

In Memory

Kazuo Ohno
1906–2010

I first saw Kazuo Ohno perform in Tokyo in 1985, when he was nearly 79 years old. I was in Japan that summer to conduct research for an anthology of contemporary Japanese plays. The playwright/director Shōgo Ohta (1939–2009) invited me to a gala evening at his T2 Studio headlined by his company, Tenkei Gekijō (Transformation Theatre), and Kazuo Ohno performing his signature piece, *Ra Arubenchina Sbô* (Admiring La Argentina).

I had known of Ohno for several years and of his pivotal partnership with Tatsumi Hijikata from 1954 to develop what they called *butoh*, meaning “dance” (a critic later coined the term *ankoku butoh*, or “Dance of Utter Darkness”), but I was not sure what to expect. Then this elderly gentleman awkwardly shuffled onstage, wearing a smock-like dress and haywire hair adorned with an artificial flower. His face, arms, and legs were painted white, his movements slow and creaky, his hands claw-like, his mouth now and again in a silent Edvard Munch scream. It crossed my mind that this grotesque creature must be the denizen of some asylum or maybe, given otherworldly presences in traditional Japanese performance, a ghost of someone driven mad by untold tragedy. Suddenly, he fell to the stage. Was it part of the performance? It was frightfully hot and humid that July evening and sweat was streaking his white body paint. Then, with remarkable agility, he sprang up without a hitch in rhythm. I was impressed more at that moment with what remained of a gifted athlete, which Ohno had been in his younger days, than with the aesthetics of his dance.

Yet, I couldn’t stop thinking about what I had seen. Here was the progenitor of *butoh* who had trained or otherwise influenced hundreds of dancers, and not only in Japan. I had seen performances by several of Ohno’s disciples, including Ushio Amagatsu (leader of the Paris-based



Figure 1. Kazuo Ohno performing *Suiren* (Water Lilies) at the Asia Society in New York City, 28–30 June 1988. (Photo by Ronit Leora)

troupe Sankai Juku), Min Tanaka, and the American Maureen Fleming, who, in part because they were younger and also athletic (Tanaka, for example, was on Japan's 1964 Olympic basketball team), rendered for me performances far more appealing than Ohno's, at his advanced age, possibly could.

Or so I initially thought. With the tangle of thoughts about Ohno's performance swirling in my head, it suddenly struck me that one should never do anything so hasty as to discount a performer's context. Ohno was, after all, Japanese. Traditional Japanese performance, as with *gagaku* (court music and dance) or *noh*, is invariably slow and stylized. I recall my students years ago complaining that, with such forms, "nothing happens." Yet, as the French director Jean-Louis Barrault discovered when he first encountered *noh* in 1960, if one did not pay close attention at every moment, suddenly so much was happening that one could easily lose the thread. And Paul Claudel, an accomplished playwright who was French Ambassador to Japan in the early 1920s, concluded that in *noh* it was not just an event that happened; rather, he wrote, "someone happened."

Although Ohno was not trained in *noh* movement, wasn't he fully within this Japanese ethos? Wasn't he creating a character materializing—"happening"—right there in front of us? And, later, as Ohno's rhythms began to filter through my consciousness, it became obvious that each moment of his performance was turned in on itself, crystallizing an intensely felt kairotic moment beyond mundane time, brimming with possibilities.

So different was Ohno's style of movement that I at first discerned few clues as to what else might be at work. He was on the ground a lot, not soaring and leaping—as often happened in Western ballet or in the kind of dance pioneered by Isadora Duncan. I thought of the contrast between Western churches, bathed in light, steeples reaching for the heavens, and Japanese temples, casting shadows, roofs low-slung and of the earth; the one conducive to looking upward and outward, the other to looking downward and inward.

It made sense that this grotesque creature moving in front of me would be looking inward. He/she appeared about to die. But this was far from the darkly brooding intensity of Min Tanaka. "Dance of Utter Darkness," I thought, could not possibly explain the totality of what Ohno was doing. Even if Ohno were embodying someone in the throes of death, he was also suggesting that death precedes life—an idea he corroborated in a conversation three years later at the Asia Society in New York. His movements didn't strike me as dark and brooding but as seeking, exploring, feeling out. This surely signaled a glimmer of light, of hope.

While death may precede life, the elderly Ohno, likely with visions of death, was showing us the raw challenge of discovering for the first time what it meant to be human, to move this or that way, to extend this or that appendage. Similarly, the configuration of his face and mouth into silent screams was showing the effort that pre-humans likely experienced prior to the development of human speech. Ohno was rendering inchoate human movement and human speech; his presence onstage was revealing the sheer wonderment, even if tinged with terror and pain, of humans at discovering who and what they are.

Still, something was incongruous. I knew that Ohno and Hijikata had vowed to distance themselves from the pervasive Western influence then inundating modern dance in Japan. Oddly enough, as Ohno has said, his life-changing experience was seeing the Spanish flamenco dancer Antonia Mercé y Luque, known as "La Argentina," in Tokyo in 1929. In the 1930s, Ohno worked with Takaya Eguchi and his wife Miya Misao, who had studied *neue tanz* with Mary Wigman in Germany. In 1934, Ohno saw a performance by the touring German Expressionist dancer Harald Kreutzberg, a Wigman disciple. In addition, with the exception of a few strains of Tsugaru shamisen music in some of Ohno's performances, such as *Tendô Chidô (The Way of Heaven, the Way of Earth; 1995)*, all the music is Western: Schubert, Liszt, Dvorak, Piazzolla, and even Elvis Presley.

Is it possible to create a wholly new Japanese dance form that grows, in part, out of Western influence and is fully attended by Western music? This apparent incongruity may be irrelevant to a purely aesthetic appreciation of Ohno's work; for me, it added to the mystery of his appeal. His life spans the volatile 20th century, when Japan, after more than two-and-a-half centuries of isolation, entered the world stage and sought its identity as it interacted with other nations. It occurred to me on seeing Ohno dance that the human challenge he was staging—an old man/woman facing death—perfectly reflected the strains and agonies of Japan's transition from seclusion to interaction.

Many observers source Ohno's particular vocabulary of movement in the ashes of World War II. That may be partially true and certainly could account for the "darkness" some find in his stage work, but the grander context of his effort, emerging from the primal mists hovering over the time before humans became self-conscious strikes me as far more interesting and, ultimately, brighter and more positive. Death is immanent and precedes life, he is showing us, and breaking through stolid, centuries-old barriers in human movement and speech to forge entirely new frontiers can generate terror and pain; at the very least, it can be vastly unsettling to become unmoored from traditional verities to be buffeted about on uncharted seas. Ohno was, in this sense, an archetypal dancer in extremis. Yet, isn't the breakthrough its own reward? Does it not potentially pass along to newly burgeoning life the multiple learnings and experiences gleaned in pre-death? How glorious to inhabit such a timeless moment. That is what Kazuo Ohno has allowed us to do.

A brief coda: Ohno is quite possibly the most magnanimous person I have ever known. My theatre colleague Cody Poulton has referred to him as "the closest thing to a saint I ever met." Another colleague Yoshiko Fukushima recalled that Ohno would go to the kindergarten run by a friend and dance for the children's graduation ceremony. Once I ran into Ohno by chance at a performance in Tokyo by Masaki Iwana, perhaps the leading *butoh* dancer in Japan today. The great man, then in his middle 80s, was patiently waiting in line with everybody else. Whenever I spoke with him, it was as if I were his most important concern. He never once appeared short-tempered, never bridled at my uninformed questions, never put on airs like many great performers. Those who studied under him unanimously cite his teaching style as warm and gentle. Maureen Fleming remembers him going out himself to get lunch for his students. Eating one such lunch with Maureen, he gave her this pithy advice, which remains with her to this day: "First breathe, then move!"

—*John K. Gillespie*