

Pia: Ungarnished Information

By Susumu Arakawa

The musical *Cats* enjoyed unusual popularity here in Japan, where musicals have not traditionally been hits. Staged in the two largest Japanese cities of Tokyo and Osaka, *Cats* achieved the first long run (over one year in each city) in Japanese musical history.

Behind the success of *Cats* was another success story. Pia Co., the publisher of information magazines bearing the same name, was finally convinced that it had secured the necessary foothold for launching a comprehensive information-oriented business with ticket sales as its major focus after the howling success of *Cats*.

Despite the originally unfamiliar sound of Pia to the Japanese ear, most young people now know that the biweekly magazine provides a wealth of comprehensive information about films, stage shows, music and concerts, exhibitions and other events. *Pia*, published in Tokyo and Osaka, has a current circulation of 650,000, which is healthy considering that the largest comprehensive weekly magazines sell an average of 700,000-800,000 copies nationwide.

Upon leafing through a copy of *Pia*, one notices immediately that it contains neither reviews nor opinions. Unique among magazines, *Pia* presents information only. Other Japanese magazines carry highly personalized articles, and try to attract readers by publishing authors with strong, recognizable styles and viewpoints. *Pia* turned its back on this convention and decided to offer ungarnished information that allows its readers to find the information on entertainment they want quickly and easily. This is the secret of its success.

Computerized publishing

Pia Co. was a forerunner in computerized publishing. Of course all publishing



Pia Co. President Hiroshi Yanai

companies are testing computer-assisted editing. But publication of conventional books and magazines is difficult on a computer, and so far computers have only marginally simplified the editing processes. Leading publishers have achieved a modicum of success in using computers on dictionaries and maps. However, the situation is completely different for *Pia*'s raw information, but this does not mean that no skill is required on the part of its editors and production staff. The accumulated data and standardized editing techniques developed by the magazine have produced a new kind of editorial skills.

The huge stock of information collected in Pia Co.'s computer after the production of 290 issues is made full use of when the magazine checks the rate of theater ticket sales and sells tickets accordingly. This new business angle was behind the phenomenal ticket sales for *Cats*.

While the Japanese publishing industry is generally suffering from structural depression, *Pia* has shown sharp growth, registering sales of ¥18.5 billion for fiscal 1987 (ending in March), up ¥4.3 billion over the previous year.

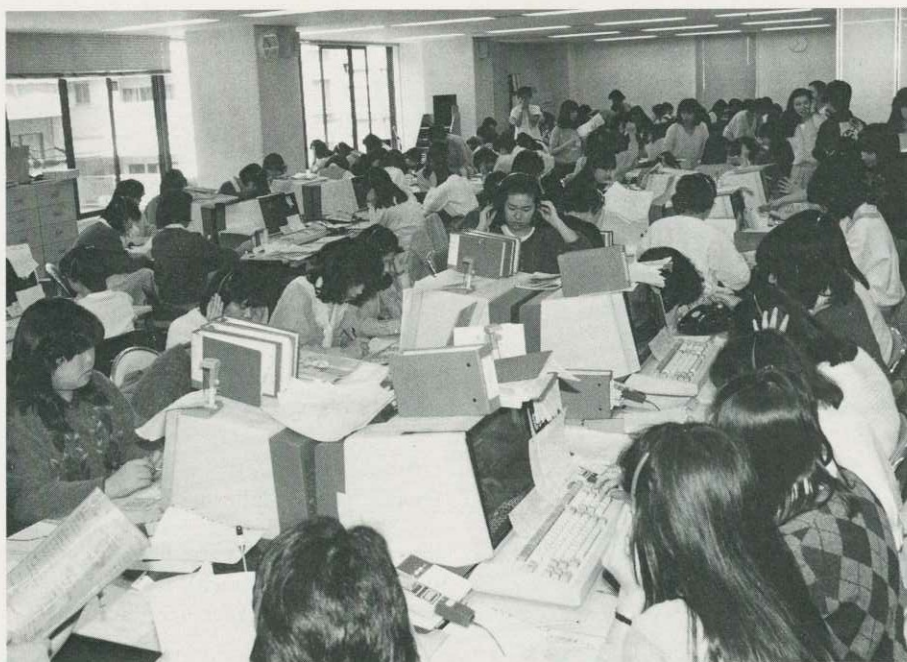
A rocky start

At 37, Pia Co. President Hiroshi Yanai is young for the job. Yanai opted not to live the typical "salary man's" life 15 years ago, when he was in college. Instead of job hunting for a position with a big company, he had a plan in mind that had been incubating since he had worked part-time on a TV news program during his student days: He wanted to make a living by publishing magazines containing information on culture and entertainment with some friends who also worked for the TV station.

In those days Japan was at the peak of its postwar high economic growth period, and people were beginning to pay more attention to the leisure side of life. Those who were born after World War II were hungry for a lifestyle with entertainment opportunities comparable to those available in the West. Yanai, in an attempt to persuade himself that his plan would be feasible, began asking his friends, "Would you buy an information magazine if one appeared in the stores?"

His informal survey was positive, with the additional answer that such a magazine should provide information not only on first-run films but also on second- and third-run movies and classic revivals. His friends pointed out that people who do not see first-run films because of expensive ticket prices would like to see subsequent runs or revivals, and indicated that an informative entertainment magazine would attract a considerable number of readers, provided the price was right.

Yanai's high expectations were shat-



Pia Co.'s ticket reservation center is jam-packed with computers.



A new reservations and sales system makes tickets for events in the world's major cities immediately available in Tokyo.

tered when the first issues of *Pia* did not sell at all; distributing agents for magazine stands and bookstores simply refused to sell it. The agents' reactions were almost identical. They said they could not place *Pia* in their distribution channels because sales would be unpredictable. Yanai contacted large bookstores directly, only to receive the same refusals. They were unwilling to try to sell a magazine that no agent had accepted.

At that critical moment, he happened to read the name of a famous essayist, the owner of Tokyo's largest bookstore, in an article in a publishing industry newspaper. Yanai gathered up his courage and called on the man, who introduced him to one of the potentates of the publication distribution industry. Shortly after this

unorthodox introduction, 89 Tokyo bookstores agreed to distribute *Pia*. "Once some copies of the magazine were seen at bookstores, I was sure of the game," Yanai recalls. And in fact circulation increased steadily with every issue. Once *Pia* was selling well, other bookstores went out of their way to carry the magazine. After circulation hit the 100,000 mark in 1976 distributing agents became eager to accept it.

In those early days the company sponsored numerous events to promote *Pia*. Among them were "Pia Ten & More Ten," an exhibition of classic films selected by readers, and the "Pia Film Festival" of independent films. All those events were successful, and the magazine enjoyed increasing popularity.

In 1979, Pia managed a smooth changeover from monthly to biweekly publication. "We found that a monthly magazine couldn't supply timely information on shows. In one month there are lots of changes," said Yanai. "So I realized it was necessary to solve this problem. The result was to issue *Pia* on a biweekly basis." Director of Marketing Kengo Motomura remembers that changing from a monthly to a biweekly was quite a challenge because funds were limited. But the decision to go biweekly proved correct. *Pia*'s sales increased sharply, and one month after the changeover the rate of increase was one and a half times what it had been for the monthly.

Computer-assisted publication started in 1980. Dating, rearranging in *kana* syllabary order, automatic editing and layout are all done by computer. At the same time, the company set up a development section to access the information collected in the computer and to organize ticket sales in its Playguide ticket offices, which has made possible the automatic generation of information based on advance ticket sales.

New wrinkles in ticket sales

In cooperation with Japan Air Lines, Pia Co. established a system in April 1986 for the advance sale through booking centers of tickets for musicals, concerts, etc., which includes tickets for events overseas as well. Thanks to this system, tickets for famous venues in major cities all over the world, including New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, London, Paris, Vienna and Milan, are immediately available in Tokyo.

Pia Co. has also tied up with NTT and launched the Japan Ticket VAN Service. In the near future this system will share information with its ticket-selling competitors such as department stores so that people will be able to buy all of their tickets from their offices or homes.

It is easy to predict what course Pia Co. will take in the future: making additional use of its stored information for business diversification. The magazine will present not only information on films, plays and concerts but also on travel, sports and even apparel and restaurants. Pia Co.'s future seems assured, and the magazine and company will continue to evolve.

"It'll take our company some time to be a comprehensive information-oriented business in the true sense," confesses Motomura. In light of Pia Co.'s present state, it seems that the company is already on the way to realizing that dream. ●