

Hijikata and BUTOH

by

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“Buton brings the subconscious before our very experience allowing us to see it and hear it and smell it in creative action. Butoh does not profess. Butoh insists over and over let us get to the truth. Nothing but the truth... Mind to be dis-ease free, demands truth. We begin to contemplate Butoh from this point.” (Quote from Kazuo Ohno)¹.

“There is no philosophy before Butoh. It is possible that a philosophy may come out of Butoh.” (Quote from Hijikata)².

“BU” meaning dance and “TOH” implies to stomp, thus unlike western dance (with its vertical movements directed towards the sky), Butoh is rooted to the earth, in deference to Japan’s history as an agricultural society. Hijikata along with Kazuo Ohno were the creative forces that established Butoh as the unique form of Avant-Garde Japanese dance that it is today.

Tatsumi Hijikata was born in Tohoku, the youngest of 11 children. It’s from his earliest childhood memories that he drew upon for both inspiration and dance technique. Tohoku, located in the northern part of Honshu is a region of wind, cold, and mud. These elements were the substance of his dance. He recalled his mother and the other women

working outside in rice paddys constantly having to struggle in the mud and we sense this laborious movement in his dancing. Also as a child, while the women were working, the children were left in straw baskets called "iibitsu." The baskets were used to keep the children from wandering away and their legs were wrapped with rags to keep them from getting free, which kept their legs bent and immobile. Again, this confined restrained experience as a child was remembered in Hijikata's own style of dancing. The crouched position used by the women when not working to protect themselves from the wind and cold was also employed by Hijikata.

Hijikata was also influenced by the movement of the handicapped. The movement of their hands, legs, and posture were of interest to him because they seemed to be extremely more aware of the parts of their body and the use of those parts. According to Yoko Ashikawa, a woman dancer who worked closely with Hijikata, there was also a conscious effort on his part to reconstruct a child's wisdom, "a kind of innocence which we have forgotten especially in regards to our bodies. He used the metaphor of a meal for dancers served on a plate, on which were placed the dancer's liver, lungs, and heart. The plate was wide and shallow, and the dancer was encouraged to play with the organs and examine them. This is something that children do unconsciously; they play with parts of their bodies in order to recognize them. He was constantly encouraging his students to explore in this way. He would often say, "Let your hand do this," in contrast to the usual designated function of the limb."³ He wanted his dancing to come from the body and not to be a mere learned function dictated to the body.

In the early part of the 1950's Hijikata came to Tokyo and studied different dance styles. In 1959 he adapted Yukio Mishima's "Kinjiki" (Forbidden Colors) a novel with a homosexual theme for the stage. The dance had Kazuo Ohno's son Yoshito a young boy, squeeze a a chicken between his thighs and then succumb to the advances of Hijikata. "The audience was outraged, Hijikata was banned by the Modern Dance Association and Mishima was greatly impressed."⁴ Mishima perhaps saw in Hijikata the physical extension of his own desire to explore the male sensuality with word. Hijikata's dance interpretation of the novel was original, somewhat shocking, and between them, the gulf that separated the man of words and the man of body was narrowed. In Hijikata's words "Buton was clearly the art of the body and the mind." Other literary influences included the writings of Jean of Jean Genet, Lautreamont, and the Marquis de Sade.

Moving into the turbulent 60's there was turmoil and change taking place around the world as well as in Japan. Tokyo, like other major cities was feeling the influence of the counter-culture and the New Left student movement. Hijikata's "Ankoku" (Dark dance) was also evolving on the periphery of a Post-Nuclear society embracing western culture and trying to leave behind the memories of a nightmarish past. T. V. was the medium in which one could see young people taking to the streets around the world, protesting, close to anarchy, using their bodies draped with flags as weapons of protest. At the same time Hijikata was exploring more and more the body as language embracing Antonin Artaud's "A theater of the body." The Japanese Dadists admired Hijikata's anti-establishment dance and even participated being hung in

vinyl bags above the stage while eating bread. Like Hijikata they preferred to use their bodies as form and expression. Yet, With all that was going on he didn't involve himself with politics. He used his energy for dancing and to explore the duality of body and the subconscious realm of the mind. For westerners, they readily accepted Butoh as spectacle, theater of the absurd. For Japanese, his dance performances stirred mixed reactions. His dance was raw, dark, some called it "dirty." Perhaps it was because he probed a different side of the Japanese psyche, a side still immersed in superstition, myth, and emotion that was disturbing and at the same time mesmerizing.

In 1968 Hijikata was preparing to perform "Revolt of the Flesh." A month before the performance his routine consisted of eight hours of dancing, jogging, and a diet of milk and miso soup. Yoko Ashikawa commented on how he became younger as the performance continued, "he started as a 39 year old, and gradually he became younger and younger. He became 35, then he was 25, 18, 12, and I remember thinking there must be a secret. This must be the secret of dance."⁵ It was also a complete turning away from western influence, a time in which he sought to "re-acquire the innocence of a child and not think so much."⁶ He worked closely with Yoko Ashikawa, and they performed for University students on campus.

Re-surfacing in the mid-70's with long hair, he had three women dancers, Yoko Ashikawa, Momoko Nishina, and Saga Kobayashi dance to "Gidayu" a kind of dramatic balladry that his father listened to. They wore wooden clogs and danced in the bent-leg position. Before his death in January 1986 Hijikata was performing what he called "Toho-

kukabuki, a combination of country dance and Edo kabuki. His long hair was in homage to his mother and especially to his older sister both who were dead. He felt their spirit as a creative force within him, as well as keeping their souls nourished and alive. "Death knows me. I have an older sister living inside me. When I'm engrossed in dance creation, she tears at the darkness within and consumes more than she needs to. She once said to me, Although you perform upon reaching the ecstasy of dance and expression, isn't it true that your ability to express depends upon the inexpressible?" and having thus spoken, she vanished. So you see, she's my teacher; the dead are my teachers."⁷

Akiko Motofuji, Hijikata's wife and respected dancer in her own right, when asked what it was like living with him and now without him said, "I'm proud I could create the unique form of Butoh together with him. I suffer from grief for losing him, but I feel that I have a responsibility to continue to convey not only his dance form but also his spirit. Even after death, I can find him in the wind or snow. I'm always encouraged by him."⁸ She still continues to carry on Hijikata's spirit and dance at Asbestos Kan in Tokyo.

Hijikata left no real stated doctrine or philosophy, it was all there in his dance. But he did define Butoh as using the body without purpose, which the productive society disliked as an enemy or as "taboo." "The root of my dances can be the same as that of a crime, homosexuality, festivals, or ceremonies, since these activities are willing to exaggerate the aimlessness of a Capitalist society." He also said, "If I stop (dancing) I will die. My daily life connects directly with the stage. The stage which disconnects from one's life is just affectation. So I always stand

on the side that danger is cultivated.”⁹

1. Mark Holborn, Buton, Dance of the Dark Soul, Aperture Foundation.
Inc. 1987. p. 128
 2. Ibid, p.9
 3. Ibid, p.16
 4. Ibid, p.11
 5. Ibid, p.9
 6. Ibid, p.13
 7. Ibid, p.125
 8. Interview with Akiko Motofuji, Tokyo, July 1992
 9. Translation by Hiroko Nakamura, Tokyo, July 1992
- * Special thanks to Hiroko Nakamura and Mari Fuji.