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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Japan Society
Presents**

In-person Virtual Reality Theater

The Dark Master

**Written & Directed by
Kuro Tanino**

**Performed by
Niwa Gekidan Penino**

**16 Performances:
Wednesday, June 23 through Sunday, June 27**

**Japan Society
(333 East 47th Street)**

New York, NY, May 12, 2021 – This summer **Japan Society** offers an unconventional presentation of psychiatrist-turned-director/playwright **Kuro Tanino's** *The Dark Master*, defined “part fable, part dream play,” (*The Australian*). Inspired by an indie manga, this immersive and humorously dark experimental theater piece engages the audience with sights, sounds and smells. Through Virtual Reality (VR) headsets, headphones, and live on-stage cooking, the piece positions each audience member in “first person perspective” as the play’s protagonist, an unassuming patron of a Japanese diner. Performed by Tanino’s experimental theater company **Niwa Gekidan Penino**, the story depicts the strange, symbiotic relationship that develops between the customer and the restaurant’s owner-chef simply called the “Master.” Borrowing the dramaturgy of first-person video games, the audience experiences first-hand how the

Master's all-consuming persona highjacks the identity of his victims in a novel production that collapses the border between reality and illusion.

This in-person theater event, performed for **just 10 audience members** at a time, will have **16 performances, June 23 through June 27** at Japan Society's auditorium (333 East 47th Street). *Originally performed in Japanese and then dubbed in English for this accompanying audio. Running time: 45 minutes. This program is for audiences 18 years and older due to mature content (depiction of sex act and suggested nudity).*

As you, the viewer, walk through the doors of this imaginary eatery, the Master invites you to take over as chef and proprietor of the restaurant. From his hiding place in an upper story, the Master monitors your every movement via hundreds of cameras concealed in the diner and trains you in the art of cooking Japanese comfort foods with detailed instructions that he delivers through a tiny wireless earpiece. In this immersive theater event, the auditory experience is delivered via headphones, and an accompanying olfactory experience is served up by the actual dishes being prepared in real-time by stagehands. As you begin to gain confidence in your culinary skills, the restaurant attracts a large clientele of regulars. However, beneath the glitz and often comic surface of this rustic, local eatery, the Master's incessant directions slowly begin to warp your sense of autonomy. These intimations "lead us down paths which are both sensual and disturbing, burlesque and demonic," notes the *Festival d'Automne à Paris*.

Kuro Tanino, who graduated from medical school and practiced psychiatry for several years, has established a reputation for creating unique theater works that depict hidden human emotions through a surrealistic story using cynical humor. He first created *The Dark Master* in 2003; and, in 2016, he completely changed the set design and ending of the story for performances in Tokyo and Sendai. In 2018, the production toured to the *Festival d'Automne à Paris*, and the following year to *OzAsia Festival* in Adelaide, Australia. Since then he has developed a few different versions, with an ambition to make each version distinct by incorporating issues unique to the presenting cities and regions. In this new adaptation born out of the global pandemic, Tanino uses VR headsets for a limited audience of 10 people per viewing. In lieu of an actual earpiece, each audience member is provided a pair of headphones to listen to the Master's every command, inducing feelings of both sensory immersion and isolation. Plastic "one-way mirrors" also separate audience members from one another while they're seated along an extended table, mimicking the counter in the diner where even the aromas of delectable dishes as they're being prepared are part of the experience.

"Niwa Gekidan Penino generated significant buzz in their 2014 U.S. debut at Japan Society, with *The Room Nobody Knows*. With this new presentation, I hope to further their status and reputation in this country," shares Artistic Director Yoko Shioya. "We are extremely happy to welcome audiences back into our building for Kuro's innovative and immersive in-person VR performance. From its intimate scale to the sensorial nature of the piece – along with its haunting and thrilling plot – this one-of-a-kind theater event seems tailor made for our return to live, onsite theater."

Schedule, Tickets & Information:

Wednesday, June 23 at 6:30PM & 8:30PM EDT,

Thursday, June 24 at 5:00PM, 7:00PM & 9:30PM EDT,

Friday & Saturday, June 25 & 26 at 2:30PM, 4:30PM, 7:00PM & 9:00PM EDT

Sunday, June 27 at 12:30PM, 2:30PM & 5:00PM EDT

Please note: performances begin promptly, no late admittance. Running time: 45 minutes. This program is for audiences 18 years and older due to mature content (depiction of sex act and suggested nudity).

Tickets are \$25 / \$20 Japan Society members.

Tickets can be purchased online at <https://www.japansociety.org/performingarts> or by calling the Box Office at 212-715-1258 (M-F 10:00AM – 6:00PM). Japan Society is located at 333 East 47th Street, between First and Second Avenues (accessible by the 4/5/6 at 42nd Street-Grand Central Station or the E at Lexington Avenue and 53rd Street). For more information, call 212-832-1155 or visit <https://www.japansociety.org/>.

Kuro Tanino (Playwright/Director), born in Toyama Prefecture in 1976, founded his theater company **Niwa Gekidan Penino** in 2000 with members of the Showa University drama club while he was studying in the medical school. Both his parents are doctors, and he is also a licensed psychiatrist, although he no longer practices. He is the representative, playwright, and director of Niwa Gekidan Penino, whose theatrical works grow out of his imaginings and obsessions and are staged in spaces carefully designed to the finest detail. He is also a sculptor and painter and is highly involved in the stage designs of each production. Tanino's plays have been nominated as finalists for the Kishida Drama Award and performed in theaters and festivals around the globe. For other companies, he has directed Ibsen's *Vildanden*, *Chekhov!?*, a commission he wrote for the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre in celebration of the 150th anniversary of Chekhov's birth in 2011, among other plays. According to *Le Monde*, "Kuro Tanino is a multi-faceted artist who plays with humor, flirts with surrealism and explores the deepest abysses of the human psyche."

Niwa Gekidan Penino strives to create freewheeling productions based on an abstract concept of "the garden" (*niwa* and *gekidan* mean "garden" and "theater company" in Japanese) and aims for a "form beyond formula" by transcending the conventions of theater through performances in unconventional spaces such as Tanino's own apartment (Atelier Hakobune), an outdoor tent, and installation-like environments. Niwa Gekidan Penino productions are known for their complex and surrealist stage sets. The company has been invited to perform throughout Japan, including the French Institute, the Owl Spot Toshima Performing Arts Center, and Morishita Studio in Tokyo and the Kyoto Experiment Festival; and at festivals and venues abroad such as Hebbel am Ufer Berlin (Germany), Zürcher Theater Spektakel (Switzerland), Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival Groningen (Netherlands), Next Festival (Belgium), and Kulturschiene (Germany), Korjaamo Culture Factory in Helsinki (Finland), and Musik Tanz Theater in Lucerne (Switzerland). The company made its U.S. debut in 2014 with *The Room Nobody Knows*, in 4-city tour produced by Japan-Society, which kicked off in New York City (as part of The Under the Radar Festival), followed by Wexner Center (OH), Walker Art Center (MN) and On the Board (WA).

About Japan Society

Founded in 1907, **Japan Society** in New York City presents sophisticated, topical and accessible experiences of Japanese art and culture, and facilitates the exchange of ideas, knowledge and innovation between the U.S. and Japan. More than 200 events annually encompass world-class exhibitions, dynamic classical and cutting-edge contemporary performing arts, film premieres and retrospectives, workshops and demonstrations, tastings, family activities, language classes, and a range of high-profile talks and expert panels that present open, critical dialogue on issues of vital importance to the U.S., Japan and East Asia.

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‡ In memoriam.

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