



**Clockwise from left: Tetsuro Fukuhara demonstrates “Space Dance in the Tube”; white body make-up is part of the butoh art form; Fukuhara says the project develops awareness of body and space.** Photos: SCMP Pictures



Robotics has long been an important area of research of companies and universities in Japan, although the complexities of human-like movement are only now beginning to be copied. Scientists at the University of Tokyo have developed a bipedal android that is able to replicate many of a dancer's movements by using motion-capture technology to record the actions and then repeat them.

The HRP-2 robot, developed by a team headed by Professor Shinichiro Nakaoka, recorded a traditional folk dance called *Aizu-Bandaisan* performed by a dance instructor, then digested all the simultaneous movements and was able to recreate the dance. The aim is for the robot to capture folk dances that are becoming rarer as older generations of Japanese die.

There are still some hurdles for the researchers to overcome. *Aizu-Bandaisan* is primarily a dance that uses movements of the upper body, and the HRP-2 needs more refinements before it will be able to perform some of the more complicated steps that come easily to a human being.

Fukuhara's new robotic dance project will make its debut in Tokyo in June 2015 before going on tour

round the world. In October, he will travel to Berlin to work with a number of artists, designers and robot technicians, including Frank Hoppe, a German space artist, and Sophia Remolde, an American multimedia artist, to create what Fukuhara hopes will be an “alter ego” for his own life.

“I would like to continue my work until I am least 120 years old and then, from the age of 121 to 170, I would like to continue with my ‘alter ego’,” he says. “I feel the theme of my space dance project is quite big, which is why I need so much time.”

He also hopes to catch the eyes of young people, who prefer to play computer games and are becoming more distanced from physical exercise and expression.

“I feel that people have somehow lost hope in dance in the past 20 years. But if we can get across the idea of Space Dance and robotic dance, then we can win back interest in this art form.”

“Dance is endlessly interesting, and it is important that we continue to develop it boldly and directly. We need to rediscover our kinetic sensations. It can give us a better interface with our society.”  
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## Culture proves catalyst for change in Egypt

Judith Mackrell

In the days since Egypt's president Mohammed Mursi and the Muslim Brotherhood party were ejected from power, the world's attention has been focused on the violent events in Tahrir Square and beyond, and the machinations of the military as it seeks to control power.

But one of the most fascinating aspects of the story is how it reflects Egypt's cultural politics. Although their list of grievances is long, it's perhaps surprising to hear that one of the many factors galvanising the opposition was the sacking of key figures in the Egyptian arts by culture minister Alaa Abdel Aziz.

One of them was Inas Abdel Dayem, the respected director of Cairo Opera House, and as artists and management demonstrated their protest, many believed it was the ballet, even more than the opera, that had been targeted by the creeping “brotherhoodisation” of Egyptian culture.

Mursi's disapproval of dance is well-known. Eight years ago he denounced dance as a violation not only of sharia law but of the constitution. Under his regime, attacks on dance and dancers became commonplace. Some weeks ago, a ballet school was threatened with closure by a member of the ultra-conservative Nour party on the grounds that dancing could inflame public “indecentcy”, and that ballet is “the art of nudity, spreading immorality and obscenity among people”. On an informal level, too, members of the Muslim Brotherhood were breaking up public performances.

Of course ballet is a problem for any regime that wants to govern by strict sharia law. It is a Western import, it puts women's bodies on public view, it sanctions their intimate physical contact with men. Dance in general is anathema to this fundamentalist school of Islam, given its celebration of the beauty and energy of the female body.

But it's precisely that energy that can also make dance a powerful force for change. In Iran, women have been banned from dancing in public since the 1979 revolution. Yet an active “underground” scene now flourishes, even if it has to categorise

itself as “rhythmical movement” or “sport”, to avoid prosecution.

One popular manifestation is the number of young Iranian women developing skills in hip hop and parkour (free running). This fast, free expressive form of movement is both a symbolic and practical act of defiance against a culture where young women are aggressively harassed on the street.

Equally moving is the dance project that was organised two years ago by Anahita Razmi, a half-Iranian artist based in London. She was inspired in part by the violent political protests of 2009, when many young men and women in Tehran shouted their anger from the tops of houses and apartment blocks. But in paying homage to that protest, Razmi was using the cool minimalist filter of Trisha Brown's 1971 work *Roof Piece*, for which Brown had placed herself and 11 other dancers on the roofs of Manhattan lofts, their bodies silhouetted against the skyline.

Brown's interest had been to liberate dance from conventional theatre; in Razmi's project, though, the Iranian dancers were making a more radical statement of emancipation: strong women dancing freely, high above the heads of a disapproving state.

Dance has always been a lightning conductor for religious and moral attitudes. Fundamentalists of many schools and cultures have condemned it as the expression of humanity's baser, more sinful self.

In the puritan era of 17th-century England, when Oliver Cromwell banned public dance – from court masques and ballets to maypole dancing – he created a generation for whom dance represented sin. When Charles II was restored to the throne, reopened the theatres and encouraged dance and music, Samuel Pepys felt he might be putting himself in moral jeopardy, the first time he tried a few dance steps at a party.

Pepys was relieved finally when all the capering stopped. He could forget about mastering tricky dance steps and at last fall “to quiet of mind and business again”.

In Egypt, tragically, quiet of mind and business have become very distant goals.

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**Egyptian minister Alaa Abdel Aziz sparked off a “culture war” when he sacked some key figures in the arts world.** Photo: Reuters