

The Walden Play

JAPAN

*English translation of the Article Michiko wrote for the
Thoreau Society of Japan Journal*

The Walden Play written by Michael Johnathon, is a two-act play which depicts the last two days before Thoreau left Walden Pond, centering on the conversations between Thoreau and Emerson. The words they speak are quoted from their own writings, and the story develops with Thoreau's house in Walden Woods as the setting. The characters are four in all.

When the play was completed, thinking that, since it was Thoreau's story, it would be best to offer it free of charge to community theaters, universities, or schools, Johnathon put it on a website, expecting 20 or 25 theaters would put it on the stage. Although he thought it would be a success if there would be as many performances on the stage, the result has been that more than 9,400 theaters and schools in 41 countries have registered, for the content of the conversations makes it easy to perform, the script, poster, and the notes for the director are all free of charge, and all they have to do is register. The script is available in English, French, and Spanish. After that Johnathon came to think of making it into a film.

The first step to the filming was fund-raising. Fortunately, E.ON-US, a big electric power company, agreed to underwrite the TV production of The Walden Play, and it was decided that the film would be made in partnership with Asbury College in Kentucky. Thanks to their state-of-the-art high definition production truck, high-definition cameras, the wonderful students, and the cooperation from legacy director Doug Smart, he was able to get all the necessary technical help. When the final edit was finished, everyone was impressed with the beauty of the picture.

It is noteworthy that, along with the filming, an audio CD was completed before the film in the following process: During the rehearsal of the play for the film version, noticing that the actors' expressions were so passionate and descriptive, Johnathon often closed his eyes in the theater and was able to visualize easily what was happening. Remembering that vivid radio dramas by actors such as Orson Wells and others were not unusual but very popular before the advent of TV, Johnathon, who already had a syndicated radio show called Woodsongs Old-Time Radio Hour, came to think that he could present the play in the show.

The play was soon broadcast with the title Walden: Woodsongs Radio Drama-Special Event and later made into a CD, which can now be listened to over the Internet . (Woodsongs Old Time Radio show: www.woodsongs.com)

To Johnathon, who has been a lover of nature since his childhood, Henry David Thoreau was always a hero. Brought up in New York City, Johnathon as a singer held a concert near Walden Pond several years ago, and immediately after that he wrote Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau, a song which was to be included in his Dreams of Fire album issued the following year. (The title of the song Walden: The Ballad of Thoreau is also used for the title of the film Magazine).

The film was sent to Public Television and movie theaters for Earth Day 2009 broadcast; moreover it received the John Muir Gold Award at the Yosemite Film Festival. While doing an article about the Eagles, Sawyer, an aspiring novelist and a Thoreau scholar, learned through her work that Don Henley, the musician and songwriter, had started The Walden Wood Project. With her increasing interest in Thoreau, she wrote to Walter Harding. Harding expressed that inexplicable feeling of hers simply as "Thoreau Enthusiasm."

The following is part of Johnathon's message to The Thoreau Society of Japan:

"I would like to see schools and colleges and families watch the Walden film, to sit together and talk about how precious this earth is and how we can each do a little more to protect it. I would like to see teenagers learn how a man named Henry David Thoreau once walked this earth and wrote about what he believed in...even though nobody else cared. I would like to see moms and businessmen and corporate heads understand what Henry felt when he looked at the trees and water's edge of Walden Pond, and reflect that passion in their own lives, their own decisions, their own businesses..."

Lastly, referring to how the earth is damaged, Johnathon concludes: "The greatest repair is changing our point-of-view of planet earth. And for the last hundred and fifty years, the one guiding our way to healing this earth...has been Henry David Thoreau."