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BODIES ACROSS THE PACIFIC:

THE JAPANESE NATIONAL BODY IN THE PERFORMANCE TECHNIQUE OF SUZUKI AND BUTOH [1]

I. CULTURE, THE BODY AND PERFORMANCE

The 20th century has been described as the pre-eminent century of the body. In the last few decades, radical models of the body have become a major way in which cultural critics and practitioners have constructed sites of resistance against mainstream politics. This is largely due to the groundbreaking work of Michel Foucault in describing how models of the body, and techniques for its interrogation and control, have been central in the development of the modern nation state.[2] It has become clear to historians and social commentators alike that the body has been, and continues to be, one of the primary conceptual sites upon which power is based. In Western history, the transition from monarchic government to modern statism was marked by a major shift in how the body was

1.. The present article is a revised edition of a seminar presented as part of the MUSU Theatre Department Workshop Series, 9/9/1992. This seminar was itself a version of a group of seminars presented for the 3rd Year Dramaturgy project, *Japanese Dreaming,* July/August, 1992. Thanks are due to Norman Price, Glenn D'Cruz, Allan Patience, Anastasi Siotis, Rose Myers, Sue Strano, Kelly Heywood, Christopher Marshall, Helen Patricia Marshall, and Playbox Theatre Company for assisting the author.

2. See:

Michel Foucault, *Discipline And Punish: The birth of the prison*, Alan Sheridan trans., (London: Penguin, 1975), 1991 edn.

---, *The History Of Sexuality. Vol. I. An introduction*, Robert Hurley trans., (London: Penguin, 1976), 1990 edn.

---, *Madness And Civilisation: A history of insanity in the Age of Reason*, Richard Howard trans., (N.Y.: Random House, 1961), 1988 edn.

constructed, and its role in society enunciated. Under the Old Regime, the body politic was thought of not only as a metaphoric entity, but as a literal manifestation of the divine order. The king was not only spiritually bound to his subjects, but physically linked also. The boundaries between individuals were plastic, and just as saints could heal by laying their hands upon the sick, or through the intermediary of the saints preserved physical remains, so the king could on occasion enact miraculous cures by his physical touch.[3] Pre-Enlightenment models of the body included the possibility of such exchanges between bodies, as well as unusual transformations (lycanthropy, sexual reversals, and so on),[4] as part of a flexible system of psychic and physical relations between subjects. With the emergence of modern statism in the 18th century, the body was re-conceptualised. The nation state of post-revolutionary Europe was considered to be a virtual body made up of a voluntary alliance of individuals. Rather than being physically linked, the modern nation state could only function if individuals were seen to be psychically and physically *discrete*, and therefore able to follow their conscience within the democratic system. Democracy can only function if it carries the potential for members of the state to withdraw from it, or to critique the

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3. See especially:
Ernst Kantorowicz, *The Kings Two Bodies: A study in Medieval political theology*, (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1957).

4. See:
Caroline W. Bynum, The Female Body And Religious Practice In The Later Middle Ages, in Caroline W. Bynum, *Fragmentation And Redemption: Essays on gender and the human body in Medieval religion*, (N.Y.: Zone, 1991), pp.181-238.
Caroline Oates, Metamorphosis And Lycanthropy In Franche-ComtÈ, in Michel Feher, ed., *Fragments For A History Of The Human Body. Vol. I*, (N.Y.: Zone, 1989), pp.304-363.
Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and gender from the Greeks to Freud*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1990), esp. pp.1-148.

democratic process from within. The body of the individual therefore becomes a crucial boundary for subjects of the modern Western state. It is finally the body which defines an individual, its sexual characteristics (masculine or feminine, heterosexual or homosexual, reproductive or infertile) and the disciplines to which it is subjected (hygiene, the constant battle against the bodily incursions of others, military discipline, the physical order of the factory, the luxury of the household).

It was this increased political and cultural significance of the concept of the individual self as a psycho-sexual being that gave birth to the modern discourse of psychology. The aesthetic corollary to this role of the individual in medicine and politics was the theatrical methodology of Konstantin Stanislavsky.[5] In the 19th century, Realist and Naturalistic theatre began to develop. Scripts of this form largely dealt with voting members of the polity (the bourgeoisie), portraying scenarios around the homes of the well-to-do.[6] Stanislavskys performance technique sought to give expression to the psychological states of the characters of the drawing room; their sexual repressions, emotions, and motivations. With the rise of bourgeois values and culture in the 20th century, Stanislavskys acting technique has attained a virtual monopoly over mainstream theatre. Australians interest in radical Japanese performance thus comes from a dissatisfaction with Naturalistic characterisation in performance, and the social dominance of bourgeois models of the body. To combat

5. See:
Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Stanislavsky On The Art Of The Stage*, David Margarshack trans., (London: Faber, 1977), 2nd. edn.

6. I have in mind here the work of Chekov, Ibsen, Strindberg, and other similar writers.
The relation of Western culture and politics to aesthetics is best described in:
Donald M. Lowe, *History Of Bourgeois Perception*, (Brighton, Sussex: Harvester, 1982).

contemporary mainstream culture by importing foreign models of the body however can lead to new problems.

Despite its apparent solidity and bulk, the body constantly eludes any analysis which is free of culture. One cannot think of the body without having a word for it. Language covers the body, obscuring it from view, and rendering its apparently trans-cultural nature problematic. All attempts to ground a philosophy or world-view in seemingly commonplace observations of the body or other natural phenomena have fallen foul of culture. Science can no more escape the prejudices of the society which has given it birth than can class. The essay that follows is an attempt to apply these observations to two culturally specific models of the body, and their relation to performance. In this discussion, the *biological* body, and its racial characteristics, will not be dealt with. Where such matters are studied, the research methodology usually predetermines the results.[7] Even when subjected to scientific investigation, the body remains inescapably *cultural*.

Theatre criticism has long been resistant to theory.[8] The new accent on physical performance as an answer to the stifling traditions of Naturalism represents the latest manifestation of this approach. By seeking refuge in

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7. See for example:
Adolph Reed Jr., Looking Backward, *The Nation*, 28/Nov./1994, pp.654-662.
Richard J. Herstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and class structure in American life*, (N.Y.: Free Press, 1994).
Susan Sperling, Beating A Dead Monkey, *The Nation*, 28/Nov./1994, pp.662-665.
Robert Right, *The Moral Animal*, (N.Y.: Pantheon, 1994).
J. Philippe Rushton, *Race, Evolution And Behaviour*, (Transaction, 1994).
Pat Shipman, *The Evolution Of Racism: Human differences and the use and abuse of science*, (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1994).

8.. Important exceptions to this rule include performance critics Richard Schechner and Patrice Pavis. See the special edition of *Antithesis*:
Antithesis 4.2. Thinking about performance thinking, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1991.

the body, many Australian theatre practitioners hope to avoid the pitfalls of politics or logocentric thinking. What is too easily forgotten is that the body offers no such escape. While Western approaches to performance have focused too strongly on psychological factors such as character motivation, physical action is inseparable from thought. The response to an overly cerebral and narrative conceptualisation of theatre should rather be to unite thought and action; to create a critical praxis in which the reassuring physicality of the body is balanced by a simultaneous analysis of its role and cultural origins. Such a union of theory and practice is impossible without a knowledge of the cultural specificity of ways of thinking about the body in performance, particularly in the case of Butoh and Suzuki technique.

In the last decade, Australian actors have begun to travel to Japan to acquire skills in physical theatre. Where young hopefuls used to be found at the Grotowski Laboratory in Poland,[9] they are now spending their time at Toga or Tokyo. Although Grotowski's method retains a strong appeal for contemporary Australian actors and directors, it now shares this exalted position with Suzuki technique and Butoh training. Yet, though this cross-Pacific exchange between Australia and Japan is commendable, the lack of a critical understanding of the cultural origins and functions of contemporary Japanese performance is of some concern. The aesthetics of Butoh and Tadashi Suzuki represent an intervention in the construction of the Japanese national body. Suzuki and the Butoh practitioners use the

9. On Grotowski's technique see:
Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards A Poor Theatre*, Eugenio Barba, ed., (London: Methuen, 1968), 1975 edn.

body in performance to critique the current state of Japanese culture. Their work is a ruralist response to urban alienation and post-war society. For these reasons, Australian actors approaching the body via such uniquely Japanese techniques may indeed be crossing the barrier of cultural difference, but not necessarily in a politically neutral way. East/West relations have constantly been marred by cultural appropriation and misrepresentation.[10] Even the visionary theatre practitioner Bertold Brecht misread Beijing Opera in order to justify his own concepts of theatre.[11] The Pacific is not an impassable barrier, but it is one that must be negotiated with caution. Butoh and Suzuki technique must not become a mysterious foreign spice thrown into Western theatre in order to give it a new and dynamic flavour. Rather, Japanese models of the body can become a self-conscious mirror of Western society and the violence it has inflicted on nations with different cultural backgrounds.

If the hyper-industrialisation the Japanese have experienced is to be the future of all developed nations, then the urban angst of Butoh and the ruralist retreat of Suzuki technique may also represent the future of Western cultural development. The body in performance should not be treated as an unproblematic, transparent device, but as a richly layered, opaque unit. In such a way, Japanese performance in Australia could take

10. For an example of East/West conflict generated by opposing models of the body, see:
David Arnold, Touching The Body: Perspectives on the Indian Plague, 1896-1900, in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ed.s, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, (N.Y.: Oxford U.P., 1988), pp.391-426.

11. See:
James R. Brandon, "A New World- Asian theatre in the West today", *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol.33 No.2, Summer, 1989, pp.30-34.
Bertold Brecht, "Alienation Effects In Chinese Acting", in Bertold Brecht, *Brecht On Theatre: The development of an aesthetic*, John Willett trans., (London: Methuen, 1957), 1964 edn., pp.91-99.

on a role equivalent to the Chinese banquet in Australian culture. Asian theatre, like Asian food, can become a part of the national cuisine, but it will always carry with it hints, flavours and rituals which identify its origin. Ultimately, Butoh and Suzuki technique can never become fully 'Australian', any more than *spaghetti marinara*.. They are all transplants which take root in our soil while connecting us to non-indigenous concepts of homeland. It is by means of such an alliance that Japanese performance can enter Australian culture. Through a better awareness of the national origins of Butoh and Suzuki technique, Western theatre practitioners, theorists and audience members can situate themselves in relation to these national theatrical styles. What follows is an account of the contextual, geographic and cultural status of Butoh and Suzuki technique in Japan. The body may exist 'beyond language', but it does not exist outside of culture. Only by recognising the cultural specificity of bodies can one hope to communicate through physical expression on the international stage, and thus facilitate the transfer of bodies across the Pacific.

II. SUZUKI TECHNIQUE

Tadashi Suzuki began directing plays at Waseda University in the late 1950s, and has since become internationally acclaimed.[12] His productions have toured Australia (most recently *The Chronicle Of Macbeth*, Playbox,

12. Yukihoro Goto, "The Theatrical Fusion Of Suzuki Tadashi", *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol.6, No.2, 1989, p.103.

3/1992),[13] Europe and America. His theatre may be characterised as a modern reinterpretation of the traditional Japanese Noh form in which the conventions of Noh are stripped down to a minimum. It is however primarily Suzuki's approach to the body, rather than to Noh, that ties him to Japanese culture.

Suzuki uses a specifically Japanese ruralist/traditionalist model of the body to create an acting method which is, paradoxically, transcendent and universally accessible. This can be observed not only in Suzuki's commentary on his work, but in his method of preparing the body for performance. It is also reflected in Suzuki's actual stage productions.

Suzuki's approach to the theatre rests upon the assumption that an actor draws his/her energy for internal focus and performance from the ground. The feet are therefore the key to acting.[14] Suzuki justifies his method through an examination of Japanese culture and theatre. Japan is in Suzuki's eyes a ruralist country, coming from an agricultural past.[15] Although this is an accurate description of many other societies, it is of particular significance for Japan. Most Japanese can trace back their village ancestry to less than four generations ago. Not only is the *furusato*

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13. See:
The Age, 16/2/1992, p.9.
The Age, 26/2/1992, p.14.
The Age, 4/March/1992, *Tempo* magazine, p.3.

14. For this and other aspects of Suzuki technique referred to in the article see:
Tadashi Suzuki, *Footwork,* (Tokyo: Parco, 1982), esp. pp.72-79.
---, "Culture Is The Body! The theory and practice of my method of training actors", in Various, *SCOT: Suzuki Company Of Toga,* [program of the 10th Toga International Arts Festival], (Tokyo: SCOT, 1992).
---, *The Way Of Acting: The theatre writings of Tadashi Suzuki*, J.Thomas Rimer trans., (N.Y.: Theatre Communications, 1987), pp.7-14.

15. Goto, pp.113-114.
David Tracey, "The Theatre Of Tadashi Suzuki", *The Imperial*, Spring, 1989.

(home village) a kind of mythic homeland, but it acts as a symbolic/geographic centre for concepts of the family, ancestor veneration, patron deities, and a host of other religious devotional systems.[16] The post-war urbanisation has created a weakening of these ties against which Suzuki and the Butoh dancers are reacting.[17]

Suzuki takes note of how traditional Japanese architecture (such as the crawl-way door) and furnishings (no chairs, low tables) bind the Japanese to their pre-modern, earthy heritage. The Japanese body is therefore characterised by bent legs and a close association with the ground. Thus Suzuki aims to mobilise the 'animal energy' stored in the Japanese national body.[18] Suzuki's performance style banishes the lazy simplicity of the urban body in order to create an energised actor.[19] He shares this concept

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16. See: Robert N. Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion- The cultural roots of modern Japan,* (London: MacMillan, 1985), esp. pp.xvi-xix.
Sokyo Ono, *Shinto: The kami way*, (Tokyo: Turtle, 1980).
Kiyomi Morioka, "Development Of Sociology Of Religion In Japan", in Kiyomi Morioka and William H. Newell, ed.s, *The Sociology Of Religion In Japan*, (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1968), pp.6-9.
Tokutarˆ Sakuri, "The Major Features And Characteristics Of Japanese Folk Beliefs", in Ibid., pp.13-20.
Fujio Ikado, "Trends And Problems Of New Religions: Religion in urban society", in Ibid., p.105.
Tadashi Fukutake, *Rural Society In Japan*, (Tokyo: Tokyo U.P., 1980), pp.60-70, 75.
---, *Japanese Rural Society,* Ronald P. Dore trans., (London: Oxford U.P., 1967), esp. pp.61-65.
17. See also: Tadashi Fukutake, *Rural Society In Japan*, pp.11-26, 39-58.
---, *Japanese Rural Society,* Dore trans., esp. pp.34-37.
---, *Japanese Society Today,* (Tokyo: Tokyo U.P., 1974), 1981 edn., pp.18-22, 48-58, 61-68.
Kiyomi Morioka, "Development Of Sociology Of Religion In Japan", p.11.
Ikado, pp.103-104.
18.. Suzuki himself believes that although Japanese culture reveals this connection with the ground more clearly than other national cultures, all performance is based on the animal energy of the lower body, irrespective of its origins.
19.. Ian Carruthers, "What Actors And Directors Do To 'Legitimate' Shakespeare: Suzuki's *Chronicle Of Macbeth* and Ellen Lauren's Lady Macbeth", in Philip Mead and Marion Campbell, ed.s, *Shakespeare's Books: Contemporary culture, politics and the persistence of empire*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Literary And Cultural Studies, 1993), pp.182-183.

with some of his Butoh compatriots. Isamu Ohsuka for example named his company *Byakko-Sha*, meaning 'White-tiger'. Ohsuka believes that all people have an animal inside them, a white tiger.[20] He aims to liberate this energy through dance. In addition Suzuki extends this principle of animal energy as the key to performance in the design elements of his plays. His productions are technically minimalist. By using little or no set, and simple lighting, the amount of 'modernist energy' used is kept to a minimum. The action of technology is limited, hence energies and images drawn from the physicality of the performers are accentuated.

Suzuki's reading of the common heritage of humanity as revealed in Japanese culture has also informed his selection of a geographic base for his group. Like several of the Butoh companies, SCOT (the Suzuki Company Of Toga) has moved away from the metropolis of Tokyo to a regional, agricultural base.[21] For the past 16 years the company has worked out of the small farming village of Toga. There they have built a simplified Noh stage and theatre complex in a series of disused farmhouses.[22]

Suzuki has also tapped into Japanese Shinto culture in his exposition of the sacred dimension of performance. Shintoism occupies a privileged

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20. Various, *Byakko-Sha: The world dance caravan through the continents*, [program of international tour], (1987), p.5.

21.. See: Bonnie Sue Stein, "Min Tanaka: Farmer/Dancer or Dancer/Farmer: an interview by Bonnie Sue Stein", *TDR: The Drama Review*, Vol. 30, No.20, 1986, p.150.

---, "Butoh-'20 years ago we were crazy, dirty and mad'", *TDR: The Drama Review,* Vol. 30, No.20, 1986, p.123.

Gregory Miller and Georgia Wallace-Crabbe, *Butoh And The Japanese*, [script for proposed SBS documentary], (Melbourne: Film Projects, 1989), pp. 12-15.

22. Goto, p.104.

Tracey.

Richard Moore, "A Feudal Lord Of Japanese Theatre", *Age*, 9/9/1989.

Tadashi Suzuki, *The Way Of Acting*, p.23.

position amongst other Japanese belief systems such as Zen Buddhism, Confucianism or Taoism.[23] Unlike the latter beliefs that had their genesis outside of Japan, Shintoism is of indigenous origin. Under Shinto theology Japan is unique in having *kami* (Shinto spirits or gods) on its shores and in its seas. In his commentaries on his work, Suzuki cites a well-known story from the Shinto creation cycle of how the first theatrical event occurred.[24] In this myth the *kami* Ameno-Uzumeno-Mikoto coaxes Amaterasu, the sun god, out of the latter's self-imposed exile by dancing on an over-turned bucket. Where the Butoh practitioners are keen to see a sexual, irreverent act, Suzuki emphasises the solemnity of the dancing deity. The *kami*'s ritualistic, stamping dance is likened to the opening of a Noh performance.[25] In Noh, the actor stamps on the ground in order to call the spirits before commencing the play.[26] Suzuki thus traces the derivations of the ruralist body in performance through Noh back to the mythic crucible of Japanese identity.[27] The theatre becomes a ritualistic, sacred space in which the forms of energy undervalued in modern society, and in modern Japanese society especially, are expressed.

This myth is quite revealing for it is also cited by Butoh dancers as a cultural precedent for their approach to physical theatre. In their

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23. See: Kiyomi Morioka, *Religion In Changing Japanese Society*, (Tokyo: Tokyo U.P., 1975), ch.2.
Sakurai, p.13.
H. Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture: A short history*, (Honolulu: Hawaii U.P., 1973), pp.9-12.
Bellah, p.53.

24. Tadashi Suzuki, "Culture Is The Body!".

25. Tadashi Suzuki, "Culture Is The Body!".
---, *Way Of Acting*, p.14.

26. See: Thomas Imoos and Fred Mayer, *Japanese Theatre*, Hugh Young trans., (N.Y.: Rizzoli, 1977), pp.33-36.

27. For a full account of the Shinto creation cycle see: Joseph M. Kitagawa, *On Understanding Japanese Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1987), pp.143-145.

interpretation, Ameno-Uzumeno-Mikoto exposes her genitalia to the other *kami* in an irreverent, wobbling dance. The other *kami* laugh at the sight of this, and Amaterasu is drawn out in order to see what they find so humorous. Where Suzuki cultivates a reverence for Japan's religious traditions, the Butoh companies (with the exception of *Sankai-Juku*) create 'holy obscenities' (see Fig.1). They are the 'Genets' and 'De Sades' of Japanese culture. Although Suzuki does utilise comedy, the character-types and bodily expression of his buffoons are largely based on those of Kyogen. For those unfamiliar with this genre, the comic characters of Akira Kurosawa's films provide a fair approximation. These figures of ridicule generally stand crouched-over and close to the ground, legs bent. They are masters of facial contortion, and are usually cowardly. Kyogen performances acted as interludes to accompany the deeply serious theatre of Noh, and their function is fundamentally the same in Suzuki's plays.[28]

Suzuki's preparation of the body for performance revolves around stamping and other exercises for the lower body (see Fig.2). A series of stamping, walking and stretching movements are carried out under the direction of a priest-like supervisor who wields authority (and a stick) in much the same manner as a Zen master.[29] After marching and stamping, the novices seat themselves on the ground while the master takes them through a series of difficult physical movements. The teacher kneels, stick in hand, and shouts a series of staccato phrases in Japanese. With each

28. On Kyogen and Noh see: Varley, pp.99-103.

29.. Glenn D'Cruz, "Zen And Noh", unpublished lecture at Murdoch University School Of Human Communication, p.89.

command, the students must instantly change position. The master's orders are accompanied by a tremendous blow in which the rod is struck against a mat, to which the actors must reply with a vocalised response.

In the process of stamping, the full force of the foot is used all the way down, causing energy to rebound from the ground through the spine and pelvis. The pelvis is kept loose in order to re-absorb the shocks, while the upper body is kept static through breath control. Ellen Lauren, who has worked with Suzuki for many years, explains:

> *All of the exercises are basically impossible. What Suzuki is asking you to do are movements that are not seen in daily life,...you need to stop all of that energy in the centre of the body...So you create a collision and try and control it, keeping a very strong outward focus at the same time...*[30]

Suzuki's actors are therefore highly energised, but this energy is largely held in reserve so as to generate a focused presence on stage.

As in Noh, Suzuki's actors stand facing forward, physically centred in their abdomen (see Fig.s 3 and 4).[31] Rather than interacting directly with those on stage, the eyes are focused on a distant point while the character impartially retells his/her life story.[32] Suzuki drew explicitly upon this aspect of Noh in devising the scripts for two of his major touring

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30. Carruthers, pp.182-183.

31.. Goto, pp.113-115.

32. Donald Keene, ed., *Twenty Plays Of The No Theatre*, (N.Y.: Columbia U.P., 1970), p.11. D'Cruz, pp.98-100.

shows, *The Tale Of Lear* (U.S.A., 1988)[33] and *The Chronicle Of Macbeth* (Australia, 1992). In both of these adaptations the lead male related the narrative of his life from a position of emotional distance. In this way both the Noh or Suzuki-trained actor rises above the concept of character, neither prohibiting nor depending upon identification with the character for performance. Therefore although Suzuki's theatre comes out of a specific interpretation of the Japanese situation, the denial of ego and/or dialogue (itself a trait of the Zen aesthetics of Noh)[34] universalises it. Moreover Suzuki's love of Shakespearian and Classical Greek scripts makes his productions accessible to both Japanese and non-Japanese audiences. Nevertheless the theatrical reception of Suzuki's work is *deepened* by an acquaintance with Japanese culture and history.

Suzuki's training methodology is therefore culturally and geographically specific, while his productions are largely transcendent of their origins. The universality of Suzuki-technique in performance is dependent upon the complete mastery and adoption of a *Japanese* model of the body. It is this paradox that brought the somewhat strained quality to the Playbox Theatre Company's production of *Chronicle Of Macbeth*.. The main obstacle to the transmission of Suzuki technique across the Pacific remains the

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33. See: Joe Brown, "*Lear*; Subtle and Strange", *Washington Post*, 8/July/1988.
"Suzuki's *Tale Of Lear* Is A Masterpiece", *Boston Globe*, May/1988.
Robert Brustein, "Robert Brustein On Theatre", *New Republic*, 6/June/1988.
Edwin Wilson, "A Crosscultural *Lear*", *Wall Street Journal*, May/1988.
Malcolm L. Johnson, "Adaption Of *Lear* Compelling", *The Hartford Courant*, May/1988.
Hap Erstein, "A *Lear* Of Emotions, Not Words", *Washington Times*, 8/July/1988.
Damien Jacques, "Suzuki's *Lear* Had A Powerful Impact", *Milwaukee Journal*, 29/2/1988.
Michael Killian, "Lean *Lear*", *Chicago Tribune*, 1988.
Various, *SCOT: Suzuki Company Of Toga*, program.

34. See also: Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Essentials Of Zen Buddhism*, (N.Y.: E.P.Dutton, 1962), p.441.

lack of a tradition of strong affiliation to a single, rigorous school of aesthetic discipline for the Western actor.[35] Western performers tend to be stylistic dilettantes, and do not respond well to the pseudo-monastic discipline of Suzuki and Butoh technique.

III. THE HISTORY AND FORM OF BUTOH TECHNIQUE

Unlike Suzuki's theatre, the Butoh dancers constitute a diverse range of practitioners who draw equally upon many sources for inspiration, including Kabuki, Noh and folk festivals.[36] It is therefore perhaps best to outline their stylistic qualities through an account of the historical origins of the different Butoh companies.

Butoh has been described as an anarchic scream against post-World War II Japan.[37] After the war, the industrialisation and urbanisation of Japan reached a fever-pitch. Japan came close to revolution in 1959 when the government renewed the U.S./Japan Defence Treaty, which guaranteed the presence of U.S. bases in Japan. This violated anti-military clauses in the post-war constitution. Many people died in the demonstrations and retaliations that followed. Thus the Butoh style was developed as a response to the increasingly alienating nature of the urban, materialist

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35footnote *. Norman Price, taped interview with Tadashi Suzuki conducted at the Playbox Workshops, 3/10/1991. Possession of Norman Price.

Tony Chapman, interview with Peter Curtin conducted as part of Tony Chapman and Ziyin Wang, *"One Step On A Journey": Tadashi Suzuki In Australia*, [SBS documentary], (Melbourne: SBS, 1990).

Also: Brandon, pp.35-37, 44-46.

36. Jean Viala and Nourit Masson-Sekine, ed.s, *Butoh: Shades of darkness*, (Tokyo: Shufunotomo, 1991), p.15.

37.. Stein, "Butoh-'20 years ago we were crazy, dirty and mad'", p.115.

environment, the violent return of rightist politics, and the legacy of Hiroshima.[38] The combination of these factors lead many Japanese artists to believe that something had gone fundamentally wrong with the process of post-war reconstruction. In the face of this situation, a new provocative dance technique was created for the Japanese body. In Butoh, androgyny and sexual confusion become equivalent to social disorder in a critique of modern identity.[39] Like Suzuki, the Butoh practitioners intervene in the construction of the Japanese national body and Japanese identity, returning to Japan's agricultural roots.

Butoh began as a simplistic, improvised dance form practised by three men: Tatsumi Hijikata, Kazuo Ohno and Min Tanaka. Hijikata, the chief theoretician of the trio, claimed that Japanese have short limbs and big heads, giving them a low centre of gravity.[40] This binds the Japanese physically to their agricultural past, and the emotions that accompany a close connection to the earth. The Japanese psyche is therefore characterised by darkness and pain, which is physically centred in the lower body. Japanese find their balance on twisted legs, and their body is fundamentally chaotic. Thus the Japanese soul, and the body in which it is located, is inherently unsuited to the ballet which dominated Japanese dance in the late 1950s and mid 1960s. The three Butoh masters reacted by developing a chaotic, tortured dance in keeping with the chaos of post-war Japanese identity.

Hijikata's first major Butoh performance was *Forbidden Colours*. The

38. Viki Sanders, "Dancing The Dark Soul Of Japan: An aesthetic analysis of *buto*", *Asian Theatre Journal*, Vol.5, No.2, 1988, p.156.
39. Viala, p.17.
40. Ibid., pp.188-189.

dance was based on the novel by Yukio Mishima set in the world of Tokyo's gay beat-sex-scene. These early improvised Butoh pieces were often based on ideas drawn from costumes or other objects.[41] In a slightly later, equally infamous production, *Nikutai No Hanran* [*Rebellion Of The Flesh*], Hijikata held a chicken between his naked thighs as he writhed in pain (see Fig.5).[42] During much of the piece Hijikata wore an oversized, golden phallus, a prop which has returned in many later Butoh performances (see for example Fig.1).[43] *Nikutai No Hanran* culminated in the death of the rooster. Kazuo Ohno's 'dance for a dead body', *Admiring La Argentina*, was inspired by the tour of the Spanish dancer La Argentina, and the costume she wore (see Fig.6).* Ohno did not start dancing until he was in his fifties, and so used his emaciated physique, and deeply wrinkled, veined limbs to give his dance a dark, teetering quality.[44] For the Butoh dancer, straight legs are equivalent to the body equipped with reason.[45] If the dancer can stand upright, s/he can create the pretence of escaping the pull of the earth, and so behave rationally. According to the Butoh practitioners, such an attitude would be a betrayal of the physical and psychic heritage of the Japanese people. The twisted posture of the Butoh dancer is inextricably linked to the darkness of the ground, and the emotions it is identified with. Bent legs represent that which cannot be expressed in words, and so is the subject of the Japanese dancer. A Butoh dancer is therefore a body without rational language. This is realised through a rehearsal process in

41. Stein, "Butoh-'20 years ago we were crazy, dirty and mad'", p.118.
42. Ibid., p.115.
43. Bonnie Sue Stein, *Butoh: Body on the edge of crisis*, [BBC documentary], (London: Michael Blackwood Productions, 1990).
44. Miller and Wallace-Crabbe, p.3.
45. Stein, *Butoh: Body on the edge of crisis*.

which the dancer brings to the surface inchoate memories of pain.[46] The Butoh performer then gives expression to such emotions in performance. Through these techniques Hijikata, Ohno and Tanaka gave rise to a voiceless cry against the state of post-war Japan.

Butoh practitioners therefore both explore and protest those aspects of Japanese culture which were repressed in the years following the Allied Occupation of Japan. The weak Asian body is celebrated in the frail movements of Kazuo Ohno, or the frightening thinness of the dancers in *Sankai-Juku*.. The linguistic dispossession of the Japanese by the cultural dominance of the West is turned into *physical* opposition through the non-verbal expression of Butoh. Grotesque images and bodily deformations abound in Butoh performance, as reminders of the horrors of Hiroshima, or the effects of mercury poisoning upon the Japanese fishing communities. Sexual taboos both Western and Eastern are flaunted by the homo-eroticism and sadism of Butoh performance. It was this aspect of their work that drew them to Yukio Mishima,[47] and united them in the post-war arts movement of Japan.

The minimalistic work of Hijikata, Ohno and Tanaka has since been enlarged upon by a number of companies. Though all of these more recent groups trace their ancestry back to the three Butoh masters, most now choreograph their productions to differing degrees.[48] The old men of Butoh largely dismiss their successors as the creators of 'theatre' rather than

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46. Hijikata's words again, cited in: Viala, p.189.

47. Prue Moodie, "The Changing Face Of Butoh", *Dance Australia*, No.29, 1987, p.48.

48. Henry Scott-Stokes, *The Life And Death Of Yukio Mishima*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 1985 edn., p.52.

'dance'.[49] Although the later companies reflect an increasing concern with the visual spectacle generated in performance, they retain Hijikata's model of the body.

The first company of this type to appear was Akaji Maro's *Dai-Rakuda-Kan.*[50] A few years later Isamu Ohsuka left Maro to found *Byakko-Sha*.[51] Maro's and Ohsuka's aesthetic is, unlike that of their predecessors, technically expansive. All the tools of the contemporary performer are brought to bear in the form of lighting effects, set, costume, props and deafeningly loud music in order to enrich the spectacle. The body is manipulated through the extra-physical resources of costume, make-up and the various use of hair (shaved, matted, tied, loose). While the body remains central to performance, its expression is amplified and reified through these means. Bodies and technology clash in an anarchic production-style. *Byakko-Sha* also shares with Suzuki and the Butoh luminaries an almost monastic respect for the master. Under Ohsuka's guidance, the members of *Byakko-Sha* live, shop and cook communally, forging them into a monastic/aesthetic community united behind the vision of the master.[52]

The company that launched Butoh as an international phenomenon is *Sankai-Juku* (see Fig.7).[53] Like *Byakko-Sha*, *Sankai-Juku* was formed by an

49. Ibid., pp.48-51.

50.. Stein, "Min Tanaka", p.147.
Norman Price, taped interview with Akaji Maro conducted at the Melbourne State Theatre, 28/9/1991. Possession of Norman Price.

51. Moodie, pp.48-49.

52. Various, *Byakko-Sha: The world dance caravan through the continents*, p.5.

53footnote *. Stein, "Butoh-'20 years ago we were crazy, dirty and mad'", p.123.
Stein, *Butoh: Body on the edge of crisis*.
Also: Video record of the *Byakko-Sha* photography session conducted at Hanging Rock, Victoria, 1987. Possession of Norman Price.

ex-member of *Dai-Rakuda-Kan,* Ushio Amagatsu.[54] It was this Paris-based collective that established many of the so-called 'trademarks' of Butoh performance: white rice-flour make-up, shaven heads, near nakedness and 'glacial pacing'.[55] *Sankai-Juku*'s physical presentation of the body is designed to strip the dancer of gender and all other signs of individuality, creating a blank page upon which the performance is inscribed.[56] Where *Byakko-Sha* can shift from the contorted orgy of a woman equipped with a huge phallus to static contemplation over a pile of rice, the men of *Sankai-Juku* will remain engrossed over the possibilities of an egg for up to 15 minutes. Structurally, Maro and Ohsuka have more in common with the dynamic variation of a Kabuki melodrama or German Expressionism, than with the work of Amagatsu. The deep, lyrical angst of *Sankai-Juku* echoes the mood of Japanese Noh Theatre and Noh's structural analogues in the Western tradition, such as the plays of Samuel Beckett. For *Sankai-Juku* bodily pain comes to represent mental anguish. All three companies however are united by the driving force of the pain within Japanese cultural memory and the energies of the lower body.

IV. CROSSING THE PACIFIC

Both Tadashi Suzuki and the Butoh dancers intervene in the construction of the Japanese body and Japanese identity against the alienating influence of the contemporary urban environment. In returning to the land for a

54. Moodie, pp.50-51.

55. Stein, "Butoh-'20 years ago we were crazy, dirty and mad'", p.120.

56. Bruce Keller, "*Kinan Shonen* [a review]", *New Theatre Australia*, May/June, 1989, p.20. Sanders, p.161.

sense of place and as a site for the generation of energy, Suzuki enables the actor to reach a state of grace and so transcend national boundaries in performance. Nevertheless, his work and methodology remains rooted in the mountain farmlands of Toga. By re-connecting Japan to its rural heritage, the Butoh practitioners on the other hand are trying to compel the Japanese to come to terms with the dark side of their unique culture.[57] The tormented dance of the Butoh performer, be it in the explosive irreverence of *Dai-Rakuda-Kan* or the measured religiosity of *Sankai-Juku*, cannot transcend the Japanese experience. Nor is it intended to.[58] *Sankai-Juku* and the other Butoh practitioners in fact sell themselves internationally on the basis of their Japanese identity. The Butoh dancers do not wish to rise above their origins, merely to reinterpret them.

Suzuki technique and Butoh training cannot therefore be fully understood without reference to their geographic and cultural provenance. If one is to take Japanese performance across the Pacific and into the global village one must be aware of the cultural myths that gave birth to that performance. Australian actors must reinterpret these origins and invent their *own* myths. Contemporary Japanese theatre and dance owes much to Western practices. Eastern theatre has in turn become a legitimate part of the Western tradition in the work of Artaud and Brecht. Artaud drew his concept of theatre as a ritual with meaning *in itself* by observing

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57. Norman Price and Suzanne Olb, "Sankai-Juku: dance across the universe", *New Theatre Australia*, May/June, 1989, p.21.

58. Stein, "Butoh-'20 years ago we were crazy, dirty and mad'", pp.111, 115.

traditional Balinese performance.[59] Brecht's formulation of Epic Theatre in turn owes much to his analysis of Beijing Opera.[60] Though neither critic correctly interpreted these Eastern sources, they did not attempt to *reproduce* the foreign theatre they had seen.[61] Asian performance served only as a starting point for a critical evaluation of the Western tradition. With a more informed understanding of Eastern theatre however an even more harmonious union could be formed. Butoh and the theatre of Tadashi Suzuki could act as the inspiration for a reformulation of contemporary Western performance without such acts of intentional misreading. Butoh and Suzuki technique critique the modern condition, and it is here that their cross-cultural appeal lies. In coming to understand Butoh and Suzuki technique, Australian theatre practitioners and audiences will hopefully come to know more of their Pacific neighbours. These Eastern styles of theatre can neither be imported wholesale into Australia, nor adopted uncritically in a piecemeal fashion. We must find the cultural analogues of the Japanese experience in Australian culture, and use these as a starting point for pan-Pacific exchange. Our aim should be to produce a theatre which is neither a culturally eviscerated version of Japanese performance, nor should we attempt to create a theatrical experience which transcends culture. Both such projects are flawed. Instead we must try to produce work which is both Japanese *and* Australian.

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59. See for example the program notes for *Dai-Rakuda-Kan*'s Melbourne performance, esp.: Anna Kisselgoff, "Visionary Grotesques Of Japanese Modern Dance" reproduced in *Dai-Rakuda-Kan: "A Tale Of The Supernatural Sea-Dappled Horse"*, program for the Melbourne International Festival, 9/1991.

60. Antonin Artaud, *The Theater And Its Double*, Mary Caroline Richards trans., (N.Y.: Grove And Weidenfeld, 1958), esp. pp.53-73.

61. Brecht, pp.91-99.

Such a theatrical project cannot be undertaken lightly. Where Australians have taken Japanese performance across the Pacific, their efforts have been incomplete. For the Japanese at Toga, or Min Tanakas farm, Butoh and the theatre of Suzuki represents their calling in life. These are techniques which must be learned for years, and complete mastery of such processes may forever be beyond the reach of the student. To become familiar with Japanese performance, one must submit to a master for many years. U.S.-born Ellen Laurens excellent relationship with *sensei* Suzuki proves that this is not beyond the abilities of the Western performer. It is simply a question of will. Culture may have to be learned slowly, but with patience, *gaijin* can come to know the Japanese as well as they have come to know us.

'Australian Butoh' or 'Australian Suzuki-Technique' are therefore logical and spatial contradictions. Bodies cannot travel the oceans with any less difficulty than words. Both exist within culture, and are ideological constructions. East/West relations have been constantly marred by misunderstanding and cultural misappropriation.[62] Only through a structural understanding of the complexities of cultural difference can that difference cease to be an obstacle to cultural exchange. If Australian performers can truly come to grips with the *Japaneseness* of their fellow theatre-practitioners, the Pacific may cease to act as a boundary and instead serve as a highway.

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62. Brandon, pp.30-34.