

## What I learned through acting in Alaska

Yuri Shiomi

Eight stars of gold on a field of blue, Alaska's flag, May it mean to you.

The blue of the sea, the evening sky, The mountain lakes, and the flowers nearby, ...

Have you ever heard this song? We sang this song at the top of our voices on the stage in a big and glorious concert hall in Anchorage, Alaska. "Alaska's flag" is the name of the song. It was adopted as the state song of Alaska. Many of you may wonder why I was in Alaska, such a far distant place.

Four months ago, on May 1, I visited Alaska as a member of the *Mikan Ichi-Za* Drama group. We were supposed to perform the musical, "Chasing the Aurora: The Samurai Musher, the Story of *Jujiro Wada*". This musical is based on the amazingly eventful life of Alaska-Japanese *Issei* pioneer, *Jujiro Wada*. Have you heard about him? Very few Japanese people would know the name *Jujiro Wada*. He was born in *Ehime* in 1875. When he was 17 in 1892, he dared to go all alone across the Pacific Ocean and at last landed in America. From there, he worked abroad on a whaling ship for 3 years, explored the Arctic wilderness by dogsled, discovered gold mines and oil wells and became a household name in the newspapers of the time.

I was first surprised to learn about such a heroic Japanese man. A man from *Ehime* in Alaska. We were so happy to have a chance to perform his legacy on the stage. After the performance, one person came to me and said, "Your smile is wonderful!" These words made me really happy. I'm very shy by nature around new people. However, I felt I was another person just while I was on the stage. The musical let me cover my own weakness. Also, one of the audience answered a TV reporter's question, "It was really interesting and touching, because I had been completely indifferent to Japanese people, but I've come to be interested in them and could understand what they're feeling. During the drama, I was sometimes sad, and sometimes happy. I sometimes cried and sometimes laughed."

In my opinion, to understand different cultures has an immeasurable power of overcoming lots of obstacles and fears humans have. Through cultural activities such as singing, dancing, musicals, and painting. We can convey a passion, love and thought beyond description. "Chasing the Aurora" may have been a small step for me, but I believe that it was so nice for Alaskans and Japanese to understand differences in their cultures.

During our stay in Alaska, our group visited many places connected with *Jujiro Wada* and had contact with the people in Alaska. We promoted mutual understanding between our two countries through the drama. We have truly made friends with them. Let's find time to share something cultural to deepen international relations, Cross-cultural understanding is a bridge to the world.