Butoh: "Twenty Years Ago We Were Crazy, Dirty, and Mad"

BONNIE SUE STEIN

The spotlight settles on a flamboyant figure perched on the edge of an orchestra seat. A seventy-nine-year-old man—face and hands painted white, lips bright red—wears an old-fashioned black velvet dress, a crumpled pink hat, and high-heeled shoes. He adjusts his hat, dabs his face, lowers his eyes, and flutters his eyelids. With mincing arms, he becomes the grotesque shadow of a young coquette. He drapes himself across the edge of the stage in the serpentine curves of traditional femininity, then kicks his foot high like a carefree young lover. To the slow koto music, he skips, flutters, and poses. Finally he smiles, drops one shoulder and tilts his chin like a scared and puzzled child, curtseys, and tiptoes away.

Pierrot at the big top? An old 42nd Street transvestite? No. To the audience at New York's Joyce Theater he is a revelation. To Japan he is a pioneer of contemporary dance. To the world he is Kazuo Ohno, one of the founders of butoh.

Kazuo Ohno, Sankai Juku, Dai Rakuda-kan, Muteki-sha, Min Tanaka, Tatsumi Hijikata, Yoko Ashikawa, Eiko and Koma, Ariadon, and at least forty other soloists and companies comprise *butoh,* the dance genre that emerged during the late 1950s and early sixties from Japan's contemporary dance scene.

Butoh is:
- shocking
- provocative
- physical
- spiritual
- erotic
- grotesque
- violent
- cosmic
- nihilistic
- cathartic
- mysterious

In the 1860s, "butoh" was used to define dance in general; later it applied exclusively to "ancient dance." The term was also used to describe Western-style ballroom dancing. Butoh was first used in its current sense in the early sixties by Tatsumi Hijikata to describe his rebellious, syncretic performance style. Hijikata first called the style *ankoku butoh,* or "dance of darkness or gloom."[1] The word "butoh" is comprised of two Japanese characters—"bu," meaning dance, and "to," which literally means step. Today, butoh is used to describe both solo and group dances that seem to be taking very different but parallel directions.

There are many elements of butoh that link it to *noh* and *kabuki,* as well as to the other traditional arts of Japan. Most of these links, however, are superficial. Butoh is an anti-traditional tradition seeking to erase the heavy imprint of Japan's strict society and offering unprecedented freedom of artistic expression. After World War II, Japanese artists turned away from the traditional forms—as well as from the West—and asked, "What is contemporary Japanese dance?" There

are some visible similarities to noh and kabuki—the white body paint, also used in kabuki, and the extremely slow noh-like movement. But these traditional forms were viewed as archaic, their codified choreography useless to the early butoh improvisers. Zeami, the great noh master, said that facial expression was cheap. Butoh artists disagreed, emphasizing their faces.

Nakajima said, "We found that we were making the same discoveries as noh actors made, using some of the same terminology, but we had never learned those forms."[2] New York–based dancers Eiko and Koma have said that often they are incorrectly compared to noh and kabuki dancers by Western critics, even though they never studied either form. Their most revered teacher is the German Manja Chmiel, a student of Mary Wigman, who Eiko and Koma studied with in the mid-1970s.

Since Dai Rakuda-kan's 1982 appearance in Durham, N.C., Tanaka's 1981 New York performances and workshops, and the inclusion of Sankai Juku in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival, butoh has become popular with American art world audiences. Butoh's success can be explained partly by understanding trends in postmodern American dance and by appreciating the general "Asian boom" in the West. Japan has long been a great influence on the experimental dance and theater of the West. From Robert Wilson, Peter Brook, and Mabou Mines to Martha Graham, George Balanchine, Laura Dean, and Lucinda Childs, Japanese elements have been used in sets, mise-en-scenes, staging, movement, and vocalization. In the marketplace, department stores like Bloomingdales build extravagant ad campaigns around their "exotic" imports from the East. In the performing arts, American audiences have begun to show an interest in the Japanese forms of kabuki, noh, *kyogen, bugaku,* and now butoh.

There is great variety in the imagery of the butoh dancers, but it is always haunting, and of a lasting impression. One does not generally go away from a butoh performance with an ambiguous feeling—you either love it or hate it. Susan Sontag attended Min Tanaka's *Form of the Sky* (1985) at La Mama E.T.C. in December 1985. In Tokyo, she had been very excited about his *Emotion* (1985) but was confused by *Form of the Sky.* According to Tanaka, "she was thinking of my last performance, keeping it in her head. She couldn't throw that one away." Sontag returned to see *Form of the Sky* again. Afterward, she spoke to Tanaka at length. "I think she understands it now," he said. What is this butoh imagery about, and why does it have such an impact on Western audiences of the eighties?

The work of these Japanese artists is so thorough and so "Japanese" that Westerners sense a searing honesty. People rarely question the validity of butoh: they accept both the grotesque and the lyrical images. Because butoh is so obviously demanding, spectators who may not like it—who may even feel uncomfortable confronting such intensity—still respect the experimentation and the performance skills required.

Artists who devote their lives to butoh are not unlike noh performers: their lives are rooted in their art. And it is this passionate, focused attention that Westerners respond to. Audiences are drawn in by the direct and raw emotions. I have seen spectators staring with wide eyes, and I have seen them sleeping—which I consider an escape from the spectacle rather than boredom. In Japan, especially at noh drama, a hypnogogic "dozing" is an acceptable way of taking in the performance. This state is a version of "attention" usually not found in the West.

Awake or not, prior to the Tokyo Butoh Festival of February 1985, relatively few Japanese had seen butoh. In Japan, the form suffers from what is called *gyaku-yunyu,* or "go out and come back." Until an artist gains recognition abroad, s/he is unlikely to win approval in Japan.

Kazuko Kuniyoshi says of the Western reaction to butoh:

> Western theater and dance has not reached beyond technique and expression as means of communication. The cosmic elements of butoh, its violence and nonsense, eroticism and metamorphic quali-

ties, are welcomed by Western artists because they are forced to use their imaginations when confronted with mystery. Butoh acts as a kind of code to something deeper, something beyond themselves. What is crucial to this code is its nonverbal nature.[3]

The *New York Times*'s chief dance critic, Anna Kisselgoff, compared American and butoh choreographers:

> Whether they acknowledge it or not, American dancers and choreographers are still using Martha Graham, George Balanchine, Merce Cunningham, the Judson Dance Theater of the 1960s and other major figures as reference points. They may extend the ideas or idioms of these choreographers, or rebel against them. But they are still working in their shadow. . . . Movement for movement's sake has been the overriding principle for choreographers seeking new directions. . . . They have increasingly borrowed ideas from the minimalist esthetic in the visual arts and in music. . . . Postmodern dance is actually an extension of a general formalist esthetic. Form was content in American dance.[4]

In contrast, she said butoh uses "natural movement and stylized gestures to convey emotional content or human relationships." In other words, butoh's emphasis is on emotional expression. But a swing toward overt content and representation is in the air and part of the reason is butoh.

In the workshop given by Nakajima at the Asia Society in September 1985, the instructor said that "in America dance became too abstract, so now dancers want to add daily activity. I can understand why. They want to recover what dance is." She felt that most of the dance she had seen in America was mechanical and, therefore, not interesting. Butoh is a "bridge between action and narrative with dance movement or choreography."

Tatsumi Hijikata

Lizzie Slater, a historian who recently lectured in Oxford, England on ankoku butoh, has written:

> After Hiroshima the young generation of Japan, mauled by the War and the shattering of the past, needed to shriek out. Okamoto Taro returned from Manchuria and urged his fellow visual artists in 1948 "to destroy everything with monstrous energy like Picasso's in order to reconstruct the Japanese art world" and Okamoto went on to state that art must not be beautiful, technically skillful, or "comfortable." Instead, it should be "disagreeable," disregarding easy beauty and known forms of art. The post-war period in Japan was based on the destruction of old values.[5]

In the art world, the rebellion was made manifest in the work of people like author Yukio Mishima, theatrical experimenters like Shuji Terayama, and dancer/choreographer Tatsumi Hijikata. They explored the dark truths that hid beneath the Japanese social mask. Hijikata wanted to uncover the ignored aspects of Japanese society such as deformity and insanity. These were difficult subjects for performance and led to a great deal of controversy regarding the work he presented:

> The aim of Hijikata was a direct assault on the nervous system. The Japanese features in art ceased to be reticent and understated and became arrogant and antagonistic. Hijikata began collaborating with Kazuo Ohno in the mid-50's, but the most significant performance Hijikata staged was *Kinjiki* ("Forbidden Colors," 1959) based on a work by Mishima. This piece was presented as part of a series of performances organized by the All-Japan Art Dance Association in 1959. It was a violent spasm of anti-dance: a young man clutches a live chicken between his thighs, in the midst of a brutalizing act of buggery. In the darkness the audience perceives the advancing footsteps of another man, Hijikata advances on the younger man (Yoshito Ohno, the son of Kazuo). There was no music, the effect was shattering. Several members of the Association were so appalled that they threatened to resign. Instead, Hijikata left, followed by others, including Kazuo Ohno. This represented the break from the modern dance world.[6]

Another famous Hijikata production was the 1968 *Nikutai no Hanran* ("Rebellion of the Flesh"). In this performance Hijikata killed chickens on stage. Dancer Ko Murobushi saw this work and decided at once to join Hijikata's studio.

> "I went to the hall alone, in a bit of a rush. I came across a horse in front of the entrance, then a number of objects in the foyer by Takigushi [the surrealist who was a very influential avant-garde figure, organizing many exhibitions at the time], Kano, and by Nakanishi [the primary designer for ankoku butoh in 1965, still an important butoh collaborator]. The performance began with a flying model aircraft which crashed into a huge metal sheet at the back of the stage after circling over the audience, screeching with noise. Hijikata appeared, making slow progress through the audience from the back of the hall, as if he were to be crowned. He was muttering, groaning, singing—in some way dancing. In a later scene, he was suspended from the ceiling like a moth, as if trapped in a spider's web. This was not elegant or aesthetic, but wild, vivid, delicate, the intensity overwhelmed me. No one can show, be NOW, as radically as Hijikata. He became dance itself, the Poet of Darkness."[7]

Mishima is said to have wept at this performance, saying, "It's terrifying, this is time dancing."

Postwar Japan was a time for breeding a new code of ethics. To rebel against a failed society was not surprising. The atmosphere was exciting: very unorganized and messy, the kind of confusion that tends to breed either more confusion or acute creativity. Like surrealism, early butoh used distortions of nature, and like dada, it used chance as a principle of composition. In another early work which Hijikata called *Dance Experience* (1960), he provoked the audience, often creating a dialog with them, confronting them directly from the stage. Improvisation was used by Hijikata, Ohno, Kasai Akira, and others of this early avant-garde. Chance and improvisation contrasted with Japan's balance and order.

Emotional expressionism entered the dances as well. A people humiliated by losing the war, Japanese artists searched for a way to express themselves. If the rest of life were full of hiding, at least the dance should be free. And so the chaos grew. Every convention was dropped. They danced naked, provoked the audience, played deafeningly loud music. Among others, Takaya Eguchi, Ohno's teacher from 1936 until 1947, had traveled to Germany in 1922 to study with Mary Wigman. He and some of his peers later used elements of this German *neue Tanz* such as loud music and dramatic emotional expressions. Ohno and Hijikata followed suit. Other German dancers such as Harald Kreutzberg had visited Japan around 1939 and left their expressionistic mark. Hijikata integrated eroticism, nudity, provocation, and social criticism with other elements of Japanese culture: classical dance, Japanese body postures, pre-war vulgar entertainment, medieval grotesque paintings. From European culture he took inspiration from the paintings of Bosch, Breugel, and Goya, from surrealism, dada, and later, 1960s pop art.

Most Japanese art forms require a sensitivity to the action continued beyond its limits, to the state of the artist as s/he overcomes self-imposed boundaries. Working beyond one's threshold of endurance increases human potential, thereby increasing emotional and physical strength and reaching *satori*. Studying *kendo* (Japanese fencing) in Japan in 1975–76, I experienced this samurai attitude. In kendo, one is expected to participate in the practice long after the body has tired. To continue means to really "learn" something about kendo. The body and mind are exhausted, self-control is abandoned, and there is nothing to interfere

with spontaneous learning. I often felt this happening to me. I would become so involved in the practice that I did not notice my tired body. The room—and time—would disappear. There was a great deal of elation following this feeling, and somehow it seemed the only place for growth. This is a key to butoh: working beyond self-imposed boundaries, passing through the gates of limitation into undiscovered territory. Whether the gestures are slow and deliberate as with Muteki-sha, or wild and self-effacing as with Tanaka, the artists share a common driving dedication to the work. The strength of their commitment is an extension of the samurai/never-give-up spirit that has reasserted itself so powerfully in contemporary Japan, evident in the business world as well as the arts.

Hijikata did not perform in public for at least the last ten years of his life. He choreographed several works for Ohno and Yoko Ashikawa, a woman who is said to have had all her teeth pulled in the early days of butoh in order to create more varied and extreme facial expressions. Koma remembers seeing her dance around 1970. He was so moved by her performance that he decided to quit the university and study with Hijikata. When Hijikata, after years of improvising, began to choreograph for Ashikawa, three principles governed his work.[8] First, in contrast to Western dance, he emphasized discontinuity, imbalance, and entropy instead of rhythm, balance, and the flow of kinetic energy. Second, he used traditional Japanese sources for inspiration. Third, he developed the lower body; Japanese proportions are different from Westerners', and Hijikata wanted to create movement specifically for the Japanese body. This has been extremely liberating for Japanese dancers, whose bodies are not suited to Western modern dance.

In 1984, Hijikata choreographed a dance for Tanaka. Tanaka had always worked independently of both Hijikata and Ohno and, unlike most butoh dancers, had never studied with either of the founding fathers. The success of the collaboration weighed heavily on him. Tanaka and Hijikata worked continuously for two months preparing Tanaka's Tokyo performance. They called the dance *Ren-Ai Butoh-ha* ("Love Butoh Sect," 1984), a name which stood for any work they did together. In the program essay for the December 1985 performance of *Form of the Sky*, Tanaka wrote:

> Since Hijikata stung my eyes, I became his son. . . . Hijikata constantly whispers strategy into my ears, and I would like to introduce him to all of you, hardly standing on enfeebled legs.[9]

Hijikata continued to teach and choreograph in Tokyo until his death in January 1986. [At that time], he was planning his first tour abroad—he had always refused to get a passport because he felt that it was not necessary to leave Japan. He resisted any commercial development of butoh and opened his workshops to the public, training anyone who wanted to learn.

Kazuo Ohno

Ohno lifts his skirts slightly above his shapely calf. He takes a small leap forward and lands in a "new world." Arms outstretched, wrists limp, he tilts his head and pliés like a child in ballet class. Later he returns to the stage in a purple fringed scarf and white bloomers. A Cabbage Patch doll is pinned to the scarf, and a large flower is in his hair. He goes into the audience and offers candy to a man, then tosses candies into the air. He exits, and his son enters, looking like a monk in a long, white high-collared silk robe. In contrast to his father, Yoshito Ohno's movements are extremely slow. I am certain that I saw his ears move as he approached the soft blue light.

Ohno has an immense wardrobe boasting an array of gowns for all occasions. During a recent trip to New York, he purchased an exquisite off-white satin beauty, circa 1890, with puffed sleeves, a high collar, and a four-foot train. At home, he tried on the dress and immediately began to dance. He looked like an old bride whose groom left her waiting at the altar.

Ohno's peers and former students refer to him as a god. He exists for his dance and constant research.

35a and b. Kazuo Ohno, in his tribute to the dancer La Argentina, *Admiring La Argentina* (1977), performed at the Joyce Theatre in November 1985. Photo 35a copyright © Linda Vartoogian; photo 35b copyright © Jack Vartoogian, 1985.

Ohno is a philosopher and loves to talk about dance and his past and to describe his previous performances, both analytically and physically. He writes every day, composing essays with such titles as "What Is a Lesson," "A Rehearsal Scene," "The Encounter with Argentina," and "The Will."

At home, Ohno teaches two days a week in his Yokohama studio. But most of the time he is on tour, dancing and distributing his essays. *Admiring La Argentina* (1977), his most famous work, has been performed in Europe, Israel, North and South America, and Asia. When performing this dance, Ohno feels that he is La Argentina, the famous Spanish dancer he first saw in 1929. In *My Mother* (1981), he becomes his mother, the other great woman who has influenced his work. Other major influences cited by Ohno are his teacher Takaya Eguchi, collaborations with Hijikata, the Japanese avant-garde experimentation of the 1960s, and his deep Christian beliefs.

In *My Mother,* Ohno skips, jumps, lies down. His

metamorphic face and body display a multitude of emotional expressions. There is a lyrical yet pitiful quality to his "mother," as he dances the dance of a tragic clown. Marcia B. Siegel described her reaction to his 1985 appearance at New York's Joyce Theater:

> The 79-year-old performer is waging an intense physical competition, a wrestling match where he gets so intimate with death that he sometimes acquires his adversary's face.[10]

Ohno's performances are structured improvisations. Although he never does exactly the same movements twice, he works from the same inspiration. He does not feel that there is a separation between life and dance. As Eiko said, Ohno "does not commute."

Ohno wrote about improvisation:

> The empty stage, the bare stage you appear on, without any preparation, does not mean that it contains nothing. . . . The vacant space is gradually being filled and in the end, something is realized there. . . . It may be the kind of thing that takes a lifetime to learn—in my case I instantaneously knew the fact that the empty space actually was filled and I danced in joy and excitement.[11]

Ohno feels that he is blessed, fortunate to be able to dance.

The first large butoh festival in Japan was held in February 1985. National Television (NHK) televised the two weeks of sold-out Tokyo performances. Among the performers were Ohno (directed by Hijikata), Kunishi Kamiryo, Tanaka with his group, Maijuku, Dai Rakuda-kan, Dance Love Machine, Teru Goi, and Biyakko-sha.

Hijikata's words of warning to Nakajima prior to her 1984 European tour appeared in her program notes:

> We are surrounded by a mass of tricky symbols and systems. . . . Modern people are aware of the dark uneasiness in front of their eyes . . . but we shake hands with the dead, who send us encouragement from beyond the body. This is the unlimited power of butoh. . . . In our body, history is hidden . . . and will appear in each detail of our expressions. In butoh we can find, touch, our hidden reality—something can be born, can appear, living and dying at the same moment. The character and basis of butoh is a hidden violence. It is a filthy child who has the special ability for butoh—because he knows how to create beautiful patterns. Butoh should be viewed as enigmatic as life itself. I am not sure in the end whether it is a trap or a secret correspondence with something.[12]

Butoh has progressed in a variety of directions since Hijikata and his peers began experimenting in the 1950s. At a September 1985 butoh workshop at the Asia Society, Nakajima said, "Twenty years ago we were described as crazy, dirty, and mad—and now we have a passport."

Tatsumi Hijikata (1929–1986)

On 21 January 1986 Tatsumi Hijikata died of liver cancer in Tokyo. He was fifty-seven years old. A founder of butoh, a term he began to use in 1963, Hijikata touched every butoh dancer/choreographer, in some way. He was the "charismatic center, the artistic force, the inspiration" for butoh, said historian Lizzie Slater.

"A big loss, big loss," said Ellen Stewart, who had planned to bring him to America for his first visit in 1986.

Among the dancers/choreographers who acknowledge Hijikata as Sensei (master/dancer) are Ushio Amagatsu of Sankai Juku, Akaji Maro of Dai Rakuda-kan, Natsu Nakajima of Muteki-sha, Min Tanaka, Yoko Ashikawa, and, although more than twenty years his senior, Kazuo Ohno, who depended on him to refine every work he created.

Hijikata provoked and manipulated his students, pushing them to be individuals and find their own personal expression. Tanaka said, "Kazuo Ohno is a god and Hijikata is the devil."

Notes

1. The source for much of my historical data is Kazuko Kuniyoshi, *An Overview of the Contemporary Japanese Dance Scene,* Orientation Seminars on Japan, no. 19 (Tokyo: Japan Foundation, 1985).

2. All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from interviews conducted by the author in 1985.

3. Kuniyoshi, *An Overview of the Contemporary Japanese Dance Scene,* 6.

4. Anna Kisselgoff, "Dance That Startles and Challenges Is Coming from Abroad," *New York Times,* October 13, 1985, H14.

5. Lizzie Slater, "Investigations into Ankoku Butoh," unpublished manuscript (1985), 1–2.

6. Ibid., 2.

7. Ibid., 4.

8. Kuniyoshi, *An Overview of the Contemporary Japanese Dance Scene,* 3.

9. Min Tanaka, "I Am an Avant-Garde Who Crawls the Earth: Homage to Tatsumi Hijikata," from the program notes for *Form of the Sky,* trans. Kazue Kobata (1985).

10. Marcia Siegel, "Beating Back the White Noise," *Village Voice,* December 17, 1985, 114.

11. Kazuo Ohno, "A Rehearsal Scene," *Drama Review* 30, no. 2 (T110) (1986): 10.

12. Tatsumi Hijikata, "To My Comrade," from the program notes of *Niwa* by Natsu Nakajima, trans. Natsu Nakajima and Lizzie Slater (1985).