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Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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OIKAWA HIRONOBU

Bringing Decroux and Artaud into Japanese dance practices

Yoshida Yukihiro (translated by Bruce Baird)

Oikawa Hironobu is a multidisciplinary artist with experiences in ballet, theater, and mime with whom Ohno Kazuo and Ohno Yoshito and Hijikata Tatsumi worked during the 1960s. In particular, Oikawa's mime teachings and perhaps more importantly his unique theories of Artaudian embodiment provide intriguing glimpses into little discussed physical influences that were circulating at the time butoh was being developed.

Oikawa was born in 1925 in Aomori prefecture, Hachinohe, to a family of physicians. When he went to Tokyo at the age of 19, he studied medicine at Juntendo University. He learned anatomy, Goethe's morphology, and Haeckel's theory of evolution. These experiences endowed him with expertise about anatomy and medicine. Diagrams and drawings of the human body appear often in Oikawa's sketches, and from them we can surmise that his early medical studies were an important part of his development.

After World War II, Oikawa began to study humanities, and enrolled in French courses at Gakushuin. There he studied with Miyake Noriyoshi, and one of the leading lights in Moliere research in Japan, Suzuki Rikie. Miyake was to later assist him in going to France, and Suzuki introduced him to the latest currents of French theater. He participated in experimental theater performances and played the leading role in a Tokyo University classroom production of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*.

In order to focus on his theater studies, Oikawa transferred to the Stage Arts School (Butai Geijutsu Gakuin). There he studied with such luminaries as Murayama Tomoyoshi, Okakura Shiro, Hijikata Yoshi, Yamamoto Yasuhide, Ito Michio, and Akita Ujaku. After this study, Oikawa established the Bread Society Theater Troupe (which was unrelated to the late Meiji troupe of the same name). Later, he debuted as a ballet dancer for the Kaitani Ballet Company, and later still joined the Komaki Ballet Troupe. Fearful that the academic side of his experience going to waste, he transferred back to the Gakushuin University philosophy department, where he studied philosophy and religion.

Eventually, he studied in France from 1954 to 1956. He gained admission to the ballet school, Paris Conservatoire de Léo Staats (teacher of Bejart), but at the same time, he intended to study western mime and theatre, and also had the vague hope of looking for traces of Artaud. In the mornings, he studied ballet; in the afternoon, he went to Ecole de Movement of Etienne Decroux, teacher of Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau. Nights were entirely devoted to going to the theater, where he saw Brecht, Barrault, Villar, Comedie Francaise, Odeon, and

Italian theater. Late at night he voraciously read whatever he could get his hands on. Decroux was apparently impressed by the fact that someone had come from Japan to study with him, but Oikawa was bewildered by Decroux's analysis of purely geometrical movements that were so different from the symbolic expression of Marcel Marceau. The acting techniques of Delsarte were also added into the mix. Ballet at the conservatory was difficult. He had to overcome the limits of his body, and train and refine his technique, and he initially felt reluctant to have to dance in front of the other dancers. But for some reason, whenever he would do a solo in front of Decroux, he would be praised, which made him all the more bewildered.

One day while sitting at a coffee shop in the Latin Quarter, he felt a vague dissatisfaction. What came to his mind was everyday human movements and Japanese folk art. While turning these over in his mind, he realized that he was already mentally making preparations to go back home. At last he discovered his path. As he recalls,

From the beginning, didn't I come here to seek the traces of Artaud? However, Artaud had already died, and the people in Paris had long ago forgotten him. Only a woman poet from Marseille spoke of Artaud as if he was alive. So that was it, he was still alive! And he was clearly showing me the way to stand between East and West. I made up my mind right then and there. Artaud had seen futurity in the meridians and acupuncture points of Daoism. He was suddenly shown the 'great teachings' of the triangle of breathing, muscles, and high regard for the cavities of the body and the cross that controls the body.

Oikawa 2014

So, Oikawa left France and returned to Japan.

After returning to Japan, Oikawa was active in many genres, including ballet, mime, theater, performance, and fashion. After an initial period in the prewar era of being overshadowed by classical Japanese dance and modern dance, ballet experienced a boom after the war. Oikawa was among the young dancers who broke away from the prewar generation of ballet teachers to pursue new currents in ballet (influenced in part by the Bolshoi Ballet and Balanchine), as part of a movement retroactively called the Creative Ballet Movement. With Hayashi Yoko, he created Ballet Tokyo, where two of his students were Horiuchi Kan and Ohno Yoshito. During this time, Oikawa studied tai chi, yoga, and facial expressiveness from the anthropologist Yamazaki Kiyoshi. From Yamazaki, Oikawa concluded that the face is a window into everyday psychology, in which he could see the depths of the human heart. Personality analysis and the world of unconscious also lay there. At that time, there was also a yearly conference of folk arts at the Nihon Seinenkan. Oikawa would attend and study Japanese folk arts. At the same time, he was infatuated with comparing daily actions and stage techniques.

At the time, Oikawa was one of the few people who could teach the Decroux system in Japan. In 1960, he started the Japan Mime Research Lab and Mime Studio with Ashihara Eiryō, and the modernologist Yoshida Kenkichi. Ohno Yoshito, Kasai Akira, and Ishii Mitsutaka studied pantomime with him, as well as Hijikata Tatsumi. Before *Forbidden Colors*, Oikawa had taught Yoshito mime gestures. About Hijikata, Oikawa says that "I didn't teach him ballet directly, but did teach ballet to the Unique Ballet group, and he appeared in the First Ballet Tokyo performance" (Oikawa August 19, 2015). Jean Niveau (Oota Junzo) was another student. Also the younger dancer Yoneyama Mamako who was to be known later for her mime, and also Zushi Akiko who later went to Brazil. When Marcel Marceau first visited Japan, he came to the Mime Studio, where he met Ohno Yoshito. They also performed a series of experimental ballets in the project [Amorous] Adventure Society.

In 1961, they did a series of three performances, called Mime Series Recitals, and then a show called Ballet Plus Mime. They also performed an experimental ballet based on the poetry of French poet Rimbaud's "Flower" (from *Les Illuminations*). Later through the 1960s, the Mimo Sapiens performances delighted spectators including Donald Richie, Mishima Yukio, Hijikata, Domoto Masaki, and the members of Tenjo Sajiki. In one of the Mimo Sapiens performances, they did a *Hamlet* with Oikawa in the leading role and Ohno Yoshito as Ophelia, and a rock band as accompaniment.

Eventually Oikawa began to consider leaving the world of ballet and mime. He writes,

I threw away the mime and ballet I had learned in Paris. The only thing left was the Artaudan way of looking at the body that I got from Barrault. I got it from Barrault, because this was something Barrault got directly from Artaud that Artaud didn't write in his book. It was a goal of mine to understand Artaud's thought, not through words, or concepts, but through his bodily techniques such as breathing, and his way of talking, and through his hints, and connect what he was searching for with eastern bodily methods. For this reason, I established the Artaud-kan (Maison d'Artaud) in 1968.

Oikawa 2008, section 6

The ideas of Artaud had entered Japan from France early in the postwar era, and even today, there are people researching him from various angles. But Oikawa was not just active in the western forms of theater such as ballet and mime, he also made contributions to theater, film, performance, fashion, thought, and criticism.

According to Oikawa, in order to interpret Artaud, Barrault produced the triangles in Figure 15.1.¹ These three symbolic elements correspond to whether the performer breathes in, breathes out, or holds the breath, or rather to whether the performer puts power into the muscle, takes power out of the muscles [relaxes the muscles], or retains power in the middle. Each of these compares to masculine, feminine, and neuter/intersex, or to the three primary colors of blue, red, and yellow. Just as one can create green by mixing yellow and blue, by combining and overlapping one can transform into an infinite number of colors (Barrault 1951, 57).

Barrault explained the ideas of Artaud and put them into practice in his postwar theater. Oikawa took notice of these same passages of Artaud and constructed his bodily expression on them. His guiding principle was the analysis of Artaud's triangle reproduced in "Affective Athleticism," and Barrault's discourse on it. If we looked at this from today's perspective, we must recognize that Oikawa was a groundbreaker in Artaud research in Japan. And an experimenter on the basis of that research.

Based on Artaud's interest in Eastern bodily methods, Oikawa began to research qigong and tai chi. He encountered the 99 Form of tai chi in Taiwan and studied tai chi with Wang Shujin.

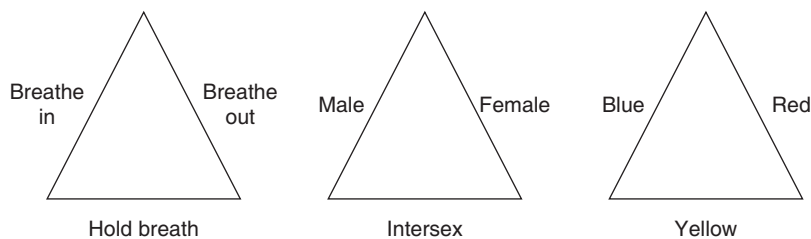


Figure 15.1 Oikawa's interpretation of Barrault's triangles.

Later Oikawa studied Yoga, and qigong. He also did ten years of Zen with the abbot Ota Dokan of the Seishoji temple. More than that, he experimented with Artaud's view of the body and presented works to the public. He writes,

the core of my own method called the Artaud System is in performance, and dance and theater are annexed to this. During the 1980s and 1990s I nurtured playwrights, dancers and other performance artists, but the Artaud System is a philosophy of performance.

Oikawa August 19, 2015

Then in 1968, the Maison d'Artaud was established. The Ohnos, Hijikata, Kasai, and others participated in these performances, and Oikawa claims that the butoh artists honed their skills through these performances. According to Oikawa, Hijikata and the others did not intentionally start to talk about Artaud, but Hijikata apparently told Oikawa in conversation that he was interested in Artaud. Hijikata said, "It's great that you have an interest in Artaud, I have an interest in the inner body" (Oikawa April 23, 2015). Oikawa kept piling up interactions with the Ohnos, as if he had particularly good relationships with them. As time passed, Oikawa came to think about his own theories through Ohno. As for the Ohnos, they kept on interacting with him while creating butoh. You can understand why Sylviane Pagès says that one of the elements in the background of the reception of butoh in France was the background of mime (Pagès 2009 and 2015, 4–41, 281–390 and 9–21).

Stephen Barber says that Oikawa made the provocative claim that Hijikata stole butoh from Oikawa (Barber 2005, 28). Hijikata happens to have addressed Oikawa in 1987 essay, "Monsieur Oikawa and Me" (Hijikata 1987). From the title you can see you that Hijikata is treating Oikawa as something Western (exotic) and noble. He sums up Oikawa's artistic world and his way of doing things, and sublimates them in his own language. He details their love-hate relationship, and even if the essay could be taken quite critically, Hijikata maintains his distance and appraises the work of Oikawa. At the same time, he writes about the reasons why he did not have much interest in Oikawa's world and he is sarcastic about those who are swayed by Oikawa. In the end, Hijikata says, "I think I will make use of this person" (Hijikata 1987, 329). In Hijikata's characteristically strange and convoluted language, this is probably as close as one can expect to an acknowledgment of the debt Hijikata owes to Oikawa. Hijikata also wrote an essay about Artaud, "Artaud's Slipper," in which he aggregates Artaud's life into the moments before his death (Hijikata 2005). Here is the record of what Hijikata sensed in Artaud, which differed from the interpretation of Oikawa. Hijikata had such a reputation that it is not surprising that it was said of him that he stole Oikawa's ideas. And he may certainly owe a not fully acknowledged debt to him, but it is a fact that he did not rely on solely Oikawa's thought, but formed his own original philosophy of the body, and produced and influenced those around himself through his own ideas.

In the end, the connection between Oikawa and butoh remains tentative but undeniable. Many of the early artists spent time studying directly or indirectly with Oikawa, and his introduction to Japan of the mime of Decroux and the ideas of Artaud contributed to the artistic ferment of 1960s Japan. Furthermore, the existence of these same two elements within the fiber of butoh must have contributed to the enthusiastic reception of butoh overseas in the 1970s and 1980s.

Note

1 Editors' note: Compare these three triangles with Barrault's five triangles in Jean-Louis Barrault, *Reflections on the Theater* (London: Hyperion, 1951), 58.

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