

Riding the tube

Tetsuro Fukuhara's unique dance style has made fans worldwide, and China may be next, writes **Julian Ryall**



From Melbourne to Berlin, Singapore, Mexico City, Kampala, Istanbul and Havana, Tetsuro Fukuhara has strung his long tube of bright white material and danced.

Tens of thousands of people have joined him, pushing the physical boundaries of the flexible cocoon as he encourages them to develop their awareness of the human body and space, which he calls "Space Dance in the Tube".

As Fukuhara, a second-generation butoh dancer, makes plans for his next international workshops and performances – this time to Chile, Brazil, Cuba and Mexico again – he has one huge regret: in all his years of dancing, he has never had an opportunity to share his passion for movement, for testing boundaries, for rhythm, with a Chinese audience or participants.

"As a Japanese, I am naturally very interested in sharing this [with] other Asian countries," the 65-year-old dancer says. "I have performed in many Asian cities before, but never in China or Hong Kong – and I hope that if my dream comes true, then it could be the source of many new and interesting cultural developments between us."

Six years ago, Fukuhara began

"Space Dance in the Tube", which he describes as an exhibition, a workshop and a new performance of communication that is based on the whole body and brings together dance, architecture, information and design, but with its roots in butoh.

Tubes of material up to 40 metres long are set up, and participants – including children – are invited to "perform" within the boundaries set by the fabric, and to awaken physical sensations that have been dulled by our addiction to virtual images, on television or the internet, according to Fukuhara.

"When you are in the tube, which is very flexible, you bounce and it becomes part of your body, and that is the relationship between space and the body," he says. "I believe that both children and adults are losing their relationship between themselves and our environment, and I want to reconnect them."

And that applies to people in China every bit as much as it does in Japan, America or Australia, he says. "I want to see Chinese children enjoying exploring a space tube. I have huge respect for Chinese history and culture – in previous centuries, we Japanese have imported that culture and

knowledge – and I would like to explore the differences and similarities that exist between our two cultures today." He also hopes any initial collaboration will introduce him to more Chinese dancers for future projects.

In the past, Fukuhara has expressed concern about the direction that butoh has taken as it became increasingly popular in Europe and America. Today, however, he says an international wave of appreciation for the art form will help its development.

Famously described by the *San Francisco Examiner* as an "unclassifiable" form of dance, butoh first emerged in Japan after the second world war, but more specifically after the violent student demonstrations of the 1950s as a challenge to the traditional order in Japanese society. The early performers were also reacting against the trend of mimicking Western dance or adhering to old-fashioned noh dance.

Performances could involve the grotesque at the same time as the playful and dancers often sought to explore taboo topics, such as homosexuality or paedophilia, and had no recognised form or style. Performers wear white body make-

up, and a dance may even involve no movement at all.

"I think my ambition now, as a butoh dancer, must be to find a way to develop this dance form internationally and not to keep it simply as Japanese butoh," Fukuhara says.

He is taking his space dance project to another level with "Space Dance in the Robotic Universe".

Working with Professor Jun Tani, of the Brain Science Institute in Tokyo, Fukuhara is developing a Tube Robot that will be the link between human movement and the actions of a humanoid robot.

"In our tube, the relationship between a dancer and the space will be kept as an amicable relationship of their unity, like one single body, and the two are constantly conversing with each other."

Work in recent years with the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency and NEC Research has also led to the evolution of a jointed robot performing dance steps and animated robot movements.

Further developments will see a robotic "suit" that can be worn by a dancer and work in harmony with his or her steps, while enabling the dancer to perform movements they might find difficult.



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