

# Contemporary Dance in Japan and its Background

KAZUKO KUNIYOSHI

*t*he term "Japanese Dance" refers to a great variety of different kinds of dance. There are two probable reasons. First, in Japan it was unusual that one style of performing art should be replaced by new ones. It was more likely that the old and new co-exist, and that they easily influence each other. In such a situation the boundaries between them can sometimes remain undefined. New styles constantly branch out from the preceding ones creating a huge number of new forms of expressions. Secondly,

*since Japan is an island situated on the eastern extremity of the Eurasian continent, it has been the terminus of a track of influence from many countries and have therefore been preserved. Over a long period of time, imported dance has slowly changed and adapted to the Japanese environment.*

Loosely speaking, there are two broad types of dance to be seen in Japan today: the traditional and the modern which existed before the Meiji period (1868–1911); and those which developed since the Meiji period. Within each group, there are those types which originated outside Japan and those which are indigenous.

Dance has had a long history in Japan, and as far back as the seventh century, it received considerable influence from outside. The next surge of influence was not until twelve hundred years later, in the Meiji period. In this period, many cultured people looked down on the traditional arts, and tried to acquire and catch up with the Western arts. This was the cultural modernization in Japan. The performing arts was categorized under the same heading of classical arts, in distinction with the modern. Thus began the concept of classical performing arts.

The first person to argue in his book, "Treatise on a New Musical Drama," published in 1904, for the need to reform the traditional *kabuki* dance was Tsubouchi Shoyo. He aimed to show in a concrete way how the surviving *kabuki* dance could be reformed to produce a new Japanese musical drama. The word "*buyo*," now the normal word for dance was coined by Shoyo in this work. A new word was necessary for a new concept. Shoyo felt that the new term was necessary to facilitate research into Japanese dance to put it into the context of world dance and introduce Japanese dance overseas. He also used *buyo* in the narrow sense of *kabuki* dance alone. Shoyo's basic attitude was that, like Western opera, Japan should create a new musical dance drama, based on *kabuki* dance. He was also very concerned about how a fusion could be achieved between Western and Japanese dance. However, Shoyo was not a dancer himself, and in

order to realize the ideas put forward in his treatise as a reform movement, the barriers of tradition had to be overcome. What is more, he needed the co-operation of dancers to do this. His ideas did not come into their own until the Taisho period (1912–1925), when they became the guiding principle of the New Dance Movement.

A truly new dance movement, called *Shin Buyo* centered on a woman dancer, Fujikage Shizue (1880–1966). Her group came to the attention of those artists who were experimenting in new stage effects, equipment, decor and lighting. Shizue was always fortunate in attracting cooperation from important artistic people, and this was significant for the later development of the New Dance Movement. One of her early works was highly unconventional for the time and caused quite a sensation. She was also innovative with the music she used for dance accompaniment. The new style of dance demanded a new type of music.

1921 was an important year for the development of the New Dance Movement. It is noticeable that other experimental dances had already been performed by Umemoto Rikuhei and *kabuki* actor Ichikawa Ennosuke. Their works were all experimental with purely musical accompaniment without words. It is important to realize that *kabuki* dance music begins with the composition of a text, to which the musical setting of the vocal melody and *shamisen* is added. The dance is then choreographed based on the

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content of the text. For this reason, *kabuki* dance is strongly dramatic, following the words of the text with gestures which describe actions and emotions. In this context, it was considered quite a revolutionary experiment to dance to music which had no text. Movement itself does not have to be subservient to the meaning of individual words, but expresses feelings through dynamic movement such as group movement. In 1922 Anna Pavlova toured Japan, and her ballet "Dying Swan" had a profound effect on the Japanese dance world. Interestingly, among those who were most affected were the dancers involved in the New Dance Movement. As it happened, those who became the pioneers of dance in Japan were studying overseas at this time and missed seeing Pavlova. And ballet had not yet taken root in Japan. Tokyo was largely destroyed by a huge earthquake in 1923. The earthquake marks the boundary between the feudalistic world of Japanese dance and the new era when trends toward freedom of expression became ever stronger. The impulse to create a new Japanese dance in opposition to *kabuki* dance has continued to the present day. Today the movement is called Creative Dance (*Sosaku buyo*).

Creative Dance is based on the classical technique of *kabuki* dance, and is usually performed in kimono, so it is clearly regarded as one area of Japanese traditional dance.

Quite different from this, is Japanese modern dance, which should be understood as something that

developed out of Western dance. It is said that Western dance was first introduced to Japan in a serious way when the Italian G.V. Rosi was brought to the Western dance section of the Imperial Theatre to teach dance in 1912. He taught the techniques of Dance Classic. Among his first students were some who were later active as the pioneers of Western dance in Japan. They learned "dance classics," and became the pioneers not of ballet, but of modern dance.

Most important of these was Ishi Baku. Baku started off in the opera section of the Imperial Theatre, but he came to feel a stronger interest in dance than in music. He was, however, highly doubtful about the kind of dance he was being taught at the theatre. Rather than ballet, he was more interested in finding a new dance which was connected with his own artistic activity and with reality. It was a time when all the arts were moving into an avant garde direction: not only in literature, but also in the visual arts, in drama, dance and opera. This activity was centred mainly in Tokyo. It was spurred on by the energy of the reconstruction after the earthquake, but was already underway before then. By calling his own works "dance poems," Baku seems to be trying to separate himself from the classical Japanese dance's dependence on literary content and a text. He seems to have used the word poetry because he wanted to express the fully present, the sensation vividly experienced with one's whole body, not with imitative gesture, but in

pure motion as poetry in movement. Baku tried to express a world, which can not be described in words, by means of sound, movement and rhythm.

From 1922 to 1925, he toured Europe and America. He gave a performance in Berlin in 1923. After that, he toured around many European centres. At that time, Baku appeared in the German film "The Way to Beauty and Strength" (directed by Leni Riefenstahl), and danced "The Captive" in this film. In this piece, what is being expressed is the person in bonds, the suffering endured in the quest for freedom, by means of powerful physical movements and the short quick steps which are so minutely defined. In the midst of that urgent state of constantly overflowing feelings, what he unconsciously chose, the form which he relied on, was surely revealed in the "The Captive."

From his Germany tour, the most important influence Baku underwent was his encounter with the German dancer Marie Wiegmann. He was now able to experience Wiegmann's German Expressionist dance. After his return to Japan, all Baku's performances were highly successful, and he created many works which remain today.

The term "modern dance" does not seem to have been used in Japan, until the German "ausdruckstanz" was introduced in the 1930s. All non-Japanese dance was lumped together as "Western dance," even by the average person including the

new Japanese dance called *Shin buyo*. The person who introduced the "ausdruckstanz" into Japan was Eguchi Takaya. He studied with Marie Wiegmann in Europe from 1931 to 1933 and devoted himself to introduce German expressionist dance in Japan.

Japanese modern dance in its early stages had two salient features. First, it was not a reaction to classical ballet or Western classical dance of any kind. Classical ballet was not known in Japan, until Rosi started introducing its techniques in 1912. Japanese modern dance emerged in the 1920s as a reflection of typically Japanese emotions, the social climate of liberalism of the time. Secondly, the influence of German "ausdruckstanz" is strong, in particular the dance and choreographic style of Marie Wiegmann. This expressionist tendency can be seen in many modern dancers in Japan today.

Following the Second World War, Japanese-American relations became stronger than before, and the Martha Graham, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor companies and New York City Ballet came to Japan. Young Japanese dancers were fascinated by American dance, and several, including Akiko Kanda, Asawa Takako and Kimura Yuriko left for the USA. Among those who studied at the Julliard School on Fulbright Fellowships were Atsugi Bonjin and Takei Kei. Thus, Japanese modern dance can be divided into three currents, one originating in Japan, one influenced by Germany, and a third influenced by American modern dance. Today,

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except for *butoh*, current contemporary dance in Japan flows from these sources.

Looking back on the history of dance in Japan, more than 30 years have already passed since *butoh* was recognized as a unique form. The single term "*butoh*" encompasses both dancers whose styles are radically different, and their staging techniques as a whole. *Butoh* emerged from the context of the avant-garde art movements in the early 1960s in Japan, as a new kind of expression. When the style first appeared, Hijikata Tatsumi himself called it "*Ankoku Butoh*" (Dance of Darkness). He founded *butoh* with the collaboration of a small number of dancers and artists. Since then, Hijikata's theory of *butoh* has had a comprehensive effect on contemporary arts in general. It has served particularly to expand and deepen the concept of dance.

The 1960s was a period of vigorous activity for the student movement in Japan, particularly in opposition to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty. The student movement insisted that it was pointless to change the system, since revolution was impossible without change at the basic level of physical existence. Hijikata's *butoh* was seen as sympathetic to this and some students sought to enter the world of *butoh*.

A number of dances were created using the unheard of technique. The body of the *butoh* dancer is most striking because it is so far removed from balanced, ideal beauty of the ballet dancer. It has no reason to

take pride in its powerful musculature or physical strength. *Butoh* dancers seem to emphasize the rounded back, bull-neck and bandy legs. In this grotesque ugliness, however, one can find an irreducible beauty and a sweetness which are without equivalent elsewhere. *Butoh* accomplished a reversal in the aesthetic consciousness.

Since the early 1980s the popularity of *butoh* has grown remarkably in Europe and the USA. *Butoh* expresses the experience of the universal modern city, not restricting itself to Japonisme or the exoticism, and this has received a sympathetic response from Western audiences, which have recognized in it a contemporary consciousness of the problematic aspects of the 20th century. Until recently Japan could boast of little in international cultural exchanges in dance beyond the classical repertoire of *kabuki* and *noh*. Outside the indigenous classical tradition, the current situation is such that any presentation of contemporary Japanese dance is viewed as no more than an imitation of existing Western forms and is not understood to be a product of the modern urban environment, and thus subject to the same problems, or to represent a universal viewpoint of relevance to contemporary man.

In the world of *butoh*, many dancers with many different styles and idioms coexist. Broadly speaking, however, there are two approaches to creation dance; those who emphasize choreography, and those who emphasize improvisation. The improvising group tend to dance

solo, and the choreographic group to dance in a formation of two or more dancers. This is natural enough, and yet these two elements raise problems (intimately) connected with the way one thinks about *butoh*. In both cases, *butoh* had to start off from a denial of pre-existing techniques of physical expression, and the question is what is to be the basis in creating a new dance.