

# PERFORMING ARTS

2024

25





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Japan Society presents

# *The Shakuichi 5: Shakuichi Vogue*

Friday, May 16 at 7:30 pm

— Followed by a Private Gathering for Artists and Members

*The Shakuichi 5* is supported by Doug and Teresa Peterson, Arts Council Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Foundation for History and Culture), mediaThe Foundation inc., and John and Miyoko Davey Foundation.



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The season is made possible, in part, by public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.



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## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Tonight, we are delighted to introduce New Yorkers to The Shakuhachi 5, an ensemble formed by five unmatched shakuhachi players from the current generation of active performers.

Japanese culture has proudly preserved and handed down many kinds of unique traditional musical instruments. The shakuhachi is one of these instruments—with one of the longest and most adaptive histories of any traditional Japanese instrument, travelling to Japan from China over 1,000 years ago. After drifting through a mysterious and peculiar past [please see “About the Shakuhachi Instrument” in the playbill], the shakuhachi’s unique sound has now become familiar not only to Japanese people but also to people around the world. It can regularly be heard in classic samurai movie scenes, and, even more recently, as a musical cue in video games. Since the late 20th century, the shakuhachi has also become a regular feature in the jazz and pop music scenes. With such modern prevalence, one may say, “Oh, of course, I know a lot about the shakuhachi!”

But, I would counter: “Once you listen to The Shakuhachi 5’s music, you will realize you don’t know much about the shakuhachi at all.” My words are not merely related to the fact that the shakuhachi-only quintet format has rarely (if ever) existed. Rather, my point is that The Shakuhachi 5’s exploration of their instrument’s new possibilities is amazingly creative; their choice of composers to commission new work is fearlessly fantastic; and their execution of that new music is outstandingly awesome through their superb technique and musicality.

At tonight’s concert, I guarantee that The Shakuhachi 5 will give you a rare surge of joy in witnessing “live” performance, because you can instantly tell the five musicians on stage are sharing their enjoyment of every moment playing together; and you will feel synchronized with their breathing and heartbeats. That is the shakuhachi magic that The Shakuhachi 5 brings to you!



Yoko Shioya  
Artistic Director

Japan Society presents

# *The Shakuhachi 5: Shakuhachi Vogue*

## PROGRAM

*Shika no Tone / Quintet Version*

Traditional  
(Quintet version arranged by  
*The Shakuhachi 5*, world premiere)

*Shakuhachi Five* (2020)

Dai Fujikura (1977- )

*Sara Soju for Five Shakuhachis* (2021)

Akira Nishimura (1953-2023)

## - INTERMISSION -

*Choreography* (2022)

Nozomu Kaneda (1992- )

*Five* (1988)

John Cage (1912-1992)

*Invitation 2.0* (2025, world premiere)

Lisa Bielawa (1968- )

*I. At a Loss for Words*  
*II. Dawn*

## The Shakuhachi 5:

Akihito Obama

Kizan Kawamura

Reison Kuroda

Akihisa Kominato

Kenichi Tajima

Japan Society extends its thanks to John Carpenter and The Metropolitan Museum of Art for use of their digital collection of *ukiyo-e* prints.

*Performance runtime is approximately 90 minutes including intermission.*

## ARTISTS' NOTE

At this concert, you will hear new possibilities for the shakuhachi, a Japanese traditional instrument that has become known globally and continues to spread throughout the world.

The centerpiece of tonight's program is a new staged work incorporating *ukiyo-e* print images. This is the first phase of our international "*Ukiyo-e* Project," through which we aim to connect three cities: New York, Prague and Tokyo.

For this "*Ukiyo-e* Project" initiative, The Shakuhachi 5 will be developing new works with a composer and video designer from each city, integrating images from *ukiyo-e* print collections from a major museum within that city. In preparation for our New York performance, we collaborated with composer Lisa Bielawa and video designer Tei Blow to create a new work incorporating the world-class collection of *ukiyo-e* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

*Ukiyo-e* started fascinating people around the world for well over a century before any international awareness of the shakuhachi began, and have had a significant and prolonged impact on art throughout the globe. Through this background, we consider *ukiyo-e* to be a pilot, steering shakuhachi players like us to new shores. Our new work, born out of the linkage of "Shakuhachi & *Ukiyo-e*," connects the past and the present and weaves together a new future. Given that potential, we think the shakuhachi is like a "magic flute" — it can pioneer the future while having a history of more than 1,000 years.

Through this performance, we would like to express our gratitude to The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the people of New York City for carefully preserving and fondly showcasing Japanese art. It is also a great pleasure for us to be able to create a work incorporating these *ukiyo-e* prints with the artists and art administrators in New York City. I hope that, tonight, we can share and enjoy with all of you the moment of traditional Japanese culture unfolding its new aspects.

— The Shakuhachi 5, May 2025

## ABOUT THE SHAKUHACHI INSTRUMENT

The shakuhachi is a traditional Japanese bamboo vertical flute, originally introduced from Tang Dynasty China during Japan's Nara period (710-794 AD). It is believed that this ancient shakuhachi instrument, with six finger holes, was first used in *togaku*, or Tang Dynasty music, played in Japan as one of multiple styles within the imperial court music known as *gagaku*. Although *gagaku* shakuhachi eventually fell into obsolescence during the 10th century, it was favored by Japanese aristocrats and nobility at the time and was mentioned in *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), Japan's preeminent work of classic literature written at the beginning of the 11th century.

After the shakuhachi was removed from *gagaku* ensembles, several centuries passed in which no references to the instrument's endurance or evolution appear in surviving historical documents. However, in the 15th century, a new type of shakuhachi—slender and with five finger holes—emerged. Known as the *hitoyogiri*, this instrument was initially used to accompany popular songs, but gradually gained independence as a solo performance instrument.

During the Edo period, the shakuhachi grew to new prominence through the *Fuke* sect of Zen Buddhism. This "modern" instrument, with its stable pitch and louder volume, became established in the 17th century, and is the main type of shakuhachi still used today.

The modern shakuhachi is known as the *Fuke* shakuhachi, named after the fact that, in the Edo period, it was exclusively used by the monks of the *Fuke* sect, which originated from the Chinese (Tang Dynasty) Zen master Fuke. Those monks, called *komuso* (literally translating as "priests of nothingness"), were warrior-monks and mendicants. Their faces and unshaven heads were concealed under deep straw hats called *tengai*. They played the shakuhachi as a meditative practice in place of chanting *sutras*, and used this instrument as a tool to solicit donations and charity. The rich, vast repertoire of solo shakuhachi music that developed and became handed down through this sect is known as shakuhachi *honkyoku*.

In 1871, in the early Meiji period of Westernized Japan, the government officially abolished the *Fuke* sect, and *komuso* lost their status as monks. As the instrument transformed from a religious/ ritual tool into a secular musical instrument following the dissolution of the *Fuke* sect, the shakuhachi began to be used as an ensemble instrument with shamisen and koto, and even became used as an instrument

in *min'yo* (folk) music. As more time passed, the shakuhachi also came into contact with Western music, and compositions incorporating shakuhachi alongside Western instruments became more common. Today, the shakuhachi is performed in a wide range of musical genres, from classical to pop, rock, jazz and other contemporary music.

The modern shakuhachi is made from carefully selected *madake* bamboo, and is crafted from the root end of the bamboo stalk. Played vertically, the instrument generally consists of seven bamboo joints between the blowing edge, or *uta-kuchi*, and the base of the instrument, and has a total of five holes—four on the front and one on the back. Among other qualities, the modern shakuhachi is unique in its timbral, or tone color, flexibility. This atypical timbral range has become a distinct characteristic of this Japanese instrument, distinguishing it from other traditional Japanese instruments. The design of the shakuhachi mouthpiece and method for blowing air into the instrument allows for substantial pitch control and an extreme flexibility in producing the same pitch through a variety of blowing and fingering techniques. Since most pitches can be achieved through more than one method, the shakuhachi has access to a wide range of timbres, resulting in a large spectrum of sound colors unique to the instrument.

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

### ***Traditional: Shika no Tone / Quintet Version***

(Quintet version arranged by The Shakuhachi 5, world premiere)

This piece is perhaps the most widely known classic (*honkyoku*) shakuhachi piece. Although it was part of the repertoire of *komuso* monks, the piece was not performed as religious music used for spiritual training, but is rather intended to express the love between parents and children, or husband and wife, through aural depictions of animals. As its title, *Shika no Tone*, or *The Distant Cry of Deer*, suggests, this piece depicts the cry of a deer heard in the deep autumn mountains, and the echoing sound is expressed through the shakuhachi.

This is a classic work of the Kinko school, originally performed as a duet. For this concert, The Shakuhachi 5 have arranged this classic work for five shakuhachi players while keeping the melody and flow of the piece intact. Part 3 was composed and added by Kizan Kawamura, who belongs to the Tozan school. This addition enables Kinko and Tozan players to perform this classical piece together.

### **Dai Fujikura: *Shakuhachi Five for 5 Shakuhachis* (2020)**

This is The Shakuhachi 5's first commissioned work, commemorating the formation of the ensemble—co-commissioned by The Shakuhachi 5 (Japan), Kyo-Shin-An Arts (USA) and International Shakuhachi Festival Prague (Czech Republic). It is an especially memorable piece for the quintet as they rehearsed while maintaining distance during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Upon being commissioned, Dai Fujikura reflected that it is often said about the shakuhachi that you must bob your head with the instrument for 3 years even before beginning to learn to move your fingers on the instrument's finger holes. He wrote: "If five shakuhachi players were bobbing their heads with shakuhachi all at once, they would look very strange and funny, so I asked the ensemble to try this. I just wanted to see them bobbing."

### **Akira Nishimura: *Sara Soju for Five Shakuhachis* (2021)**

This is The Shakuhachi 5's second commissioned piece. Akira Nishimura, one of the most widely known contemporary composers of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, passed away only two years after this piece's premiere. Of the piece, he wrote: "*Sara soju* is the Japanese term for the twinned *sala* trees under which Sakyamuni Buddha died near the town of Kusinagari in the northeast Indian province of Uttar Pradesh... [This] work is a fantasy inspired by the scene of the death of Sakyamuni Buddha. It might be thought of as a miniature depiction of nirvana in sound. It consists of three sections played without a break."

### **Nozomu Kaneda: *Choreography* (2022)**

This piece was selected from the "Open Call for Works" held in correlation with The Shakuhachi 5's "3rd Regular Performance" concert. Nozomi Kaneda wrote, "*Choreography* is based on the theme of 'rhythm,' which I have been exploring in recent years. While using a variety of rhythms, the entire piece is composed of only a few intervals, such as 'Do-Mi-So-Si-Re-Fa♯-La-Do♯,' to make various rhythmic effects throughout the piece clearer. Therefore, this work gives off the impression of light and fashionable dance music."



### **John Cage: *Five*** (1988)

The Shakuhachi 5 included this piece on the program as they believed it would be most suitable for them to play the work in New York, especially with John Cage's close association to the city. They further commented: "The works of John Cage, who pushed non-Western musical ideas and expressions and revolutionized the world of music, have a strong affinity with Japanese instruments, especially the shakuhachi, which is associated with Zen." They cited notes by Miyuki Shiraishi, a scholar specializing in John Cage, who said of the piece, "*Five* is one of the items in the 'Number Series' of works that American composer John Cage wrote during his final years. 'Five' here refers to the number of performers, although there is no specification of the line-up, meaning that the work may be performed by any combination of voices or instruments. The score contains fragments of notation enclosed within 'time brackets' that indicate precisely when a specific fragment should start and end. For example, the first time bracket for Player 1 is indicated as 0'00↔0'45, meaning that the player should start playing at some stage within this duration. The next time bracket is 0'30↔1'15, meaning that he should end this particular fragment at some stage within this prescribed duration. All the parts are written in this manner. The effect is one of tranquil music with small sounds emerging out of silence.

### **Lisa Bielawa: *Invitation 2.0*** (2025, world premiere)

*This nine-minute piece was co-commissioned by The Shakuhachi 5 and Japan Society, and receives its world premiere in tonight's concert.*

From the composer:

The invitation to compose for The Shakuhachi 5 struck me as a wonderfully bold move on their part. The shakuhachi itself has a centuries-long historical association with the solitary and introverted Buddhist monks who played as they wandered from town to town, collecting alms. In sharp contrast, The Shakuhachi 5 comes to the instrument with amiable sociability, even extroversion. Tradition dictates one player at a time – they play as a quintet. Traditional repertoire is passed down from master to master – this group reaches out to composers like me, from completely different musical worlds, to create new work for them.

Because of its connection with the monks, the shakuhachi was an exclusively male sphere until relatively recently. There are female spheres in Japanese

traditional arts too, ones with which I had already developed a strong relationship as an undergraduate in the Literature major at Yale. In my twenties, I managed some of my own surging, rapidly cycling passions of the heart by immersing myself in *tanka* and haiku penned by the ancient Japanese Courts' most sublime women poets, also its most passionate lovers. I wrote some of my own.

This piece, *Invitation 2.0*, is a musical meditation, more than 30 years later, on one of my own earliest haikus, "Invitation."

How must I ask you?

Even that bird invites dawn

At a loss for words.

Articulating the tension within haiku between timeless Nature and the lover's immediate awareness of Self, the piece is in two continuous movements: *A Loss* for *Words* and *Dawn*.

—Lisa Bielawa, May 2025

## **ABOUT THE SHAKUHACHI 5**

The Shakuhachi 5 is a group of five leading shakuhachi players —Akihito Obama, Kizan Kawamura, Reison Kuroda, Akihisa Kominato and Kenichi Tajima. Founded on each individual's outstanding skills, acquired through deep classical shakuhachi training and live public performances, they formed a new ensemble together that transcends the bounds of traditional schools in order to explore contemporary expressions through their instruments.

The group made its debut in 2020 with a video recording of the telework composition *Longing From Afar* in a performance conducted by the work's composer Dai Fujikura. In the same year, the group appeared on the cover of the *Hogaku Journal*, the major monthly magazine on Japanese traditional music, and their interview was featured as a top article in that issue. At the end of the year, the ensemble gave their first public performance in Tokyo, which included the world premiere of Fujikura's *Shakuhachi Five*, followed by their 2nd concert in March 2022, which included the world premiere of Nishimura's *Sara Soju*. After their 3rd concert in Tokyo in March 2023, they released their debut album, *The Shakuhachi 5*, in March 2024, through the label Camerata Tokyo. In June

2024, they launched a major new website on shakuhachi instrumentation, titled “The Shakuhachi 5 - Shakuhachi Gakki-ho,” and plan to update the site into a Japanese-English bilingual resource this year.  
(<https://ritzzy-woodwind-365.notion.site/The-Shakuhachi-5-434d3f55b17844d38e622f11dba43215>)

**Akihito Obama** studied shakuhachi under Toshimitsu Ishikawa and completed a course of study at the Ikuseikai, the NHK training institute for performers of traditional Japanese instruments. He has performed frequently in concerts at the National Theatre and at music festivals outside Japan. He gave the world premiere of Dai Fujikura’s *Shakuhachi Concerto* in the version for ensemble. He has released 10 CDs, including one of shakuhachi *honkyoku* entitled *Jakujo Koin* (*The Light in the Silence*).

**Kizan Kawamura** studied shakuhachi under his father Taizan Kawamura. He was awarded first prize at the Kumamoto National Hogaku Competition and the Gold Medal at the National Tozan School Honkyoku Competition. He is a member of the Japanese orchestra Mutsunowo and the “J-Trad” ensemble Mahoroba.

**Reison Kuroda** studied shakuhachi under Reibo Aoki II and III. He was awarded first prize at the International Shakuhachi Competition held in London in 2018. He has presented solo concerts worldwide, including many first performances of new works and concertos for the shakuhachi. He is a member of Hogaku Quartet / Hogaku Shijyuusoudan and of RigarohieS, and serves as a Japan Cultural Envoy, sponsored by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs.

**Akihisa Kominato** is a shakuhachi performer of the Kinko school and the third *iemoto* (Grand Master) of the Kominato school of *min’yo* (folksong). He studied under the late Living National Treasure Goro Yamaguchi and graduated from the Department of Traditional Music at the Tokyo University of the Arts. He made his major debut with the label Avex in 2004. He serves as tourism ambassador for the city of Sugagawa in Fukushima Prefecture and as producer of Blends, a series of programs broadcast by NHK featuring music played on Japanese traditional instruments.

**Kenichi Tajima** graduated from the Department of Traditional Music at the Tokyo University of the Arts in 2006 and served as assistant professor at the university between 2009 and 2012. He was awarded the Newcomers’ Prize at

the 69th Arts Festival sponsored by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2014. He is general director of the comedy band Yurubito and head of the Ken’ichi Tajima Music Theatre Ensemble. He is also a member of the Aioi Wagakki Orchestra and of the Japan Sankyoku Association.

## ABOUT THE COMPOSERS

**Dai Fujikura** was born in 1977 in Osaka, Japan, and moved to the UK when he was 15. Fujikura was the youngest composer ever to win the Serocki International Composers Competition in 1998. Since then, he has been awarded many other composition prizes, and has received numerous international co-commissions. His opera works have gained a worldwide reputation, with the world premiere of *Solaris* (co-commissioned by the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Opéra de Lausanne and the Opéra de Lille) in 2015, *Golden Bug* (commissioned by Theater Basel) in 2018, and *Dream of Armageddon* (commissioned by the New National Theatre Tokyo) in 2020. Since 2015, Fujikura has been leading composition classes for children from 4 to 14 years old in Soma, Fukushima, as a part of El Sistema Japan. Fujikura has also served as the Artistic Director of the Born Creative Festival at the Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre since 2017, a music festival that brings “new sounds” together from around the world. His works are recorded by and released mainly on his own label Minabel Records in collaboration with SONY Music, and his compositions are published by Ricordi Berlin. <https://www.daifujikura.com/>

**Akira Nishimura** was born in Osaka in 1953. He studied composition and musical theory from an undergraduate to postgraduate level at Tokyo University of the Arts. In 1977, he won the first of his numerous prize winnings at the Queen Elizabeth International Music Composition Competition. In 2013, he received the Medal of Honor with Purple Ribbon. He was composer-in-residence of the Orchestra Ensemble Kanazawa (1993-94) and of the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra (1994-97). He served as a Professor at the Tokyo College of Music, the Musical Director of the Izumi Sinfonietta Osaka (from 2000) and the Kusatsu International Summer Music Academy & Festival (from 2010) until passing away at the age of 69 on September 7, 2023.

**Nozomu Kaneda** was born in Niigata, Japan in 1992. He researched Toru Takemitsu’s music and received his doctorate at Kunitachi College of Music. In

2019, he was selected for the 10th JFC Prize Composition Competition, and in 2020, he received the 1st Matsumura Prize. He has studied composition with Motoharu Kawashima, Takashi Fujii and Kazunori Maruyama; piano with Satoko Inoue and Maiko Takagi; and musicology with Osamu Tomori. His works have been performed in Japan, Thailand, Vienna, Germany, Switzerland and other Asian and European countries by such renowned individuals and groups as Mayumi Miyata and Ensemble Platypus. He is currently a lecturer at Toho Gakuen School of Music.

**John Cage** was born on September 5 in Los Angeles and died in New York City on August 12, 1992. Among his composition teachers were Henry Cowell and Arnold Schoenberg. His invention of the prepared piano and his work with percussion instruments led him to imagine and explore many unique and fascinating ways of structuring the temporal dimension of music. It would be difficult to calculate, let alone critically evaluate, the stimulating effect and ramifications that Cage's work had on 20th-century music and art, for it is clear that the musical developments of our time cannot be understood without taking into account his music and ideas. Japan Society presented the highly acclaimed *John Cage's Japan* in fall 2023 to showcase some of Cage's extensive work.

**Lisa Bielawa** is a composer, producer and vocalist. She is a Guggenheim Fellow and Rome Prize winner, and has also received honors from the American Academy of Arts & Letters, OPERA America and American Antiquarian Society. She was also nominated for a Los Angeles Area Emmy for her unprecedented, made-for-TV-and-online opera *Vireo: The Spiritual Biography of a Witch's Accuser*.

Bielawa incorporates community-making as part of her artistic vision. She has created music for public spaces in Lower Manhattan; a bridge over the Ohio River in Louisville, KY; the banks of the Tiber River in Rome; on the sites of former airfields in Berlin and San Francisco; and to mark the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. During the pandemic, she cultivated a virtual community using submitted testimonies and recorded voices from six continents through her work *Broadcast from Home*, now archived by the Library of Congress. She is currently at work on *PULSE* —a new violin concerto for Tessa Lark co-commissioned by the Louisville Orchestra, Boston Modern Orchestra Project and Cincinnati Symphony with more orchestras to be announced—as well as her latest *Broadcast* for hundreds of musicians, to be presented in Knoxville by Big Ears in

October 2025.

Bielawa's music has been premiered and presented worldwide by the NY Phil Biennial, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, The Kennedy Center, Rouen Opera, MAXXI Museum in Rome, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, Radio France, Yerevan Concert Hall, Venice Architectural Biennale, American Music Week in Salzburg, INFANT Festival in Novi Sad, Serbia and more.  
[www.lisabelawa.net](http://www.lisabelawa.net)

## ABOUT THE VIDEO DESIGNER

**Tei Blow** is a media designer, technologist and performance maker. Blow's work has been seen at Japan Society, Hartford Stage, Dance Theater Workshop, PS122, Lincoln Center, The Kitchen, BAM, The Public Theater, The Broad Stage, MCA Chicago, MFA Boston, Kate Werble Gallery, Baryshnikov Arts Center, The Roundabout, The Wadsworth Atheneum and at theaters around the world. He is the recipient of the Foundation of Contemporary Arts Grant to Artists, Obie Award, The Henry Hewes Award, NYSCA Composer's Grant, the Bessie Award and the Creative Capital Award.



## **Yoko Shioya 20/20: Celebrating 20 Years of Artistic Vision**

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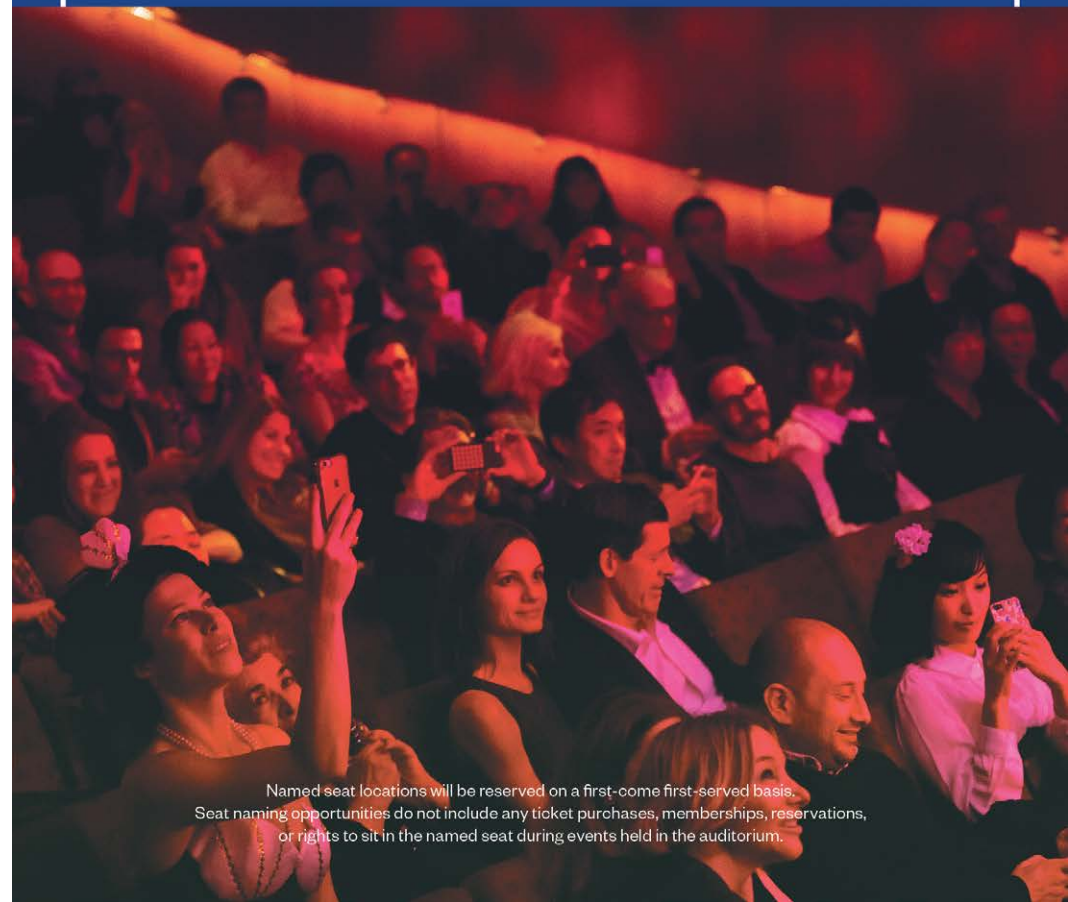
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