

January 2005

Dear Friends of BAJ,

It is a great pleasure to report to you on major events held in 2004 - the year when we observed the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Japan Society of Boston. The reported events are only a few highlights of the many, many special programs marking the centennial of JSB. In addition, there were other lectures, concerts, symposia and other events. Although they are too numerous to list here, in total they represented an extraordinary focus on Japan and Japan-U.S. relations running throughout the year.

As a kind of ongoing 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party for JSB, these programs attracted broad new attention to the work of the Society and successfully launched it on its Second Century! In years to come, the leaders and members of JSB will continue to carry forward its mission to bring the peoples of Japan and New England closer in friendship and in cultural and commercial exchanges. As the Society moves into its second century, we will recall with pleasure and pride the achievements of the first one hundred years that were celebrated so successfully in 2004!

We look forward to a continuation of our pleasant association with BAJ friends, in the same spirit as expressed by Ambassador Iguchi, your former president, in his cordial letter sent to us last October.

Peter Grilli  
President  
Japan Society of Boston

### **2004 – The Centennial Year of the Japan Society of Boston**

2004 was a dramatic year for the city of Boston – one that will be recorded as a unique year in the city's history, never to be forgotten by the city's residents. The event that grabbed international headlines and that cheered the hearts of every Bostonian was, of course, the spectacular triumph of the Boston Red Sox in the World Series of American baseball. After a 98-win regular season (the most games won by the Red Sox in a single season since 1978), the Sox faltered by losing the first three games in the American League championship series to the New York Yankees. For a moment, everyone thought that the famous curse of Babe Ruth would once again bring defeat to the Red Sox. But then, history paused and turned around. The Red Sox defeated the Yankees in a clean sweep of four games, becoming the American League champions. And then – incredibly – they went on to demolish the St. Louis Cardinals by winning the World Series for the first time in eighty-six years! The Babe's curse was dead, the Red Sox were champions, and a huge burst of new energy and confidence swept through the city of Boston! (And Boston's high spirits continued as the New England Patriots won America's NFL football championship for the third time at the Super-Bowl in February 2005!)

2004 was a historic year for the Japan Society of Boston as well. As the first and oldest Japan Society in America, the Japan Society of Boston celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday with a year filled with special programs and events. Members and friends of

the Japan Society of Boston thought that it was a truly wonderful gesture on the part of the Red Sox to wait 86 long years in order to deliver the fantastic gift of a World Series championship to the Japan Society as a special gift on the Society's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday! That was the most extraordinary gift of all – but there were many other memorable events. In this brief essay, I would like to recall just a few of the highlights of the Society's Centennial year.

2003 ended and 2004 began with a bittersweet event. To celebrate the beginning of its Centennial, the Japan Society undertook an unprecedented program as part of the annual First Night New Year celebration in Boston. We planned to build a huge ice sculpture – a replica of Edo Castle – on Boston Common. This magnificent ice sculpture, to be built by three talented ice sculptors from Sapporo, would celebrate both the Society's Centennial and Massachusetts' sister-state relationship with Hokkaido. The three ice sculptors arrived from Sapporo on December 26, 2003 and immediately set to work with a devoted team of American assistants. Day by day, truckloads of huge blocks of ice were delivered continuously to the site at Boston Common, and the walls of Edo Castle began to go up. Crowds gathered on Boston Common to watch the construction of the largest ice sculpture in the history of Boston's First Night festival, and reporters and TV cameramen recorded every step as Edo Castle grew larger and larger. It took the Society's team only four days to build the huge 25-foot ice castle, and by the evening of December 30 it stood complete, tall and magnificent. Lit by spotlights at night, it looked especially beautiful, and could be seen from all the surrounding buildings, towering over all the other ice sculptures assembled for First Night.

But Nature had a different plan, because throughout those four days the temperature kept rising in what was an unexpected mid-winter heat wave in New England. On Dec. 30, the temperature rose above 60-degrees – a level more appropriate to May or September than December. All our efforts to wrap Edo Castle and keep it cold were in vain, and the castle was melting almost as fast as it was constructed. By the morning of December 31 – just as the First Night celebration was about to begin – the ice had melted so thin that Edo Castle seemed about to collapse. Although Mayor Menino had scheduled a press conference at 10:00am right in front of Edo Castle, city officials decided earlier that morning that the castle had become a safety hazard and must be demolished. With TV cameras recording the sad event, and with tears running down the faces of many Boston citizens, the beautiful castle of ice was broken down to a mountain of ice-blocks. The unfortunate “collapse” of Edo Castle brought international attention and appeared as a top TV-news story and on the front pages of many newspapers. Curiously, this sad event won even more attention for the launch of the Japan Society's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday than if the ice castle had stood as proudly as we had planned!

Many other important Centennial events took place in Boston throughout 2004, but few attracted quite as much attention as the melting of Edo Castle. One special event in early spring was the Society-sponsored New England Japan Bowl, which took place at the Children's Museum of Boston. This wonderful annual tournament for high school students studying Japanese language, tests their knowledge of Japanese

culture and language. This year our young contestants did especially well, and one of our teams from New England went on to triumph in the National Japan Bowl contest in Washington.

Springtime in Boston is always a season of great beauty as flowering trees burst into bloom. The spring of 2004 was as beautiful as ever, and it marked a special occasion for the Japan Society of Boston. As a gift to honor the Society's 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday, the family of Lawrence and Atsuko Fish donated one hundred new cherry trees to the state of Massachusetts, to be planted along the Charles River in downtown Boston. On May 12, a ceremony was held at the famous Esplanade in Back Bay as the 100<sup>th</sup> cherry tree was planted. Each tree stood about ten-feet tall and they were already beginning to bloom. In only a few years, the Charles riverbank in Boston will be able to boast a park full of blooming cherry trees as beautiful as the famous cherries of the Potomac Basin in Washington DC, and visitors from all over the world will flock to Boston to celebrate the arrival of spring, much as Japanese people celebrate *sakura-matsuri* every year!

Another unforgettable highlight of the Japan Society's Centennial year was the arrival of the Heisei Nakamura-za Kabuki troupe, led by Nakamura Kankuro, for a series of four performances at Boston's Majestic Theatre in early July. Although Kabuki troupes had appeared in other American cities, this was the first time that a fully-staged production of Kabuki ever was presented in Boston. For four days in July, Kabuki in Boston was the hottest ticket in town as theater fans from all over New England came to Boston to watch Kankuro and his colleagues perform the dance-plays *Bo-Shibari* and *Renjishi*. Performing alongside Kankuro was his son Nakamura Shichinosuke, who had already won fame in America for his role as the young Meiji Emperor in the film *The Last Samurai*. The brilliance of a great Kabuki performance always brings intensified interest in Japanese traditional culture to non-Japanese viewers, and Kabuki in Boston during the Centennial summer of 2004 prompted a wave of renewed interest in Japan and new memberships in the Japan Society of Boston.

Other notable performance events of the Society's yearlong 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration were a joint performance in April by the Bamboo Orchestra and *Tsugaru-shamisen* virtuoso Hiromitsu Agatsuma with the famous Ondeko-za *taiko* group. Ondeko-za returned to Boston after an absence of more than fifteen years and – as in the past – the Ondeko-za members all ran in the Boston Marathon and did an impromptu outdoor *taiko* performance near the finish line right after their run. In December 2004, the Society's Centennial year came to a close with another dramatic performance event. The acclaimed Noh actor Umewaka Rokuro brought a troupe of top Noh performers to Boston for a special performance that recreated (in John Hancock Hall) the historic performance by Rokuro's great-grandfather Umewaka Minoru for American president Ulysses S. Grant, visiting Tokyo in 1879.

During April and May of 2004, the Harvard University Film Archive joined the Japan Society of Boston in presenting a retrospective of the films of Yasujiro Ozu. This series of 36 films presented almost every extant film of the great Japanese movie director, accompanied with several lectures, a demonstration of the art of the Japanese

*benshi* film narrator (with noted *benshi* Midori Sawato), and other educational events. A special collaboration with MIT resulted in the popular exhibition called *Black Ships and Samurai*, organized by Prof. John Dower. Later in September, Professor Dower's studies of the mutual images of Japanese and Americans at the time of Commodore Perry's arrival in Japan in 1853-54 were also featured in a Japan Society program by Dower and stage director Miyamoto Amon about the new production of the musical *Pacific Overtures*.

In October, the Japan Society of Boston co-sponsored with the New Bedford Whaling Museum a memorable symposium titled "*Pacific Encounters: John Manjiro and the Origins of the Japan-U.S. Relationship*." This day-long symposium presented a number of distinguished Japanese and American scholars speaking about the historic ties linking Japan and New England, beginning with Manjiro's arrival in Massachusetts in 1841 and continuing until the present day. Leaders of many other Japan-America societies from all over America attended this symposium, which was part of the annual meeting in Boston of the National Association of Japan-America Societies.

In late November, the Centennial year drew to a close with the Japan Society's Annual Dinner, featuring presentations by Robert Reischauer (President of the Urban Institute in Washington DC) and David Rockefeller Jr. (Director of Rockefeller & Company of New York). Representing two great American families that have made great contributions to the Japan-U.S. relationship, it seemed especially appropriate to invite the current generation of the Reischauer and Rockefeller families to help celebrate the Japan Society's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Both Robert Reischauer and David Rockefeller Jr. spoke movingly of their parents' and grandparents' activities and their deep affection for Japan.

Many other memorable exhibitions of Japanese art were presented in and around Boston in conjunction with the Society's Centennial. Among them were several special exhibitions at the Museum of Fine Arts, including the highly popular *Art of the Japanese Postcard* exhibition; an exhibit at the Peabody Essex Museum of Salem titled *Geisha: Beyond the Painted Smile* (which subsequently traveled to the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco); and a wonderful show at the Children's Museum of Boston called *Five Friends from Japan* (this exhibition was later presented at the Children's Museum of Washington DC and elsewhere). Another art highlight of the year was the joint presentation by the Japan Society and the MFA of a special program devoted to the life and work of Isamu Noguchi, the celebrated sculptor and designer who did so much to bridge the artistic traditions of Japan and the U.S.