Butoh - Theater of the Soul

By Christal Whelan

Thank you all for coming here tonight to see GooSayTen, a Butoh dance duo that comes to us from Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido. I am very happy to introduce Morita Itto and Takeuchi Mika. They are part of a growing and now global Japanese dance lineage called Butoh. Butoh is often described as "avant-garde" although it has been around for half a century and is now well established not only in Japan, but in the Americas and Europe. Just last year the International Butoh Academy opened in Palermo, Sicily. I suppose butoh can remain avant-garde as long as it continues to be inspired by a spirit of transgression that marked its beginning. Since butoh is not an easy dance to understand, I would like to tell you a little about its origins and history in order to better foreground what you will see performed by Morita and Takeuchi this evening.

The name - "butoh" - means "dance" in Japanese, but it came to be used more narrowly in the mid-nineteenth century to refer specifically to recently imported Western dance forms fashionable at that time such as ballet, the foxtrot, and the tango. In the late 1950s, when Hijikata Tatsumi (1928-1986) started his avant-garde dance movement in Tokyo, what we now think of as "Butoh with a capital "B", he adopted the word "butoh" in order to stress the foreignness of his new dance from native Japanese dance traditions. At the same time, he also wanted to distinguish his new dance from the lightness or brightness characteristic of these imported Western dances. So he added the word *ankoku*, meaning "deep darkness" and called his dance *ankoku butô* meaning "dance of utter darkness. "

From the start, Hijikata's *ankoku butô* attempted to shatter the complacency of his spectators by placing on stage everything that our modem world required to be hidden from sight because it caused existential discomfort - disease, disability, sexuality, death, and the waste produced from massive material consumption. Whether physically buried in the earth or repressed deep in the human psyche, these banished parts became phantoms that he believed haunted the souls of modern people. By putting what was taboo onto the stage, Hijikata urged people to look at these disowned parts of themselves.

The postwar years in which the aesthetic of ankoku *butô* first developed were characterized by tremendous social change in Japan. The atomic bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki had revealed that the impossible - utter annihilation - was now possible. The juggernaut of American culture was fast transforming Japanese institutions and lifestyles, and threatening to efface or at least muddle Japan's own heritage. As Japan began to recover from the war and enter a path of

economic ascendancy the sense of rupture with the past still remained acute. The ANPO protests at this time were not unlike our anti-war protests of the 1960s. They were massive and heated demonstrations against the renewal of the Japan-U.S. Security Treaty that granted the American government use of the military bases throughout Japan.

Butoh was part of this climate of protest. It drew from Surrealism, a movement that cultivated the exploration of fantasies, dreams, and the investigation of the subconscious mind that Freud had pioneered. Butoh was eminently capable of producing evocative dreamscapes as evidenced in the first Butoh performance staged in Tokyo in 1959. Called *Kinjiki or Forbidden Colors*, it was based on Mishima Yukio's novel of the same title. *Forbidden Colors* dealt with a homoerotic theme and included the strangling of a live chicken on stage over the crotch of a boy, and concluded with the man in pursuit of the boy on a completely darkened stage with only the sounds of running and heavy breathing. According to butoh legend, this shocking performance resulted in half the audience leaving the theater.

To Hijikata's dark and powerful charisma, Butoh's co-founder - Ono Kazuo (1906-) - provided a stark contrast. He brought to the dance the qualities of illumination and tenderness. Through twenty years of collaboration, the two men formed what might be thought of as the yin and yang that constitute the totality of butoh. Incidentally, Ono and Hijikata were both from northern Japan where they had experienced great poverty in their own lives. Hijikata's sister, who had been sold into prostitution so that the family could survive, haunted the dancer his entire life. What became one of butoh's most typical postures - a bow-legged crouch - was the familiar stance both men had often seen - farmers consumed by hunger and permanently stooped from cropping rice in the fields. Along with this posture were others: slumped, bow-legged, and pigeon-toed.

These wraithlike figures soon filled the butoh stage. But they went beyond being emblems of the rigors and sheer physicality of pre-modem life in Japan. They were attempts to return to a pre-socialized body emptied of habitual movement and therefore open to new creative forms of expression.

Butoh training avoids the use of mirrors in the studio since it focuses on practices that induce interior metamorphosis. Dancers learn techniques designed to deconstruct the modern body conditioned by mechanical time and whose scaffolding the illusory atomistic modem self had been built. Hijikata initially tried to recapture the pre-modem Japanese body considered more in tune with the rhythms of nature. He believed that by reliving certain postures the memories encapsulated in them could be reactivated not only in the dancer but resonate into the audience.

In conjuring up postures that evoked the past and returning to the darkened pre modern stage that had characterized Kabuki and Noh before the advent of electrical illumination "vulgarized" the

theater reveals the nostalgia at the heart of butoh. However, Butoh's nostalgia is not regressive but one fed on the widespread popularity of Yanagita Kunio 's folklore and Origuchi Shinobu's ethnology. These fieldworkers, who gathered stories and local customs throughout Japan, managed to foster a new sense of Japanese traditional identity highlighting the country's great regional diversity. In butoh, the tangible proof of this resurrected yet fragmentary Japanese identity became the tattered kimono worn by some dancers.

Butoh dipped into the past in order to engage in a subtle conversation or negotiation with tradition. Its yearning for Japan's past amounted to an encounter with tradition within the present moment and in this very body. If I am not mistaken, it shares something with the Japanese Buddhist idea of *satori* - that integrating flash attained when a person comes to the end of logic's tether.

The *ankoku butô* of the 60s was an underground dance performed in small theaters in Tokyo. By the 1970s butoh had come into its own and resonated with wider currents of nostalgia for the rural and marginal as reintroduced by Yanagita and Origuchi. By the 1980s butoh enjoyed an international presence, especially in Europe. Since the 1990s indigenous butoh has sprung up in many parts of the world. These new non-Japanese butoh currents are challenging the definition of butoh as a Japanese dance made for a Japanese body type.

While deeply rooted in Japan, from the start Butoh was a robust product of cross- fertilization. Prior to forging the Butoh aesthetic, Hijikata and Ono had studied ballet, German modern dance, and had also been influenced by French mime. Ono studied with Eiguchi Takaya, who had gone to Germany to study with Mary Wigman, one of the great pioneers of German Expressionistic dance. Ono studied also with Baku Ishii a pioneer of Western modern dance in Japan and an important student of Giovarnni Rossi, who had been hired by the Japanese Imperial Theater to teach classical dance and modern ballet. But Ono's actual "calling" as a dancer came while watching the renowned flamenco artist Antonia Mercé in Tokyo. Stunned by her performance, Ono decided on the spot to devote himself to dance. Hijikata, on the other hand, drew inspiration from Western literature. Among his favorite writers were Jean Genet, Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, Edgar Allan Poe, and Antonin Artaud.

Although Hijikata passed away in 1986, Ono is still dancing at 100 years old. He dances from his wheelchair now, taking great care to perfect his hand movements. Since there is no ideal body type in a genre such as butoh where dance can only emerge from a deep knowledge of whatever body a person has been given in this life, there is no retirement age in butoh. Today the largest butoh company in Japan is Dairakudakan, but another large butoh company -- Sankaijuku - is expatriate and works out of Paris. Carlotta Ikeda has also lived in France since 1978 with her all-female

company Ariadone. Renowned dancers such as Pina Bausch in Germany had encountered butoh performers in Paris as early as the 1970s. It is safe to say that butoh and Bausch mutually influenced each other at an early stage while both drew from a common source - German expressionistic dance.

Some contemporary Butoh is extravagant and stylized spectacle while other butoh is more like Jerzy Grotowski's (1933-99) "Poor Theatre" with the exterior elements of costume and scenery stripped away in order to focus on the actors, ability to create transformations through the perfection of their craft alone. The core of such performance is the encounter between the spectator and performer.

Hijikata admired the dramatist Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) who advocated an end to what he called the "artistic dallying with forms." Instead, Artaud said that performers should be like "victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames- (Artaud 1958: 13). Having witnessed Kabuki during his artistic training, Artaud remarked that: "the Japanese are our masters" (Schumacher and Singleton 1989). Unfortunately, Artaud did not live to see the birth of butoh although it comes nearest to his own theatrical ideal. While butoh is usually referred to as "dance", it is better understood as a kind of theater - a theater of the soul. When it is performed sensitively it is like an exorcism that lets the demons within us flow out. GooSayTen partakes of this lineage. It combines what Artaud refers to the "fiery magnetism of image" with "spiritual therapeutics." May this duo enliven your capacity for astonishment.

References

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Schumacher, Claude with Brian Singleton (eds). Artaud on Theatre. Methuen Drama, London, 1989.

*This introduction was given by the author at Zero Arrow Theater in Boston (November 8th) and Bowker Auditorium in Amherst (November 9th, 2006), U.S.A., before GooSayTen's Butoh performance "To the White, To the Sky".)

*Cited in GooSayTen website at *http://www.ne.jp/asahi/butoh/itto/*