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THE CONCEPT OF BUTOH IN ITALY

From Ohno Kazuo to Kasai Akira

Maria Pia D'Orazi

Butoh in Italy has passed through three stages since it was first introduced to the country in 1980: An early period of aesthetic seduction, when Butoh began to spread to Italy in the eighties and was seen as a totally new vision of a bodily reality; an era in the nineties when Japanese dancers began to teach their own personal methods and techniques in Italy and original Italian books came out; and finally a third stage, starting in 2000 and still ongoing, that introduced the possibility of creating an Italian butoh by developing the teachings of Japanese dancers. The history and landscape of butoh in Italy are wide and varied, but in this essay, I will focus on three particularly influential Japanese founders. The first of these is Ohno Kazuo, who toured Italy in 1983, and gave the first butoh workshop at Rome's "La Sapienza" University in 1986. The second is Iwana Masaki, who gave a series of extensive workshops in Rome starting with that of Theatre La Comunità in 1991. And the last is Kasai Akira, who gave his first workshop in Rome in 1998. In particular, Ohno's presence ignited curiosity about butoh's originating principles and his way of dancing became the model of a style based on improvisation. Iwana brought with him a precise training system, dispensing with the false mythology of improvisation and concentrating his attention on the dancer's physical preparation. And Kasai questioned all the acquired certainties and set the ground for a new Italian beginning.

Because the first Japanese butoh dancers arrived in Italy by way of France, the 1980 International Theater Festival in Nancy is an important date. Jean Kalman, a French lighting designer and festival representative, went to Japan and arranged for the appearance at the Festival of Ohno Kazuo in 1980s. He was joined by Kasai Akira, Amagatsu Ushio's Company Sankai Juku, and the outsider Tanaka Min. Interestingly, Ohno was presented in the theatre program as the founder of "modern Japanese dance."

Ohno was seventy-four years old. He appeared in *Admiring La Argentina* in a flower-adorned hat and a long black dress, all crochet and lace. He was a male dressed as a female chasing the spirit of flamenco on a tango beat. He was an old man showing his half-naked body. He was a fool speaking with imaginary presences, crowding the space around him with ghosts. Yet his indecipherable motions held such concrete precision as to leave no doubt about their being real. The public was literally enraptured by his presence. It was his personal triumph, the beginning of a personified legend, and the starting point of butoh's international success. *Le Monde* critic Colette Godard described him as "a ghostly body that life grabs by means of imperceptible

movements,” moving as “a bird being carried on the wind” or “a life story going hand in hand with death,” and wrote that he had “apparently found at the sources of nature the basis for an extremely elaborated technique which has been imitated by others” (Godard 1980a, May 21). As one representative of butoh, there was Ohno, always present and true to himself, moving in a natural way, passing through different ages and gender identities and ignoring the limitations of his own age.

On the other hand, there was the totally naked dancer Tanaka. There was nothing fragile about him. He was “a creature made by silt ready to come into being pressed by a powerful inner energy that leads toward trance” (Godard 1980a, May 21). There was also a man with “transvestism passion,” Kasai Akira (Michel 1980, May 27). And finally, Sankai Juku, with bodies shaved and painted white, and with their slow and soft movements “vibrating with an intense energy that holds back the muscles’ impulses” while “they play precious movements of the art of seduction . . . mating, rest, and war” (Godard 1980b, May 30). They possessed bodies that were no-longer human, and all-too-human at the same time, each of them able to become something else and undergo endless transformations.

Ohno’s affinity with European cultural sensibilities as well as his age played a central role in the first diffusion of butoh. It was a real shock at the time to see an old man dancing. Furthermore, Ohno was dressed in western attire and dancing to Bach and Puccini arias sung by Maria Callas; his movements were not ordinary but reminded us of gestures from everyday life, and the dance’s dynamic never moved too far from dance’s received notions of time: he was never too slow, nor too still; nor did the deformation of his body trespass the boundaries of accepted aesthetic canons. Thus, Ohno’s appearance transformed that which was disturbing in butoh (and in the performances of the other dancers) into something familiar, thereby letting people draw near to it.

Capitalizing on their success in France, Sankai Juku and Tanaka were the first butoh performers to visit Italy (Rome) that same year. They were followed by Carlotta Ikeda (Polverigi, 1982), Murobushi Kō (Polverigi, 1983), and Ashikawa Yoko (Reggio Emilia, Milan and Rome, 1983). Following the lead of French reviewers, Italian reviews mainly focused on the metamorphic qualities of the dancers and their strong power of bodily communication. Moreover, the press took for granted the fact that butoh was related to the post Hiroshima landscape as pointed out by Roland Barthes (Barthes 2002) and Jean Baudrillard (Baudrillard 1985). Ohno came to Italy for the first time in 1983, brought there by Maria Perchiuzzi three years after she had first approached him in Nancy and volunteered to produce him, having been so moved by his performance. That tour took him to Parma and Milan, and over time he performed all over Italy. As was the case in France, Ohno was welcomed as the master who invented butoh (Guatterini 1983) and as the artistic father of Sankai Juku (Pasi 1983).

Eventually, Ohno came to Rome University in 1986 to give the first Italian butoh workshop and two performances: “Admiring La Argentina” and “Dead Sea.” His workshop was the first contact with butoh technique for the Italian audience, and he was again introduced as butoh’s founder. Nevertheless, he did not demonstrate the kind of technique that participants expected to learn by imitation as with any other dance school. He gave an image like “be an insect” to the students and invited them to dance freely relating to that, since dance – he said – is the result of a personal experience that is impossible to reproduce. The technique of butoh’s founder seemed to be a non-technique. And Ohno was like no other butoh dancer. Moreover, his shows were all built on improvisation, and this brought about a double misunderstanding: on the one hand, the idea that improvisation was the essence of butoh; on the other, that one could dance with no specific preparation. These contradictions became the seed for the future development of the Italian study of butoh.¹ That is, Ohno was an extraordinarily well-trained dancer and a human



Figure 28.1 Ohno Kazuo, *Dead Sea* (Rome, 1986), photograph by Marco Tambara.

with a huge reserve of personal experiences. Looking at him, it seemed to be easy to transform the body by realizing a connection between a given image and personal imagination. So the risk for dancers who were inspired by his model – taught in Italy by dancers like Tadashi Endo or Takenouchi Atsushi – was often the external imitation of butoh forms or a kind of retreat of dancers into their own bodies and emotions.

This perception of butoh was changed completely by the arrival in Rome in 1991 of Iwana Masaki, an independent solo dancer then established in Paris. Iwana was the beginning of a wave in the beginning of the nineties in which several Japanese dancers started to hold workshops in Italy.² His butoh teaching process eventually brought about the birth of different generations of dancers who sometimes use the label of butoh and sometimes incorporate butoh body work in their artistic practice. In some cases, this resulted in a pedagogical continuity, which gave birth to

established schools. This is true for Iwana at first in Rome (from 1991 to 2004) then in Naples and Milan; Yoshioka Yumiko collaborating with the Lerici-based dance association Gest-azione, led by Annalisa Maggiani (from 1995); Kasai in Rome (beginning in 1998); Onishi Sayoko, who founded a butoh academy in Palermo supported by Ohno Yoshito (2005); and Takenouchi Atsushi, who established a permanent teaching course at Spazio-NU in Pontedera (2015).

Iwana's workshop was a turning point for several reasons. First of all, the way it was organized. It was a two-week workshop lasting five hours a day with Iwana performing every night, so that participants could experience butoh training and then directly observe how the teacher transformed the exercises into dance. The long duration gave the participants the chance to enter deeply into the concrete world of butoh work. And it was an exceptional situation, since butoh in Italy has been mostly organized by independent producers with no economic support, and this often determined the short duration of workshops.³ Secondly Iwana's way of teaching was more objective and detailed compared to the one experienced with Ohno, a way that seemed



Figure 28.2 Iwana Masaki, *Jokanaan* (Rome, Sala Uno, 1998), photograph by Emilio D'Itri.



Figure 28.3 Iwana Masaki, *Jokanaan* (Rome, Sala Uno, 1998), photograph by Emilio D'Itri.

to be less mysterious and more practical. The workshop title was “The Internal Landscape” and the proposed training system was based on a classification of different “bodily states.” Every state included a character (boy, woman, warrior, old man, spirit), and a corresponding image for the energy to realize it (a narcissus for the boy, a lotus flower for the woman, swimming upstream towards a waterfall as enemies surround one for the warrior, a cloud of alcohol dispersing through air for the spirit). Iwana explained that the ability to change form and the sensibility towards the space around our bodies are necessary yet insufficient conditions for dancing, because dance is always a compromise between the dancer’s desire and his/her physical condition. The exercise thus became a kind of initiation to dance, a way to listen one’s body in order to recognize and reveal original physical and spiritual means.

I participated in Iwana’s first workshop in Rome and served as his Italian producer from 1994 to 2004. Silvia Rampelli, who represents one of the most original artistic Italian contributions to the personalization of butoh’s legacy, also participated and even attended Iwana’s first Italian workshop in Orvieto. Rampelli collaborated with Iwana in his first project with European dancers – the performance *Yomotsu Hirasaka* (The Slope between life and death, 1995) – and founded with Iwana the company *Habillé d’eau* in Paris in 1996 together with Muronoi Yōko.⁴ The company worked only one season, producing the performance *Misogi* in Paris in 1997, but Rampelli kept the name and refounded *Habillé d’eau* in Italy in 2002, with Alessandra Cristiani, Andreana Notaro, Elisabetta Di Terlizzi, and Francesca Proia.⁵ The debut performance of the new company, *Studio per Attis*, won the prize “Enzimi Danza 2002” for its originality. Other award-winning productions followed: *Refettorio* was awarded the Scenario Prize 2003 at International TeatarFest di Sarajevo (2004), *Ragazzo cane* (2005) premiered at La Biennale Festival of Venice 37 under the direction of Romeo Castellucci, and *Stato secondo* won the project “4 Cantieri per Fabbrica Europa” (2008). Rampelli is committed to researching the “elementary structures of action” – as she named her public body research events since 2014⁶ – and the “nature of the performing act” (D’Adamo 2012, 14), and currently refuses the label of butoh for her work. She described her meeting with Iwana as a “shocking meeting in terms of the perception of the self, of being and acting,” since Iwana

“entrusts to his pupils the experience of responsibility for action” (D’Adamo 2012, 43) and a vision of dance as an “original process of opening” (D’Adamo 2012, 45). Along with Iwana, Rampelli represents the main influence for the first generation of Italian *butoh* dancers, which essentially developed in Rome around the activity of the Liòs Company and the NON-Company.

Liòs Company has been a project of a dance collective that started in 2000 by a group of dancers who shared in common training with Iwana not only in Italy but also in long summer workshops in Normandy, as well as the rare workshops held by Rampelli and Muronoi.⁷ Its members Stefano Taiuti, Alessandra Cristiani, Marie Thérèse Sitzia, Samantha Marenzi, Flavio Arcangeli, Maddalena Gana, and Manuela Giovagnetti organized the international *butoh* festival “Trasform’azioni” in Rome from 2000 to 2010.⁸ Since each of them produced at least one solo for the festival every year, beginning in 2000, we can begin to talk about an Italian *butoh* style. Their way of dancing seems to have incorporated the “bodily state” proposals by Iwana, his improvisational style, and a kind of dynamics created by quite slow movements, stillness, and sudden explosions.

The first Italian print resource on *butoh*, *Butō, la nuova danza giapponese* (D’Orazi 1997), appeared late in the Iwana era. It traces the historical context of *butoh* following the main publications in western languages then available,⁹ tells about an experience of prolonged study with Iwana Masaki, and offers a collection of texts written by Japanese dancers. The opening essay introduced the concept of dance as a way to reveal an immanent original landscape written on the “flesh body,” the *nikutai* – that holds personal and universal memories as matter, and is opposed to the “physical body” (*shintai*) corresponding to individual’s social role: “The body left to the necessity of its own impulses can regain a state of innocence, where its reaction to the environment is not contaminated by acquired habits and behaviors” (D’Orazi 1997, 7). That is, the *nikutai* is a natural primordial non-dual authentic body where each act comes from an intention deeply rooted in a state of being and the body is not used as a tool to express something. This book became a point of reference for the early Italian dancers involved in *butoh*.

What is clear according to this view of the Italian *butoh* scene is the strong imprinting by Iwana especially in regard to the style of dancing – in terms of the dynamics of movement and the use of bodily state images – that sometimes clouded dancers’ own bodily research. That is, Iwana-trained dancers



Figure 28.4 Kasai Akira, *Seraphita* (Rome, Teatro Greco, 1998), photograph by Emilio D’Itri.



Figure 28.5 Kasai Akira, "Rhinoceros" (Rome, Teatro Furio Camillo, 2009), photograph by Emilio D'Itri.



Figure 28.6 Kasai Akira, portrait (Rome 1998), photograph by Emilio D'Itri.

often ended up using the form of the master's internal landscape rather than their own. This is the reason why Kasai's arrival on the Italian scene in 1998 was a kind of storm.¹⁰ His fast-moving style was a totally new butoh proposal in Italy and pushed dancers to search again for the nature of butoh.

When Kasai started to teach in Italy, he explained that he could not teach Japanese butoh, but he could help to build an originally Italian butoh. Hijikata and Ohno, through their example, only demonstrated that butoh is possible, and that it can be found anywhere. That way, though born in Japan, butoh retains universal possibilities. According to him, the ancestors of butoh are Nero and Heliogabalus, Lautréamont, Genet, Marquis De Sade, Jesus Christ made man, Artaud, Nijinsky, and Isadora Duncan, all of whom bore a divine spark within their material body. Or, in the language of dance, all those who brought consciousness into the body and gave to imagination the same value as reality (D'Orazi 2011). His workshops pointed at butoh as a way to connect motion to the energy of bodily sensations and to the energy of words. In the later case, his meeting with Steiner's eurhythmy, which connects body and consciousness through the use of words, was a way to deepen the research of butoh and to build a new horizon for the future.¹¹

Especially after the experience of being choreographed by Kasai in "Eliogabalo Project" (see Figures 28.7 and 28.8), the dance style of the aforementioned Lios Company underwent



Figure 28.7 Alessandro Pintus, "Eliogabalo Project," directed by Kasai Akira (Rome, Teatro Furio Camillo, 2009), photograph by Emilio D'Itri.



Figure 28.8 Alessandro Pintus, Flavio Arcangeli, Manuela Giovagnetti, Marie Thérèse Sitzia, “Eliogabalo Project,” directed by Kasai Akira (Rome, Teatro Furio Camillo, 2009), photograph by Emilio D'Itri.

a transformation of atmosphere and dynamics.¹² Currently, the company has disbanded and each dancer is experimenting and performing a more personal approach to dance. One of the members, Stefano Taiuti, developed an original style by combining his experience with mime and butoh, which gave him “a different way to live the act of dancing and a breathless range of spiritual body experiences.”¹³ He performs solo works presented in art galleries, theatres, urban environments, nightclubs, and television. Currently, he signs his productions as *Zeitgeist* (the company he formed in 2003). Another former Lios member, Alessandra Cristiani, focused her work on the “possibility of investigating and perceiving the subtle nature of the body phenomenon”¹⁴ and continues working with *Habillé d'eau*, as a solo performer, or in collaboration with other theatre companies (lately with Fortebraccio Teatro for *Metamorfosi*, 2015). As a solo

performer, she won the “Scenari Indipendenti 2008” prize with her project devoted to photographer Francesca Woodman *La fisica dell’anima* (The physic of the soul). Her teaching activity – largely inspired by Iwana’s system – has lately introduced elements of eurhythmy drawn from Kasai. Marie Thérèse Sitzia elaborated her system of training named “Phenomenology of the presence” and is working as a solo dancer or in collaboration with other theatre directors. She won the prize devoted to original projects of young dancers, named “Tracce-EXPLO,” with *Genealogia di un pesce* (Genealogy of a fish, 2008). Maddalena Gana is performing with the Giano company founded in 2004 together with the actor Giordano Giorgi “to explore the intimate essence and the concrete form of matter,”¹⁵ and has developed a relationship between body and sound, collaborating with live musicians. Belonging to the same generation is Alessandro Pintus, who studied mainly with Iwana, Tanaka, and Kasai. He founded the NON-Company group (in 2001)¹⁶ and uses a personal method of training largely inspired by physical manipulations of Tanaka and Hijikata technique as reconstructed by Waguri Yukio (Waguri 1998). One of his stated goals is investigating by means of *butoh* Italian cultural roots.

In 2001, the first Italian volume devoted to Ohno was published (D’Orazi 2001). It was a reconsideration of Ohno that explored his relation to Hijikata and *butoh* techniques and methods. Even though Hijikata and Ohno point in two different directions of working – improvisation and choreography – both seem to share the same vision of dance as a sequence of “bodily states,” a succession of psychophysical changes related to image-content, whether the composition precedes the performing act – as in a choreography – or the two happen simultaneously – as in improvisation. That is, dance has not so much to do with a sequence of motions, as with a series of internal variations. It is not important if there is a story guiding the dancers’ actions. The important thing is the nature of the dancers’ presence, how the dancers change their energy by working on the hidden side of the motion. Roberta Carreri, an Italian actress of Odin Teatret



Figure 28.9 Alessandra Cristiani, “Flower” (Rufa Rome University of Fine Arts, 2016), photograph by Eleonora Cerri Pecorella.



Figure 28.10 Marie Thérèse Sitzia (Rufa Rome University of Fine Arts, 2016), photograph by Eleonora Cerri Pecorella.



Figure 28.11 Maddalena Gana, "InPrimia" (Rufa Rome University of Fine Arts, 2016), photograph by Eleonora Cerri Pecorella.

Company directed by Eugenio Barba, talking about her experience at Ohno Kazuo Dance Studio once said:

There is one thing that was especially clear: the real dance is not the one you can see watching the body moving on the stage. The real dance is what happens inside the dancer's body. The actor, as well as the dancer, is a medium that lets pass through his or her body the energies produced inside to join with the spectators and let them dance by themselves.

*D'Orazi 2001, 112*¹⁷

And, this “bodily state” concept is a kind of key for understanding butoh's influence on the Italian stage.

In 2002, when Ohno decided to place a copy of his archive in Europe, the Ohnos renewed their connection with Maria Perchiazzi to establish a connection to Eugenia Casini Ropa of Bologna University. The Ohno Archive opened in 2002 guaranteeing at least one event a year – such as a conference, poster exhibition, performance, and book translation – devoted to promoting the knowledge of Ohno and to deepening the discussion about butoh.¹⁸

Some years later, the first Italian book on butoh founder Hijikata was released (D'Orazi 2008). It reads Hijikata in terms of a heretical total body who dared to live a total life (*Il corpo eretico*):

The body is the incarnation of a person, but Hijikata looks around and all he sees are corpses, individuals no longer in contact with themselves, who have made theirs the restrictions imposed by their cultural environment, setting limits to their mental, spiritual, and sentimental existence, never experienced in full. Defining *butoh* dance as “the corpse rising to his feet, with a desperate desire for life,” Hijikata exhorts the dancer to reach a full awareness of that same body that looks vacant and unattended in everyday life, handed over to an organization that determines its needs, wishes, and salvation modes: unaware of its potential, afraid of the strength of his drives and of the mystery of its functioning. His butoh is the heresy of a total body.

D'Orazi 2008, 19–20

As the reader can see, Kasai re-invigorated the world of butoh with his ideas, resulting in, among other things, a reinterpretation of Ohno and new attention paid to Hijikata. Kasai brought again to Italy the awareness of the potential meaning of dance. According to him, three conditions need to occur, given which even a ballet dancer can be part of butoh:

A dancer should have the instruments to perceive his own body, because butoh is the awareness of the material existence of our body. He must live his present days, because butoh moves on with the world, it is not a new tradition, it is always evolving. And his dance should be criminal, for butoh is always fighting power.

D'Orazi 2011, 88

Butoh can restore a body deteriorated by the “super-national power of computers and information technology” and “find a way to preserve the essential energy of dance” (D'Orazi 2016a, 149). According to Kasai the task of butoh is nowadays “to create a new body through the power of the word” (D'Orazi 2015, 142). Actually, the dancer has to come back to the birth point of

the body, that is, the same point where spoken language originated, the point where a flow of energy precedes the emission of a sound becoming word. For “in this era of falsehood, dance is no longer for dancers only, it is for everybody” (D’Orazi 2016b, 57). In Italy, the research is still ongoing and has attracted a number of young and old pupils. But the possible results of Kasai’s scattered seeds are still wide open.

Notes

- 1 The author was among the participants at that workshop and soon after devoted her graduation thesis to Ohno. This was the start of thirty years of research about butoh (largely as independent researcher) as well the start of thirty years of producing the activities of Japanese butoh dancers in Italy.
- 2 The main in order of arrival are Ohno Kazuo, Iwana Masaki, Murobushi Kō, Nakajima Natsu, Maro Akaji, Kasai Akira, Tanaka Min, Yoshioka Yumiko, Yoshimoto Daisuke, Carlotta Ikeda, Tadashi Endo, Horikawa Hisako, Sumako Koseki, Muronoi Yōko, and Takenouchi Atsushii.
- 3 The first workshop of Iwana was in Orvieto in 1990 organized by the dancer Rossella Fiumi. The one in Rome the next year was organized by the theatre director Maria Inversi, who met him in France. But the first appearance of Iwana in Italy was in 1989 with the performance *Awahi* (Bi-Duality) at the space Dark Camera.
- 4 The performance was premiered in Rome at Furio Camillo Theatre, with Monica Camilloni, Irena Kulka (from Switzerland), Giuliana Majocchi, and Silvia Rampelli.
- 5 The company is still working today but in a different composition, the only constant member is Alessandra Cristiani.
- 6 The title has been used on the occasion of a public collaboration with theater director Romeo Castellucci.
- 7 Beginning in 1997 Muronoi Yōko (1959–2017) started to give workshops in Rome, and her work with “natural movements,” as well as her research into the origins of movement left a strong mark in the first Italian generation of butoh dancers.
- 8 The author collaborated at this Festival mainly as producer of Iwana Masaki and Kasai Akira and occasionally gave her contribution as butoh scholar. The report of this experience is included in a book about the Festival (D’Orazi 2010).
- 9 The main ones included the *Die Rebellion des Körpers* (Haerdter 1986); the landmark volume *Butoh: Shades of Darkness* (Viala 1989) and the American *Ankoku Butō* (Klein 1988); the *The Drama Review* volume devoted to butoh (vol. 30, n. 2, Summer 1986) and the aesthetic analysis of butoh made by Vicki Sanders for *Asian Theatre Journal* (vol. 5, n. 2, Fall 1988).
- 10 Kasai arrived in Rome in 1998 invited by the author. But Kasai’s regular teaching activity began in 2004 and is still ongoing with at least one project a year.
- 11 Both in terms of identity – as each nation has a specific language and language builds the body – and in terms of building the body for dance: in the same way Hijikata used words with the aim of making dancers aware of their body and transforming their physical condition.
- 12 In 2009 Kasai realized, in collaboration with the author, the *Heliogabalus Project* for Liòs and NON-Company after a month-long artistic residency in Rome. All the dancers attended his workshops for about ten years. For a more detailed report about this experience, see D’Orazi 2011.
- 13 Stefano Taiuti, dancer, choreographer, performer; <https://stefanotaiuti.com/c-v/>
- 14 Alessandra Cristiani, performer; www.alessandracristiani.com/biography/
- 15 Giano. Compagnia di teatro e danza; <https://gianoteatro.wordpress.com/storia/>
- 16 Non Company; <http://alessandropintus.com/>
- 17 Carreri also said, “Katsuko Azuma, Natsu Nakajima and Kazuo Ohno showed me a completely new way of feeling my body, not from the outside but from within. They made me discover what I now call the ‘internal body,’ revealing parts of myself that were hidden even to me” (Carreri 2014, 231–232). The Italian director Eugenio Barba is the founder of ISTA-International School of Theatre Anthropology, “a multicultural network of performers and scholars” searching for the “technical basis of the performer in a transcultural dimension,” in order to “understanding the fundamental principles which engender the performer’s presence or scenic life” (www.odinteatret.dk/research/ista.aspx). ISTA hosted the butoh dancer Nakajima Natsu twice (in 1990 and 1996) and Ohno (in 1994).
- 18 Conversation by the author with Eugenia Casini Ropa, December 2016. For the archive activities, see also, Elena Cervellati essay (Cervellati 2015).

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