



Spendlove practicing for an underwater performance on the theme of *Swan Lake*.

Kanako Kitao Spendlove

Spendlove was born in 1982, in Kyoto Prefecture. She represented Japan in synchronized swimming while a student at Ritsumeikan University. She won silver medals in the team competition at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens and at the FINA World Championships in Montreal in 2005. She has been a member of Cirque du Soleil since 2006.

Series: Japanese Individuals Contributing Worldwide

Synchronized Swimming Olympic Medalist Performing with Cirque du Soleil

Kanako Kitao Spendlove, selected at the age of 20 for Japan’s national team for synchronized swimming (now officially referred to as artistic swimming), overcame harsh practices lasting as long as 10 hours a day to win a silver medal in the team competition at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens. Having also earned a silver medal the following year at the FINA World Championships in Montreal, she was expected to capture the gold at the next Olympics, but instead she announced her withdrawal from the sport, after three years on the national team.

“While it’s true I had earned a medal, I didn’t feel that I had achieved the kind of synchronized swimming I had imagined I would,” she recalls.

She wanted to pursue a style all her own. A few weeks after announcing her retirement from competition with that dream in mind, she found out that an audition for a show incorporating synchronized swimming performances would be held in Tokyo. The organizer was Cirque du Soleil, a company with its international headquarters in Montreal that incorporates such diverse elements as street performance and opera into traditional circus shows and performs those shows in countries around the globe.

Highly evaluated at her audition for her expressiveness, physical ability, and, most of all, her confidence in taking on new challenges, Spendlove headed to Canada alone to participate in training that spanned dance, music, and



The Nage (synchronized swimming) team of “O.” Spendlove is fourth from the right in the back row.

more.

Cirque du Soleil is known for shows that push performers to the very limits of human physical ability, and its unique production offerings bring together top-notch athletes, street performers, dancers, and staff from around the world.

“While each performer works to enhance his or her own abilities, we also come together as one, respecting each other’s skills, to produce an even better show. I was really struck at how wonderfully the group harmonizes, and I became completely absorbed in my training,” Spendlove recounts.

While in training, she was selected for the show “O,” a resident show at the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. First performed in 1998, “O” received glowing praise for its extraordinary creativity and artistry and became an endeavor that brought Cirque du Soleil’s reputation to even greater heights.

“The first time I performed and received a standing ovation, I was so deeply moved that I was trembling, feeling the positive feedback to my very core. ‘O’ is a richly complex work that people in the audience can interpret in various ways. Even now I approach each show with a fresh outlook and a bit of healthy tension. I really enjoy performing it.”

Spendlove’s abilities are highly evaluated, making her one of the star performers in “O.” She centers her life in Las Vegas and weaves practice as a competitive athlete into her performance schedule of two shows daily, five days a week.

She adds with a smile, “I want to understand synchronized swimming even more deeply, because it’s my true passion. I hope to keep pushing myself to the best of my ability and continue to move audiences through my performances.”



The name “O” comes from the French word for water, “*eau*.” The set dramatically converts to an enormous pool before the audience’s eyes.



Spendlove continues to practice as a competitive synchronized swimmer. Representing the United States of America at the 17th FINA World Championships in 2017, she partnered with Bill May to win the bronze medal in the mixed duet competition.



Spendlove enjoys a satisfying life in Las Vegas, where she lives with her husband, who works as a rigger at Cirque du Soleil, and their almost-three-year-old son.