** made a surprise temporary visit back to the States (was he flown in on JETAA Airforce One?) just in time for a big Hello/Goodbye dance-a-thon at **S.O.B.'s** on Brazil Night (a/k/a Saturday.) Is this the last we'll see of him for a while? Say it ain't so, Joe.

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NEED HELP?

Need help and a little support in your job search? Here's what JET alum Fran Bigman is doing to help.

The JETAANY Job Group is a new Yahoo group founded for all JET alumni in the area to share information about jobs, career fields, and interesting opportunities. My main goal in starting it was to provide a support group for those of us who are job hunting, and I hope we can use it for advice, encouragement, and sharing contacts. In other words, if I know you're looking for a job in publishing and I have a friend at Random House, I'll connect you. Because it's all about the connections, the larger this group gets the better. I encourage everyone to join, whether you're currently looking for a job or might be in the future. I also hope it will be a place where we can give each other advice about resumes, cover letters, interviews and how to get them, and other practical info.

To sign up, please send an email to:
jetaanyjob-subscribe@yahoo.com
 or visit <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/jetaanyjob/>.

We already have 27 members and are planning to meet up in person soon. Good luck and happy holidays!

-Fran Bigman (fran_bigman@yahoo.com)

Editor's Note: Feel free to sign up even if you already have a job. Reach out and help your fellow alums who are looking!

JETAANY CAREER FORUM October 23, 2004

From impressing classrooms full of *genki* children to one-on-one interviews with recruiters, JET alumni are in danger of a different sort of culture shock. To help them readjust and to introduce another group of skilled alumni to the area, the New York Chapter of JET Alumni Association held its annual Career Forum at the Nippon Club on October 23, 2004. As done in years past, the Career Forum was followed by the official Welcome Back Reception, generously supported by Council on Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR), NY.

The average American changes careers 4 to 5 times and holds 10 to 12 different jobs, according to Jane Hyun of Crossroads Communication. Jane is a professional career counselor who offered advice tailored to JET alumni on what she called, designing your own career. She emphasized the importance of creating a 2-minute pitch and being strategic in seeking out new career possibilities. "There is often a sense of urgency to get to the meetings. But, in the end, self-assessment does come back to haunt you." Tips on targeting specific industries and a lively Q&A period rounded out the presentation.

Ex-JET and ex-recruiter, Victor Cabilla was next on the agenda. Drawing on actual resumes and recruiting company information, Victor offered helpful tips on effective resume writing. He also discussed at length the difficult task of encapsulating JET into words and translating that invaluable experience into the US job market.

JET skills carry over into many different fields as shown by the diversity of the JET Alumni Career Panel. Representatives told their stories, from finance, marketing, non-profit, law school, education, information technology, human resources and foreign policy fields. Small breakout groups with panelists gave participants the opportunity for

WHO GOT NEW JOBS?

Elusive though they might seem, there are jobs out there and JET alums have found them. Here are three JET alums who have found good and interesting jobs in the past year.

Kareem Hertzog
*Inventory Analyst, Medical Systems Group
 Olympus America*

I'm a JET alum and I've been working for Olympus America since December of 2003. I was a JET in Asahi-shi, Chiba-ken from summer 2001 to the summer of 2003. When I moved back to New York, I went down to one of the temp agencies that I worked for in the past and told them that I wanted to work for a Japanese company. They found a temporary position for me in September of 2003 and I was hired full time a few months later. Olympus is involved in many things. Here's the link to our website for more information. "<http://www.olympusamerica.com/>"

Jennifer Fletcher
*Marketing
 Kaplan Inc.*

I just moved to the city in September. I got a full-time marketing job with Kaplan, even though I didn't study business in school and have no marketing background. Here's how I did it. A few years ago, I started working for Kaplan part-time as a teacher. I taught the SAT, GRE and TOEFL. I worked in Virginia and also in France. The rate for teachers isn't bad (\$15 an hour). When I came to Manhattan, they gave me 20 teaching hours a week as soon as I showed my face in the office. A week later, I casually asked if they had a full-time position open, and they mentioned the marketing position. Teaching for Kaplan is a great way to get your foot in the door to a great company. If you are interested, call 1-800-KAPTEST and tell them you are interested in teaching. Kaplan has locations in the east village and also in midtown. Good luck everybody! People on my academic team are always looking for great teachers. JETs to the rescue, please!

Laura Zamborsky
*Program Administrator
 New York University Psychology Department
 zambor26@hotmail.com*

I am currently working for New York University as a Program Administrator in the Psychology Department. I do mostly administrative stuff with a bit of advising the students. I found the job online and at NYU you have to apply online so it makes it very competitive unless you have some sort of connection. There are thousands of people applying these days to get free tuition, which is why I am working there as well. It's a great deal. It took me about four months to get a job, but I'm really happy here. My department is really flexible with my class schedule fitting in with my work schedule. Definitely not a job I would want to have forever, but perfect for now while I'm in school and it's getting me

more individualized questions and advice.

Employed or still looking, at 5:30 the participants moved to the annual Welcome Back Reception. The evening opened with speakers calling attention to the long history of Japanese-American relations and the importance of grassroots cultural exchanges such as the JET Programme. Government representatives and JET alumni, both new and old, were able to mingle, discover connections and meet new people over sushi and sake, enhancing JETAANY connections in the New York area. Details on potluck dinners and the *bonenkai* along with more winter JETAANY functions are available at www.jetaany.org

JETAA Presents

JAPAN BY MALE - Part 2
by Alexei Esikoff, Fukushima 2002-03

*The second in a fictional
multi-part series.*

A summary: Some more of the introductory chapters from my work-in-progress novel about Peter Szeikaly. He is a study abroad student from Pennsylvania living in Aomori, and a bit of a dork. Maggie is his half-Japanese friend from England. Ravi is another English student, and Brad is a Californian that Peter, inexplicably, doesn't like.

Never let it be said I lack goals.

I went into Super Electron, the aptly-named electronics store, with a wad of yen and a dream. I wanted to become the Playstation 2 Master before my return home. So I also purchased ESPN NBA 2K and SFX Tricky.

Passing the display of digital cameras, I stopped and shuddered, because I wanted one of them too. (The one I had brought with me to Japan was the Konica with the cracked case I'd received for my fifteenth birthday.) There was a nifty little Canon that promised "Big Power!" and boasted a 50,000 yen price tag.

I bought it. I didn't have the cash, so I charged it to my emergency credit card, linked to my mother's address in Pennsylvania, not mine.

How can I rationalize it? The technology this camera contains wouldn't be available stateside for another two years, at least.

(At least that's what I told my mother on our monthly call when she complained about the \$450 charge.)

I lugged my packages home, panting by the second floor. The Playstation instructions were only in Japanese but the set-up was pretty easy.

Before I started to play, I took a picture of the Playstation resting on the tatami mat, because I liked the juxtaposition of New and Old Japan.

In my drawer were a pair of Adidas shorts usually worn (though rarely) as a bathing suit. Paired with a shiny-thin old gray T-shirt, I was ready to run.



On the stairs, Ravi and Bob were coming up, backpacks slung over their shoulders. "Hey mate!" said Ravi. "Going for a run?"

Well, what did it look like?

"Yeah."

"Good for you."

Bob, in his Kiwiness, said, "Come down to the pub later."

"Pub?"

"You seen the one around the corner?"

Ravi laughed and nudged him. "How would he have seen it? It has a sign that's like the size of

Luxembourg."

"Yeah, well, it's around the block to your right, and it says in English 'Tomorrow.'"

"Uh, okay."

Ravi put his hand on my shoulder. "A whole lot of us will be there. Simon and Joe and Brad and Darren and Maggie and I think even Heather will join us."

"I'll try," I said, and moved down a step.

"In like an hour," Bob continued.

"*Ja ne*," one of them said, but I'd already turned around, and
("Fiction" continued on page 10)

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THE DATING GAME

(a/k/a How We Find Our Jobs)

by
Karen Sumberg

When I arrived back in the States from my journeys abroad, I knew the transition would not be smooth. I expected a few blips and the occasional belly flop on the path to getting a life, but I did not expect the belly flops to be so consistent or the blips to increase in size as my time at home has increased. The biggest hurdles I have encountered in my progress have been dating and finding employment.

The dating scenario is more for the benefit of my parents, who seem to feel that at the ripe old age of twenty-five I am straddling the line between spinsterhood and taking a vow of silence on the way to the nunnery. I did go out on a few dates for appeasement's sake and to see what was out there. One of the dates consisted of coffee in the park and a monologue on how my date was "embracing several types of spirituality because religion is just a constraint put on people by the subversive power structure which dominates us all." Needless to say I could not wait to schedule another date with the local Dali Lama.

Luckily, I have found a substitute for my temporarily stagnant social life—job interviews. Yes, every interview I go on or cold call I make is a marginally passable substitute for dating.

Step 1- The Search

Finding a suitable job, like finding a suitable date, takes time and careful evaluation. I don't want to go in for just any job. After a careful process of elimination, well really, after seeing any job in my chosen field, I send my resume. In the dating world, I am much more particular. The dating website I joined has a vast array of potential men. Perusing the profiles filled with likes, dislikes, ideal first dates, eye color, and pictures allows me to decide which person I want to make contact with. The first e-mail begins the awkward practice of initiating a date. If that goes well, the next step is "The Meeting."

Step 2- The Interview

The same process of asking for a date happens within my job search. After several phone calls with the friendly people in the HR office a date and time are set for "The Interview." The preparation for an interview is a careful puzzle of the right clothes (professional, but not too stuffy), make-up (a natural look), and jewelry (small delicate pieces and not too much). Much like a first date, you already have this outfit all worked out. The jeans, cute v-neck blue shirt, and sexy heels or black skirt and ironed button down that look casually thrown together took hours of cautious planning.

The descriptions of some of the men, and I am sure women, give of themselves on the websites are not always accurate. I am not talking about a little difference in the color of hair or one inch shorter than was actually stated (although the standard rule is to subtract two inches from the height given on the profile), full-blown distortion of appearance is a definite problem. People must forget that this is a dating

service, eventually you meet people face to face. I encountered description distortion during one of my dates. The guy had a picture posted on the site and he looked tall, cute, and relatively fit. He stated that his body type was athletic/fit. I walked past him about three times before he noticed me and said my name. Why did I totally miss seeing someone I had seen a picture of? How could I not recognize a face when I had looked at it and thought it was attractive? Apparently, this gentleman thought that "athletic/fit" still applied to his body even with the extra fifty pounds. If you ave a few extra, or fifty extra, pounds on your frame, just say so. It is worse to meet someone expecting them to look one way and then see the person. My first thoughts were about how this guy and reality were not really friends, more passing acquaintances who met for lunch once a year. But, I still had a date to go on, so we headed in to the restaurant to learn whether there would be a second date or not.



A job interview is, like a first date, a nerve-racking exercise in fake presentation. The person you show to the interviewer or date is this hyper-fabulous version of the real you. The senior trip to the Bronx Zoo becomes the time you studied the animals of the wild. History paper on the restoration of Charles II to the English throne is now an in depth study of the political movements in England and how they influenced American politics. The passing interest in ABBA is now a full appreciation for the music of Scandinavia. In the interview, the opportunity to tweak your life is met with more questions. During a date, the hyper-you is met with "Oh really!" and "Me too!" First dates tend to foster a sense of one-upmanship. As in, "I

love U2." "Me too, I was a roadie for them on their 2001 tour. Bono and I are pretty tight." Granted, that is an extreme example, but you know the feeling.

Step 3- The Callback

Thus far, I have not had that much experience with this stage of the game. I usually initiate the callback. This is the point where I suck up all the pride I have left and call to check if they still remember they interviewed me. The response is a brisk and slightly friendly, "Thanks for calling, but we'll call you." This is where the date experience differs a bit from the job. If a date went well, we are usually both in agreement and the callback is not as fretful. Although, of the four dates I have gone on thru the website none have been callback situations. For one reason or another, the spark was missing and a second date would have been an exercise in futility. I have been taking a break with the whole dating scene since my date with the extra fifty pounds. Perhaps, someday soon I will get the itch to restart my dating life again, but until then I have a job quest to fill the hole.

ELECTION VIEWS FROM JAPAN

The JETAA Newsletter asked JET alum Brian Hall, currently working in Tokyo, to solicit some views on the U.S. election from some average Japanese folks. Here's his frontline report from Japan.

Being an American and living overseas these days carries a strange amount of baggage. Of course when I came to Japan in 1998, I didn't quite feel that being an American was such a bad thing and had not too much to be ashamed of.

Teachers and students here had always told me they viewed Americans as being very independent and tried their best to do what is right. That was the mood at least up until Bush went into Iraq. Then things felt a bit different. I was no longer talking about America in class positively but rather defensively. Being an American abroad with George in office over the past four years was like walking around with a sign on my back saying "kick me!"

With all the resentment I felt back in NY this summer during my vacation home, I was sure that America would not tolerate any more from a president who lied to America and the world. He even redefined the word terrorism so now even animal activists are classified with Al Qaida. Hearing the final result of the election was like waking up on cold tatami with a hangover from drinking cheap sake bought at the local supermarket.

At the request of the JETAA New York Newsletter, I sent out questionnaires to people here in Japan to gather some comments about the election. Many Japanese friends, students and colleagues were quick to voice their disappointment with Bush's re-election. The questionnaire provided much of the same feedback and it would be repetitive to list all the abundant "I hate George Bush!" remarks I received. One of my former students, now in university, sent me a nice bit she wrote about

her thoughts and I think they represent much of what I have heard here in Japan. This is what she wrote:

Like many other Japanese people, I was very shocked when I heard Bush was re-elected. Although many Japanese people are not interested in Japanese politics or the election of our Prime Minister, a lot of Japanese people paid attention to the US presidential election in America. I wonder why more than half of the American people still support Bush although he attacked Afghanistan and Iraq and many people died because of the war. I don't want such a war to happen again in this world. It is difficult for Japanese to understand that the presidential election was strongly related to morality and religion because Japan is not a country which is divided into two groups by what religion you believe, what race you are, where you are from in the country. It seems to me that many developing countries in the world are being dominated by the American government instead of the United Nations. Now America has a much stronger and more influential power than the United Nations does. Is it what people in the world wish? How about human rights of those who lost their families or relatives over the war and those who wish for a peaceful world? I hope that this world isn't dominated by the American government, this so called Bush administration, from now on. -Junko N.

All in all, I am not surprised anymore when some of my students yell out, "America is one crazy country!" My best reply is "George W!" They just laugh. I wish I could.

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(“Holiday” continued from page 1)

Bible to students and faculty alike. Ibuki-sensei had one of the gleaming new books on her desk and told me that it helped her to deal with students who were being rude to her (which seemed to be all of them with the exception of three girls on her table tennis team).

In early December, with Christmas fast approaching, Ibuki turned to me one day and asked me to do a lesson on Christmas. “Christmas in America?” I asked. “No, the story of Christmas and then, maybe some points on how you celebrate Christmas in America,” she responded. “Well,” I suggested “you should probably do the lesson on the story of Christmas since you are Christian and I am not.” “Ummm, maybe, you would be better at the story of Christmas because my sect does not celebrate Christmas on the 25th. We are not sure that is the actual day that Christ was born,” Ibuki-sensei replied. I was trying to close my mouth from shock, but it seemed dead-set on staying open. I fully acknowledge that December 25 is most likely not the exact day of Jesus’ birth, but it is accepted that the 25 is the day the coming is celebrated. “Oh, when do you celebrate Christ’s birth?” I asked. “Well, we are not sure when it happened so we do not officially celebrate it,” was the answer. This puzzled me tremendously, as the birth of Christ is one of the founding principles of Christianity. Christ’s existence is the reason Christianity came into being (well that and Paul spreading the word after he died, but I digress). But, in the end, who am I to argue a person’s religious views? So a nice Jewish girl truly benefited from her secular education in America by being able to share the story of Christmas with my *chugakko-sei*.

Stacy Smith

During my 3 years as a JET in Kumamoto I rarely got homesick, but when this affliction did strike it would inevitably be during an American holiday, which is why I was happy to discover that there was evidently an annual international Thanksgiving dinner where I lived. Determined to see what it was all about, I went to check it out my first year with an Australian and an American friend. The dinner was potluck-style, and our contributions were motley to say the least. My American friend had made the 1-hour journey from the *inaka* on his bike, on the way passing a town famous for watermelon so he decided to pick one up to bring along. I had made my famous rice-cooker banana cake (due to lack of an oven), and my Australian friend brought fresh bread.

The dinner was housed in a facility that normally was a kindergarten run by a couple in charge of a local Lutheran church. The three of us arrived to find a full house and a sign at the check-in table reading: “100 yen for a paper plate and a set of chopsticks. Donations welcome!” Behind the counter was an area filled with assorted presents that were being collected for a holiday toy drive. We walked into the spacious room to find a mix of Japanese and international families, and tables spread with all sorts of goodies. There was the usual Thanksgiving fare of pumpkin pie (thanks to Costco) and stuffing, as well as the more Japanese offerings of *umeboshi* and *sushi*. Despite a turnout of close to 100 people, once we were all seated and holding dishes stuffed with food, we went around the room and shared what we were thankful for. Responses varied from the typical (family, friends, health, etc.) to the only-in-Japan answers (“I’m thankful for watermelon!”), the latter of which caused my friend to beam and admit that lugging the melon in his basket on the way over had been hard but worth it. Once a bilingual blessing had been offered, chopsticks were broken and we all dug into our holiday fare.

I have to say it was my first time eating turkey with chopsticks and that I did miss having cranberry sauce, but other than that it was a Thanksgiving that felt very close to home in spirit. Our bellies full, my friends and I geared up for the bike ride home (thankfully downhill!), though at that moment even simple movement was difficult. For the remainder of my time on JET, I enjoyed this unconventional celebration every November, and have to say that I kind of missed having sushi at the Thanksgiving table this year...

**Toby Weymiller
West Seattle, Earth**

Fuyu yasumi of 1999/2000 was amazing!! At the time, I was the OSIG (Outdoor Special Interest Group) President and had coordinated many trips and events, as well as constructed the frequent newsletters to my members across Japan. However, the two weeks in Niseko over Christmas and New Year’s this particular vacation were absolutely incredible.



First of all, I rented a 3 story cottage for the entire two weeks and invited any and all OSIG members to come, as well as fellow Hokkaido JET’s who didn’t have anything better to do for the holidays than ski, party and break in the millenium in a place they would surely never forget. Nearly every day, we skied untracked powder, soaked in *rotenburo* hot springs, drank cheap imported beer and played card games (which usually involved drinking large quantities of alcohol) late into the evening. Every morning, we would wake up early and start the whole daily ritual again with smiles that ran from one ear to the other. By the time December 31st arrived, we had people sleeping in closets, on tables and pretty much any place they could find room for a sleeping bag. The *genkan*, in fact, became a mountain of shoes that we aptly named, “*Nisekofuji!*”

Finally, the party held at JoJo’s Café (approximately 15 or 50 steps, depending on how straight a line you were walking, from our cottage) on New Year’s Eve was the icing on the cake. A band called “Boogie Nights” came down from Sapporo and played amazing covers into the wee hours of the morning with, of course, the famous Prince cover being played as the clock struck 12. My mate, Keith (a.k.a. Snapper), and I attempted to stay up all night so that we could be on the first gondola ride in the morning. We both fell asleep about 6:30am, but got up around 11am to enjoy yet another 1/2 day of epic Hokkaido Powder. Many choose to take a polar bear plunge on this day or watch the sunrise from Mt. Fuji. Snap’s and I decided to ski the deep and by looking at our grins at the end of the day, there was no doubt we had started off the new century properly.

In summary, the world did not end on Y2K, but if it did, we would have all been in a great place to say, “Sayonara”. Fuyu Yasumi 1999/2000 was truly an unforgettable JET memory!

Shannan Spisak

My first Thanksgiving the three American ALTs in my city went to the foreign food store in Tokyo and bought traditional Thanksgiving ingredients. We RENTED a kitchen at the local international center (since no one’s apt. had an actual oven or enough space to cook a large meal!), made turkey, mashed potatoes, pumpkin pie, etc. Then brought all the food back to two ALT apts in the same building. We hosted about 15 people (Japanese and other non-american JETs) between the two closet sized spaces - one held the food and coats/shoes, while the other provided floor and folding chair space for eating! It was a very successful celebration....

Lynette Martyn

(“Holiday” continued on page 12)

WHERE DO WE VOLUNTEER?

Nancy Leahy Big Brother/Big Sister

I joined Big Brothers Big Sisters NY almost a year ago and i love it. It's easy to make it fit your schedule and it's very rewarding. The headquarters is on 30th street, on the block where I live. So I used to pass it everyday and think to myself "I need to find out more about this." So I finally went to an information session, and signed up, and got matched with a ten year old girl who lives in the South Bronx. You need to commit to eight hours a month for at least a year. For us, it usually winds up being four hours every other weekend. It really works with my schedule because they take your needs into account when they match you. For example, you can request an older child so you don't have to spend half your day in the subway picking them up and dropping them off. (my love of younger kids outweighed that, though) You can specify whether you want to do weekends or weekdays. So it's pretty flexible in that regard. My Little, Sophia, is ten years old, so I have to go pick her up wherever we go. That can be a pain, but it's so worth it. She is so fun and open-minded and loves learning new things. She especially loves activities where we make things. I have recently taught her how to make pillows on my roommate's sewing machine, which she adores. We go to museums, to the movies, restaurants, or picnics. The list of activities are endless. It's really about exploring the city with someone who needs an older role model. I think it's rewarding on both sides. She learns about all that the city has to offer, and can hear a fresh point of view on life. I doubt many people from her neighborhood would ever think about going to live in Japan, for example, but she is always interested in hearing about my experience there. And I love having a ten-year old buddy who is so inquisitive and interested in things. She forces me to think about stuff that I

take for granted. Here's the website for anyone who's interested.
<http://www.bigsnyc.org/>

Laura Epstein Brainstorm

I've recently started volunteering with a program called Brainstorm, which is an after-school tutoring program for kids in Harlem. It's amazing for a few reasons--the tutoring is 1 on 1; the parents are generally pretty involved (all the kids who go are there because their parents signed them up); and in it's past few years, the program has really made a difference in test scores and getting kids to college. The website is " \t " _blank" <http://www.brainstormnyc.org>. I've just started there last month, and I go once a week to work with a junior high student--something I never would have done before my year of junior high teaching in Japan!

Laura Zamborsky iMentor

I volunteer with iMentor, which is and organization that matches high school kids with professionals and they communicate weekly via email. There is the traditional match, which is by occupation, where the student is interested in your profession, and the newer match, the book club, which is what I do. In this match, you are paired with a student in an English class and you read the same book and discuss it weekly. You also meet face-to-face four times over the year at various activities iMentor organizes such as going to a METS game, a museum, or the zoo. iMentor is a great orga-

("Volunteer" Continued on page 13)



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(“Fiction” continued from page 5)

people lose their accents when they speak foreign languages.

It’s an odd thing, running. There’s no destination in mind. It’s just one foot in front of the other and causes rank armpits. Mine stunk.

I jogged past the 7-11 and turned the corner. There was a sign that said “Tomorrow Bar Snack,” all right, but nothing else about it suggested a bar. Move on.

There was a rice paddy, unbelievably, in the next plot. Rows of green tufts intermingled with dirt.

At the edge there was a shrine the size of a mailbox, stone with a red curtain. Someone was kind enough to donate a jar of canned peaches, sitting nonchalantly next to the incense. I reached inside.

Two schoolgirls in those omnipresent sailor dresses stopped and held their hands to their mouths to suppress giggles. I turned around and went home.

Maggie came down the stairs as I went up. “Hi Peter! You’ve been jogging, haven’t you?”

Why did everyone on this program revel in stating the obvious? “Yeah, a little.”

“Well, are you coming down to the pub?”

“I don’t know. I should shower.”

“Shower, then, and join us.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“You know to look for the little sign?”

“Ravi told me about it.”

“Right, okay. *Ja mata!*” And she trotted down the stairs.

In my *apato* I kicked off my smelly shoes. Left them jumbled up in the entryway. Shed my shirt in front of the stove, my shorts by the toilet. I stood in the bathtub and held the shower-attachment-thingie, running the water all over my sweatiness.

Then on the concrete porch I smoked the final Marlboro. Lungs content and smoky, I watched the customers go in and out of the 7-11.

Maggie knocked on my door and asked me if I knew where she could buy a mobile phone. I offered to take her to Super Electron to buy us both cell phones.

“Sometimes,” she responded sardonically, “I think I’m learning more about Americans being here than I am about the Japanese.”

“You must’ve known we call it a cell phone.”

“I did. But that’s not what I meant.”

She attempted to play Tricky while I shuffled around for a satisfactory shirt. “I’m really shit at this!” she called, so I sat, clean-smelling, next to her and finished the course. Her weak beginning prevented a high score.

Down the main road we walked, mocking the endless concrete. How can a country that’s so obsessed with outward appearances allow their streets to be this hideous? Maggie suggested we cut through the Shinto shrine. When I told her it wasn’t a shortcut, she said we should go anyway, for the aesthetics.

Inari-jinja stood in contrast to the rest of the town. The red *torii* gates were two stories high and striking. Underneath ran a boulevard of sparkling silver granite, up to the wooden temple. It was guarded by two stone lions.

We watched a middle-aged businessman approach the temple. He walked up the three steps slowly, tossed something (money?) in an iron pot, and pulled the thick braided rope next to it. Then he clapped three times and bowed in prayer. Maggie stopped me a moment and ran to the side of the temple. In a box of ashes she lit a stick of incense with the lighter in her pocket. She closed her eyes. So I went to sit on a wooden bench by the entrance. The incense reminded me of smoking, so of course I lit a cigarette. After a moment, she ambled back over to me. I offered her a cigarette, which she took. “It’s a lovely temple, isn’t

it?” she asked. I nodded.

Back on the street the noise and concrete and wires took over again. We crossed the train tracks and stood in front of *my* temple, Super Electron, the warehouse of shiny beeping things. Maggie found their uniforms funny (blue t-shirts that said “Super Electron May I Help You” and orange pants). “I’ve noticed one similarity between the UK and Japan.”

“What?”

“We’re both obsessed with uniforms.”

“Did you have to wear one growing up?”

“Everyone did.”

I took her to the back, passing the video game section longingly, where the cell phones were displayed. To say they were amazing doesn’t begin to describe them. Magical phones: pay bills, buy drinks from vending machines, shoot and edit videos. The screens were as crystal as digital TV. In contrast, all my American phone could do was make and take calls.

A man wearing a nametag that said “Watanabe” asked if he could help us. I attempted to pick up a particularly flashy number, but it was strapped to the counter like a child in a safety seat. “I’ll get you one,” said Watanabe, opening the storage cabinet with a key.

Then I looked at the price. “Jesus Christ.” When Watanabe handed me a box, I apologized and said I need a cheaper *keitai*. Much cheaper, in fact.

Watanabe walked Maggie and me further down the display. The one he suggested was light blue and took pictures. It had internet access but that

cost extra.

“Can I buy drinks from a vending machine this this one?”

Watanabe laughed. “No. But it comes in different colors. Would you like a pink one?” he asked Maggie.

“I want a blue one too,” she said, and I realized it was the first time I ever heard her speak a full Japanese sentence. Her accent was good, but her speaking was slow and deliberate.

Watanabe took two boxes from the cabinet. “It will take a few minutes to do the paperwork.” He hustled us back to the counter. “You are both very good at Japanese.”

“Thank you,” I said, as Maggie countered, “No, I’m not.”

Watanabe, unlike some store-people who seemed frightened at the concept of helping foreigners, was somewhat amused by us. “Are you boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“No,” Maggie answered.

“Friends only,” I added.

Watanabe leaned towards us conspiratorially. “Want to know a secret about Japan?”

“Sure.”

“In Japan, men and women can’t be friends. Only lovers.”

Underneath my feet there was a rumble. In fear I gripped the counter. Maggie gripped me. “What’s going on?” I asked Watanabe-san.

“Earthquake,” he said.

“Oh my god,” said Maggie in English.

“It will only last another minute,” assured Watanabe, and went back to his paperwork. (That’s why merchandise was always

(“Fiction” continued on page 11)



(“Fiction” continued from page 10)

strapped in!) Without fanfare, the rumbling stopped.

He described our DoCoMo contract (great name, DoCoMo) and what services we were paying for in easy Japanese. Calls seemed expensive, but text messaging was cheap. He turned on both phones and switched their menus to English. And then he pointed to a display of flashing antennae lights. “Pick one,” he said. “A present.”

It’s rude to refuse a present. We selected the same fire-alarm-flashing thing and Watanabe attached it to our antennae. Then he presented us both with paperwork.

“Use your *inkan* here,” Watanabe pointed out a spot on the page to Maggie.

“Inkan?”

“Name stamp,” I whispered.

“I know. I didn’t bring it with me.”

I hadn’t either. It hadn’t occurred to me, and it should have—I was signing a contract, after all. Dumbass. “Watanabe-san,” I explained, “We don’t have *inkans*. In our countries, we sign a contract. Can we sign?”

Watanabe looked hesitant. “I cannot answer that question. One moment please.” I shrugged at Maggie. He came back with an older man, one in a blue shirt and tie instead of the Super Electron t-shirt. Watanabe explained to him that we were *inkan*-less, but we were good people who had come a long way and he trusted us.

The manager said one thing:

“*Hai*.”

Maggie and I bowed deeply and thanked him profusely. The manager went off to do something more useful like find merchandise to strap in.

We signed and Watanabe handed us each a Super Electron bag. Maggie smiled graciously and said, “Thank you. You were so helpful.”

“Do you like music?” Watanabe directed at me.

“Uh, sure.”

He took a business card out of his back pocket. “I’m a DJ. I spin Friday nights at Club Neo. It’s reggae night. Please bring your friends.”

The card said: DJ RASTA.

“Don’t tell my boss what I do on weekends,” he warned me.

“I wouldn’t. Thank you.” Making a show of admiring the *meishi*, I tucked it into my wallet, then shook Watanabe’s outstretched hand.

“Goodbye!” he called.

“That earthquake was bizarre,” said Maggie immediately when we were outside.

“I guess we have to get used to them.”

“Wasn’t it strange how calm Watanabe was?”

“A little, yeah.”

“He seemed nice.”

“Unusually nice.”

“Well, I liked him.”

“How much?”

She swung her bag at me. A corner caught my arm and left a red mark. “I’m allowed to find somebody just nice.”

“Sure you are.”

“You’re insinuating something!”

“Yup.”

“Unfair. I’m trying to find things I *like* in this country.”

“What’s there not to like?”

“There were some things my mother hated about Japan. She called it the country of ‘hidden ugliness.’”

“So she won’t be coming to visit you?”

“She’s dead. So she wouldn’t be coming, would she?”

There are times when I am such a social retard. Family death has never truly touched me (mom and brother, healthy; father, healthy and a jerk, grandfathers, dead before I was born, grandmothers alive and dottering, handful of cousins seen only at Christmas). What is the right thing to say when someone’s just admitted to you they’ve suffered a lot more than you have? Maggie’s mother must have died in the last decade or so for her to remember such specifics. But I couldn’t ask her about it, could I? The pause in conversation weighed like lead. “Do you miss her?” I asked lamely.

“So much so that it hurts physically.”

Cautiously, I put a hand on her shoulder. Somehow we weren’t walking anymore. Maggie rested her DoCoMo bag on the ground and then her arms were around me. We stood there oblivious to the world for a moment, my mind blank. Then we both heard kissing noises. I released Maggie and saw a group of teenage boys in overalls cooing at us. Maggie picked up her bag and walked past them without a word.



In the school’s computer lab I opened my Hotmail for the first time in a month. That it wasn’t full is pathetic. A few from my mother (with chronological cascades of !!! in the subject headings), two from my brother, one from my father, and one from Jeff, my old roommate. I opened his first.

Evidently I left a stack of Supermans in the closet and he wants to take a girl out. Running low on cash, she’s great, can he sell them?...No, he better bloody not.

My mom, reminding me of my brother’s approaching birthday.

My brother, reminding me it’s almost and then it was his birthday.

I didn’t read my dad’s. Think what you will about that. I don’t care.

While I was ensconced so quietly in this lab, I wanted to see what was going on in the world. I read the *Examiner* for about five minutes before it starts to bore me. Same old shit: people without health care, political windbags, stupid lousy local teams. The news can really depress you if you let it. So I read *The Onion* instead: “Microsoft Patents 1s, 0s.”

I attracted the attention of the kid next to me. He seemed to understand English. Probably thinks *The Onion* is real. I flipped to another headline, the dirtiest one I could find: “Pat Robertson Rethinks Homosexuality After Casual One-Nighter.” Sensing his craning neck, I chuckled. Then I realized he didn’t know who Pat Robertson was and probably thought I was gay. So I clicked back to Hotmail.

As I logged off, of course I noticed there was nothing from Katherine.

Three of my classes were in Japanese. The lectures weren’t a problem—I was surprisingly well-prepared for academic-speak—but the reading was a bitch. Just because I knew what a word sounded like didn’t mean I could read it. There seemed to be endless archaic *kanji*. To be expected in a history class, and my dictionary was a well-thumbed, hateful thing. *In the Meiji period*, uh... (flick flick flick) *thanes depended on their master for uh...* (flick) *commodities*. (Thanes!?!? If I wanted to read *Beowulf* I would’ve stayed in the US.)

In my Japanese Lit in Translation class—the only one in English—was the bulk of the study abroad students, along with a handful of Japanese kids who spoke English. I gathered that most of these locals spoke such unusually good English because of their exposure to the language, and not because they learned it in school. Most of them lived overseas at some point, and a couple have Western fathers. Only one, Naoto, was a guy, and Maggie told me he was gay. (How does she know these things?)

We went out as a class sometimes afterwards. Well, Brad and Maggie and Ravi and the Japanese girls always went out, and sometimes I did too.

(“Fiction” continued on page 12)

(“Fiction” continued from page 11)

This one particular time I felt rather (inexplicably) *genki*, and found myself guzzling *nama beeru* at Catfish Johnny’s.

Catfish Johnny’s was obviously done by someone who thought he was cool. Someone who took an interest in American blues and 50’s pop (not to suggest he understood American blues and ‘50’s pop, but he was passionate) and collected all the memorabilia he could find and Krazy-glued it to the walls. Upside-down double basses served as the counters, blue neon announced this was Chicago Chicago, and there was even a trunk in the corner full of curly wigs (presumably meant to look like Jheri curl) and sequined vests. Unfortunately I never saw a businessman drunk enough to don one, though Brad tried once, and looked ridiculous.

It’s a little embarrassing how little it takes to get me drunk. I’ve never been a big guy, but I can barely out-drink the Japanese girls, who by their second are making goo-goo eyes at...well, me.

“Did you like *Norwei no Mori*?” asked Satomi, a particularly fetching girl who always carried her books in a see-through backpack.

“What’s *Nor*—oh, you mean *Norwegian Wood*?”

She laughed, cupping her hand to her mouth. “Oh, I’m so sorry! I said the Japanese title!”

“It’s okay. I knew what you meant.” Your eyes are *luminous*.

“I read it in Japanese first.”

“Do you like it better in Japanese?”

She cocked her head to the side, bringing her cherry mouth closer to mine. “I don’t think so.”

“But it seems like a very Japanese book.” Oh, shut up.

“But it is a strange book, I think. Murakami is a very famous Japanese writer. But mostly he writes science fiction—”

“Sci fi,” I offered.

“Yes, sci fi. But *Norwegian Wood* is like an American movie.”

“It’s based on a Beatles song.”

“*Subarashi*. I love that song.”

From the other end of the double bass Brad cawed: “Next round’s on me! Whaddya want?”

Satomi leaned in. I smelled the Asahi. “Can I tell you a secret?”

Yes. Yes you can. Anything. “Sure.”

She held her tiny hands around her mouth. “I don’t like him.”

I loved her for a moment. “I don’t either.”

“He’s loud.”

“He’s from California.”

But she didn’t understand why that was a bad thing, and I lost her. [Satomi had already gone home by the time we left, not even saying goodbye, just leaving in a whirl of pink booze. Ravi (drunk again) balanced on me for most of the way and Brad was ahead of us chatting up Ayako (Ayako, to Brad: “My name means ‘Love Child.’” Brad, to Ayako: “I would love you, child.” Could I make this shit up?). Ravi was heavy for such a skinny guy.] At home, in front of the bathroom mirror, I flexed. The frame cut me off at my bellybutton. So I jumped, and glimpsed my penis. Booze had left it flaccid. The local porn didn’t help. I tried this one magazine that caught my attention because it had the same name as my brother, Daniel. (An extra copy, very lonely, sat in the desk with the intention of being sent.) It didn’t really work: The women, breasts pendulous, looked like they were in pain. None of the fake-happy smiles of American porn. In my futon, I lay naked and imagined Satomi’s breasts, probably flat like pancakes, but still beautiful with a dark aureole.

*** TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NEXT ISSUE! ***

Alexei Esikoff is an adjunct professor of writing at Brooklyn College.

(“Holiday” continued from page 8)

I remember one Thanksgiving when I hosted a big turkey (make that chicken) dinner for some expats and Japanese friends. All the pictures are smokey from cooking so much food in a not well ventilated apartment. The Japanese guests particularly enjoyed my Italian rice stuffing. :)

Matt Jungblutt

My dad lived in Tokyo, so every Thanksgiving we would get the world’s smallest turkey from the National Azabu Store and cook it in the only western style oven that many of our friends had ever seen. The first year we invited my first JET boss and two couples from my dad’s office that we really liked. Eventually (around five years later) we wound up having about thirty JETs coming to the Thanksgiving events, many of them British, Kiwi, Irish or Canadian - so often it was their first time having an American style Thanksgiving meal, and some of our Japanese regulars would be preparing cranberry relish and stuffing.

Generally I hated New Years in Japan, cold, everything closed, boring, and being on the outside of society, quite lonely. Yet our Tokyo house was minutes from *Meiji Jingu*, and in our neighborhood there were several mini-New Year’s only shrines set up for donations. One year I got the bright idea to put out a wooden box and hang a little sign that said in Japanese “outer-outer *Meiji Jingu* shrine donation area - alcohol donations requested only” on the front steps of our house, with two bottles of beer to give people the idea. Later my father, brother and a few friends went over to the nearby *Hato-yama* shrine, (which was famous for *sumo* in some way) and goofed around with a priest we knew, who later introduced us to a few of the lower level wrestlers. When we returned home there were a few more bottles of beer, some 500ml cans, and three or four bottles of decent sake. Better presents than I had gotten that Christmas.

Rosie DeFremery

My most memorable Thanksgivings ever were celebrated while on JET. I guess you appreciate them more when you’re no longer living in the States and you actually have to put some effort into observing the holiday. I was friends with a JET named Steve who lived in Shuzenji, a well-known resort and *onsen* town on Shizuoka’s Izu Peninsula. He set up this incredible weekend gathering in which we all converged on Shuzenji on a Saturday and headed out to an onsen resort that had expansive facilities including a restaurant. Steve spent weeks in advance of Thanksgiving procuring a turkey via the Foreign Buyer’s Club and researching recipes to then share with the staff of the restaurant in the hope that they might be able to put together a special meal for us. It was a five-course culinary adventure, delicious to the last bite, and we all ended up fuller than full as is the mandate. Some of us were plenty tipsy too. We were all blown away by how perfectly the Japanese staff executed the Thanksgiving plan. What made it better than perfect was the onsen trip afterward followed by a dessert course! Unbelievable. I have yet to top that Thanksgiving despite some other memorable get-togethers in subsequent years.

I also have humorous memories of my mom visiting during Chanukah and somehow losing our chanukkiah, so seeing as we weren’t likely to find another one in Japan we ended up sticking some candles in her peanut butter and jelly sandwich & lighting them up. Totally not halacha-approved but makes for a funny memory.

(“Holiday” Continued on page 13)

("Holiday" continued from page 12)

Alexei Esikoff

I lived in Inaka, but I had a good friend who worked in Tokyo, and who invited me to spend Thanksgiving with her at a pub that was having a turkey-and-cranberry feast for American expats. I had lived in Japan for only 4 months at that point, and had ventured into Tokyo once. Needless to say I was excited. But when one of my *chugakkos* informed me that there was an *enkai* that night in my honor, I felt I couldn't turn them down. So instead of stuffing my face with food I missed and craved with people who understood my childhood TV references, I ended up in a hostess bar, cramming sushi down my throat so I wouldn't have to pay attention to my principal. He was standing on a table with his tie around his head, Rambo-style, singing the Carpenters. ("I know English song!") The hostesses, feigning delight, clapped along. Of course at school the next day, the principal had restored his dignity; his baggy eyes the only sign of the night before. My Tokyo friend called later to say I missed a wild event: Fujimori and his son made an appearance at this Thanksgiving event. Exiled dictators make for a much more interesting story to write home about than drunken bosses.

Steven Horowitz

Thanksgiving in my family, is the craziest, funnest holiday involving about 40 relatives going to the beach and playing a big football game where half the family dresses up as chickens. (It's a long story.) So my first Thanksgiving in Japan, where ovens are a rarity and turkeys only available via special import, was looking to be a little depressing. That is, until I saw a listing at the Nagoya International Center for a guy willing to cook up a Thanksgiving dinner for a group for only the cost of the food itself. It sounded a little too good to be true, so I called up Lon, from Western Canada originally, and went to meet up with him and find out the scoop. I thought he was going to be some sort of weirdo-*gaijin*-freak, but it turned out Lon's wife was on an extended trip to Canada and he just really likes cooking. It also turned out he would host it in his own house, where he had an oven. The dinner he explained included a big ol' turkey, a couple sides, a salad, and a choice of two different kinds of pie. Oh yes, and videotapes of Cheers episodes! Meanwhile, I always spent every Saturday playing ultimate frisbee with a bunch of ex-pats and Japanese folks in a park in Nagoya, so getting a group together and convincing them to play football instead of frisbee and then head over for a super excellent dinner was easy as, well, pie. It all worked out perfectly, the food kicked major *oshiri*, and the pies were heavenly. It was the best substitute Thanksgiving I could ever have conceived of. Wish I still knew how to get in touch with Lon to thank him.

My other favorite holiday memory is leading a Passover seder in Japan. A few frisbee friends decided to make one happen, and it turned out I was the most knowledgeable about how to lead the service. So we had about 5 *gaijin* and 4 Japanese friends gathered in a super-tiny *tatami* floor apartment, somehow we had matzoh and matzoh balls (I think my mom had sent me a matzoh ball soup mix), and, my favorite part, we used *wasabi* for the bitter herb. Oh yeah, and for the hide-the-matzoh part of the seder, we all had to close our eyes while one person hid the matzah in the super-tiny apartment. (It was found behind the picture on the wall.)



White House photo by Eric Greiner

(Continued from "Volunteer" page 9)

nization for busy people because almost everything is done online. I enjoy it a lot, though you don't get to know the kids all that well since they have limited time online.



Volunteer

I also volunteer with New York Cares in various projects. Currently I'm doing an early morning reading program every week with elementary school kids. I learned about New York Cares through JETAANY actually and it's fantastic because you can do as much or as little as you want, as long as you do at least one thing a year. And the options are literally endless environmental, feeding the homeless, kids' education, you name it.

Ryan Chan

Boy Scouts of America

I volunteer as the Assistant Scoutmaster at Troop 150 of Manhattan. As an assistant scoutmaster, I'm there to watch the kids and to occasionally dole out sagely words of wisdom. It's actually a pretty rewarding endeavor. Every week I am there to teach these kids something new, and I get to watch these kids grow up, becoming responsible adults.

My involvement with Scouting and Troop 150 began while I was a teenager. At the age of 15, I joined the troop with the hopes of becoming an Eagle Scout, and snagging a college scholarship. While I rose through the ranks pretty quickly, I never did become an Eagle Scout.

However, I did develop a love of nature and for camping. I also learned how to be a leader and how to work in a group. These were the things I wanted to pass along, which is why I rejoined the troop upon returning from Japan.

My JET experience has actually been extremely beneficial in helping improve my skills as an Assistant Scoutmaster. As in Japan, I am dealing with kids are hitting the age where they are a bit more rebellious, and a lot less polite. And, as in Japan, it is my job to teach these kids, which as all of us know, is not as easy as it sounds. I use the same skills that helped me survive as an AET in Japan in my current role: patience and creativity.

Steven Horowitz

The International Center (www.intlcenter.org)

I, and a number of other JET alums, volunteer as an English partner at The International Center. Currently I'm a writing partner for a young computer programmer who is getting ready to begin studying at a college here in New York. In the past I have been an Advanced English partner and a Conversation partner as well. The International Center is a great resource for its members, providing not only English practice but also a gathering center to meet new people. In addition, the staff at the IC are wonderful people and very committed. For JET alums it's a great way to volunteer and stay connected with your past experience.

Theatre Review

Steven Sondheim's PACIFIC OVERTURES

Reviewed by Lyle Sylvander

When the original production of Pacific Overtures opened on Broadway in 1976, it marked the fourth collaboration between composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim and producer/director Harold Prince. The team had challenged the notions of what a Broadway musical could be by dealing with such unconventional subject matter as the frustrations of marriage (*Company*), illusion and the fallacies of the American dream (*Follies*) and the fickleness of romantic relationships (*A Little Night Music*). No one was prepared, however, for the bold theatrical experiment that Pacific Overtures presented its audience. The show not only dealt with an academic subject – the opening of Japan to foreigners and its subsequent emergence as a world power – but it told its story from the Japanese point of view by approximating the style of theatre known as kabuki. The result was an ambitious and admirable failure. After opening to mixed to negative reviews, Pacific Overtures succumbed to its poor box office performance and closed within six months.

Amon Miyamoto's new production of *Pacific Overtures* is based on one that he directed at the New National Theatre, Tokyo, in 2000 (the production briefly toured the US in the summer of 2002). This marks the first Broadway revival of the show (as well as the first Broadway show to be directed by a Japanese person) and, like the original, is entirely cast with Asian-American actors. Miyamoto dispenses with Harold Prince's elaborate kabuki conception, which featured white make-up, outsized performances, and visually stunning scenery, and strips the show down to its bare essentials. (For an interesting comparison, you can watch the original on video at the Museum of Television and Radio). Rumi Matsui's scenic design is made of a simple wooden floor and floating panels. A small pool of water surrounds the stage on three sides, which establishes a divide between the isolated "floating kingdom" and the outside world. When Commodore Perry's crew makes its appearance, they enter from the central aisle of the theatre and cross a bridge onto the stage, forever altering Japan's solitary existence. This basic conceit works well and effectively dramatizes the shock that accompanied Perry's landing. But Miyamoto's intimate staging unfortunately brings the main story into focus and the weakness of that story is *Pacific Overtures's* ultimate flaw. While there is much to admire in Stephen Sondheim's score, John Weidman's libretto (with additional material by Hugh Wheeler) is overtly didactic and lacks sufficient drama to make the show emotionally engaging.

The gradual effects of Western imperialism and the opening of Japan are revealed through the two central characters of Manjiro (Paolo Montalban) and Kayama (Michael Lee), a samurai. As Japan becomes increasingly Westernized, Manjiro retreats into the traditionalism of feudal Japan while Kayama sheds his traditional garb and joins the march of progress. This story is played against the historical backdrop of pivotal events largely told in extended musical sequences – the first appearance of Perry's fleet ("Four Black Dragons"), the signing of a treaty largely favorable to the United States ("Someone in a Tree"), the commercial penetration of Japan by other foreign nations ("Please, Hello"), and the eventual assertiveness of Japan on the world stage ("Next"). Acting as both a narrator and

commentator on the action is the Recitor, expertly played by B.D. Wong. The relationship between Manjiro and Kayama is meant to personalize the dramatic turn of events that are engulfing them but the characters are too stilted and one-dimensional to effectively engage the audience. Upon realizing that his beloved feudal Japan is gone forever, Manjiro breaks down at the end of the show. Montalban does his best at conveying his character's anguish but he cannot overcome the weakness of Weidman's script, which hasn't developed the character very well. Kayama's acceptance of Japan's transformation is similarly unsatisfying. This is especially troublesome in Kayama's case, as the character is the more interesting one – he begins the play as a minor government official and, through Western diplomatic maneuvering, attains a level of power.

The epic historical events provide the backbone of the story and they unfold mainly through Sondheim's long musical sequences. Sondheim condemns the imperialism of the United States and the other Western nations (France, Russia, Holland, England) with such sardonic lyrics as "We don't foresee that you will be the least bit argumentative/so please ignore the man-of-war we brought as a preventative". But the show is not a simplistic anti-Western creed; it more complicated than that. Implicated alongside the West are those Japanese who conspire against their own country, such as Kayama and the Shogun's Mother, who sings "the tea the Shogun drank will/Serve to keep the Shogun tranquil" as she poisons her son. The musical also seriously examines the collision of two disparate cultures. The song "Pretty Lady" is about three English sailors who mistake a young woman for one of the *geisha* they've heard so much about. She sees their advances as threatening while they don't understand why she wants to run away – "Pretty lady with a flower/Give a lonely sailor half an hour/Pretty lady, can you understand a word I say?/Don't go away." The scene ends in tragedy as the girl's father kills the three sailors.

Sondheim's music imitates Eastern music by using pentatonic scales, limited harmony (Japanese music does not use any harmony), and Japanese percussion and flutes among the Western instruments. In this way, the score is representative as the show as a whole by being a fusion of two different cultures. As the show progresses, the score gradually becomes more and more Western sounding until the finale. The song "Next", which encompasses the next 150 years as Japan industrializes and buries its feudal past forever, is completely Western in orchestration and sound. Miyamoto has incorporated new dances into the number that detail Japan's conquest of Korea and China, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the reemergence of Japan as a technological innovator and financial power. The number, like much of the show, is interesting from an historical and political perspective. But despite the admirable performers on stage and Miyamoto's slick and minimalist direction, this production can't escape the fact that *Pacific Overtures* plays like an academic treatise. It provides much cerebral stimulation but, as an evening of dramatic theatre, it leaves much to be desired.



THE "HOLIDAY" ISSUE TOP 10!

We know all the ins, outs and traditions of the big mainstream holidays. But many of us came to also be familiar with certain alternative, more personal holidays custom designed for for JETs. To honor these special and equally important days, he Newsletter therefore presents ...

THE TOP 10 LESS PUBLICIZED JET HOLIDAYS

10. Fictional Religious Observance That Coincidentally Falls on a Friday Day
9. Gaijin Coming of Age Day - the first day you are mistaken for a native Japanese speaker on the phone
8. Hangover Day (Reformed) - Observed at school by teaching six class periods
7. Superbowl Party Day - begins promptly at 8:00 a.m. Often explained by reference to #10.
6. Yes, A Second Jewish Holiday That's Difficult to Explain and Sounds Completely Made Up But Just Happens to Come a Week After the Other Jewish Holiday Day (often confused with #10)
5. Hangover Day (Conservative) - Observed at home. Alone.
4. Boxing Day - (Still no clue what it's about. Possibly related to #10.)
3. Self-Evaluation Day - Celebrated on selected days with the questions "What am I doing here?" and "They're paying me for this?"
2. Career Evaluation Day - Observed the day following Self-Evaluation Day with the question "What am I going to do after this?" and concluded with the ceremonial signing of the Renewal Contract.
1. Hangover Day (Orthodox) - Observed on the 6:08 a.m. *shinkansen* from Tokyo to your *inaka* town.



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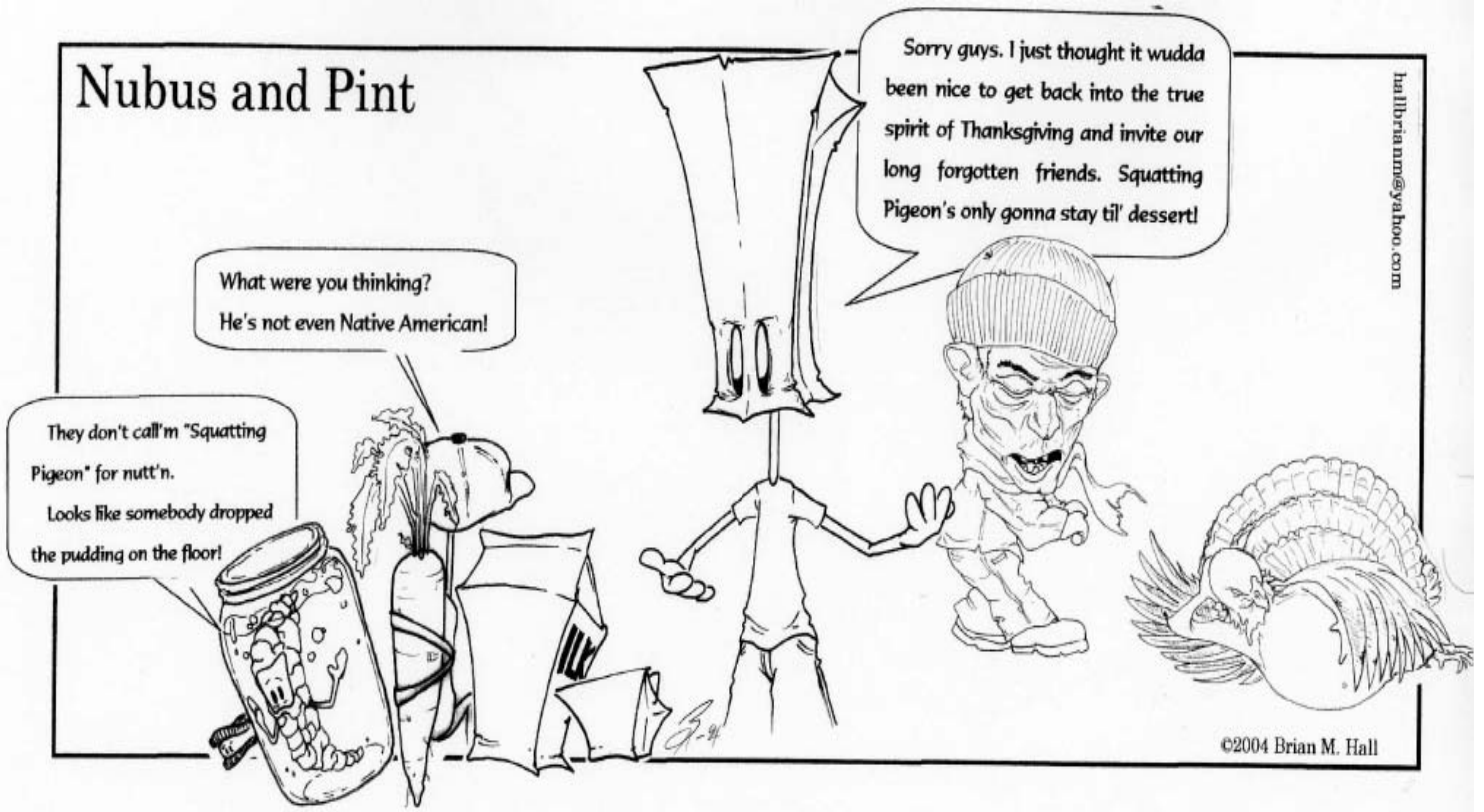
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