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35

IRAQI BODIES' *THE BALDHEADED*“Butoh”-inspired Iraqi
contemporary performance*J Dellecave*

The 2000s and 2010s are proving to be an era of violent conflict and war unfolding in new locales every day. During this time countless amounts of social and popular media images represent peoples from war-torn Iraq and other parts of the Middle East. The usual onslaught of Internet images bring faraway wars to the tidy rectangles of our laptop computers, neatly packaging the diversities of war-affected humanity into generalized identity boxes – Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern, refugee. Within this fast-paced quick-to-change landscape, the general ethos and pervading stereotypes of what ‘these people’ look like are constantly in flux and overwhelmingly negative. Popular amongst these images are the stereotypes of Iraqi as terrorist or Iraqi as victim of war. This essay examines perhaps the least obvious and most obscure place for an intervention into these visual media-perpetuated narratives, a contemporary Iraqi dance theater performance inspired by Hijikata Tatsumi. With focus on the butoh-inspired choreographic work *The Baldheaded*, I contend that choreographer Anmar Taha, director of the theatrical company Iraqi Bodies, effectively countered negative stereotypes of Iraqis as aggressive and hyper masculine. Taha’s *The Baldheaded* poignantly and powerfully conveys Iraqi experiences of war as universal iterations of human suffering. Through embodied butoh-inspired images of Iraqi men as artists rather than as terrorists or victims, Taha’s work illuminates compelling tensions between universalism, whiteness, and the international concert stage.

Iraqi Bodies is a contemporary physical theater company directed by Taha and co-directed by Josephine Gray (Figure 35.1).¹ In 2009, following heightened violence in Iraq and being wounded by a bullet in crossfire, Taha founded Iraqi Bodies in Sweden. He has since been creating pieces with various performers from both Europe and the Middle East. *The Baldheaded* was Taha’s 2005 graduation performance from the Institute of Fine Arts in Baghdad and was performed by him and six of his cohort from the Theater Department: Hayder Chokan, Ali Shukur, Samer Disher, Muhanad Rasheed, Raed Kadim, and Ali Da’em (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.).² *The Baldheaded* gained notoriety at the school and, according to Taha, quickly and unexpectedly attracted international attention after winning the jury prize at the Philadelphia Theater Festival in Jordan. *The Baldheaded* premiered in Gothenburg, Sweden, at the Pustervik Theater, on June 5, 2010, with a smaller but overlapping cast. Much of Taha’s current artistic explorations arose from his early explorations of *The Baldheaded* and what he now terms “letting the body speak the trauma of life” (Iraqi Bodies 2016a). Today Iraqi Bodies “explores the link between movement and gesture, between dance and physical theater” and is influenced by the theories and methods



Figure 35.1 Anmar Taha, photograph by Khalil Younes.

of Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and others (Iraqi Bodies 2016a). Much like the performances of other internationally renowned contemporary theater artists, the work of Iraqi Bodies currently employs collaboration with musicians, set designers, and performers.

The edited video clip of Taha's *The Baldheaded* reveals six hairless male dancers embodying motifs of conformity contrasted with distortion.³ Each dancer has a bald head, white powdered body, baggy black pants, and bare chest. During one moment, the homogenous sextet pitter-patters stage left and turns suddenly to walk steadfastly forward en masse. They are not quite in unison, but possess a similar cadence, all the while uttering sonically dissonant nonsense words and exaggerating their breaths. When the bald men settle into a center stage clump, the wide blue wash of light shrinks to a single stark white spotlight now encompassing all six men. This keen use of focused pools of white lights, contrasted with the blue wash, dramatically enhances the physicality of the performers throughout the performance. In another moment the theme of anguish takes center stage. The uniform group pauses from the execution of concise asymmetrical gestures, seemingly disturbed or in pain, their heads tilt slightly and kilter subtly. As the clump descends to the floor, the twisted arms of the six white men reach skyward from their concave torsos in cramped, claw-like positions, with fingers clenched and wrists cocked. An ugly, dissonant *uhhhh, uhhhh* emanates from the living tableaux. On cue, the dancers melt to the ground in grotesque positions. In low squats, they methodically rock from side to side, scream at an unexpectedly high pitch as their hands cross their genitals in modesty, then huddle in a circle as if participating in a secret game. They shuffle forward with a drone-like gaze and then part ways: two turn stage right, while four turn stage left. The lights cross-fade and when the lights refocus, the six dancers stand in a circle enclosed by a pool of light. Powder wafts from their bodies as they stomp one foot with oomph.

Taha asserts that *The Baldheaded* is not butoh in style or genre but was instead influenced by his academic study of Hijikata at the Institute of Fine Arts. During his studies he was drawn to

Hijikata's philosophical writings and performance photographs. Taha remembers, "there was one image that resounded deeply in me of Hijikata as an old woman covered in black. I knew that woman, it was my mother, my sisters, my aunts and so many familiar faces all bound together in that one archaic figure" (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.). During our written interview Taha admits that he felt resistance towards and was perhaps even frightened by butoh outside of academic study. On the two occasions he interacted with butoh as an embodied form – once in a workshop setting and once as a spectator of a butoh performance – he was unable to comfortably remain at the performance or workshop and felt as though he had to remove himself. Taha also questions the possibility of authentic butoh experiences in a fixed amounts of time, and is therefore suspicious of events such as butoh workshops or staged performances. He believes one cannot train in butoh class, but that butoh is a philosophy and "way of life" which requires practice, devotion, recent personal experience of war, and Japanese heritage (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.). Writes Taha:

How is it possible to 'learn' or 'experience' 'butoh' in a week, even a month, workshop if you at night are stuck at the computer or you still have in mind what is coming next on your calendar? The two are at odds with each other. You cannot 'attend' butoh- it is a philosophy if you will, to be practiced and devoted to. 'Butoh' also arose from war so how can anyone or any country who has not experienced war very recently truly resonate with that thin edge of life and death? I do not know 'butoh,' I cannot practice 'butoh.' All I sense with 'butoh' is the light and shadow, which I personally experienced in war. . . . There can be no training of 'butoh.' Butoh is a concept and a way of life. 'Butoh' is also Japanese and I am not Japanese. Because of this I have very ambiguous feelings about 'butoh' as a dance, or style, or practice, and is it possible to do 'butoh' if you did not go through the horrors of Hiroshima.

Anmar Taha, pers. comm.

During the making of *The Baldheaded* the physicality of butoh was not a goal, nor was it actively engaged or mentioned as part of the creative process. Taha muses, "Hijikata's life and pictures had simply let me know that it is possible to make beauty on stage from and through the horrors of life" (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.). Taha writes, "as an aesthetic, [butoh] did not inspire the piece, my circumstances at that time inspired the piece"; however, "butoh inspired *The Baldheaded* if by butoh we mean the incentive of Hijikata to give physical shape to hidden memories borne from terror" (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.). Taha's circumstances during his time at Baghdad's Institute of Fine Arts included the omnipresence of death and corpses in everyday life and daily routines. He relates "the contorted bodies in butoh" to "the bodies lying on the streets" that he frequently encountered on his way to school (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.). Inspired by Hijikata's explorations of human darkness and beauty, Taha was similarly compelled by externalizing his experiences of war, violence, and suffering through crafting theater out of what he terms "pure necessity" and an honesty that in his opinion he has not been as successful in achieving since (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.).

Though Taha was not compelled or inspired by the aesthetics of butoh, *The Baldheaded* still visually exhibits the hallmarks of a globalized yet admittedly amorphous style of butoh.⁴ Iraqi Bodies' performers are male; nearly naked; slender and softly muscular; masculine yet not aggressive; bald; and ghostly white. Thus Taha's performance lends itself to yet another compelling aspect of butoh-inspired performance in a global context. Butoh as inspiration provided Iraqi Bodies the ability to enact the universal body or the body that lacks individual traits and which was culturally unmarked and thus ethnicity-less.⁵ "Butoh," a Japanese form, popular on the

avant-garde international, often Western concert stage, provided a platform for the erasure of ethnicity and individuality in service of the universal. Thus, the cultural product of a butoh-inspired Iraqi choreographer's universal expression of war, reveals the ever-present tensions of universalism and whiteness on the international Western stage. Taha ascribes a purity and inherent ethnicity to "butoh," yet when embodying Hijikata's inspiration, the Japaneseness transmogrifies into the whiteness and universalism of the international avant-garde. At the same time, this whiteness and universalism allows the Iraqi men in Taha's company to counter pervasive negative stereotypes.

Iraqi Bodies state on their website that "their work wishes to transcend any human differences and instead create scenes to show a reality shared by all" (Iraqi Bodies 2016a). Yet Taha is very critical and skeptical of globalized, universalized, and non-Japanese butoh. Though the mission statement of Iraqi Bodies states that their goal is universal expression that overcomes difference, Taha critiques the globalization and Western adoption of butoh:

The West has also adopted 'butoh' as a 'style,' just as it has adopted Buddhism etc. . . . I do not believe that it is the 'butoh' practitioners in themselves that have promoted 'butoh' in forms of short workshops and performances here and there spread throughout the world. Instead it is the active values of commerce used by the West that cannot handle subtle and sensitive expressions found in art, 'butoh' being one of them.

Anmar Taha, pers. comm

In my virtual viewings of *The Baldheaded* the visual style and aesthetics appeared more Sankai Juku-like than Hijikata-like (Taha n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c). The butoh-esque dancers performing *The Baldheaded* are extremely homogenous, and hardly distinguishable from one another, never mind identifiable as a concise ethnic group. As far as I can tell, the identification of Iraqi Bodies as Iraqi occurs only through the name of the dance company (or to a knowledgeable person through names of the company members). The name Iraqi Bodies accompanies, and therefore inscribes, every video clip or article currently available about this choreography. Taha's choreographic intent connects to butoh beyond genealogical origin and surface visual elements. Yet the de-ethnicization from the inspiration butoh, the re-racialization of the performers as white (both from the powder and the concert stage), followed by re-ethnicization of the unmarked dancers from the company name Iraqi Bodies, rejects the possibility of shared cultural roots while drawing on universalism rooted in values of whiteness. This brings to bear important questions about the possibility of war, suffering, and tragedy as unifying (while horrifying) human events which enable artists to craft beautiful, powerful, meaningful, universal art without attempting to transcend cultural differences.

Iraqi Bodies utilization of butoh inspiration but Western theater technique depicts Susan Foster's contention that, on the global stage, ethnically based techniques are commonly secondary to contemporary postmodern Western techniques. Foster contends that the foregrounding of Western techniques in essence serves "to groom" the "universal body" thus creating a global body that is not culturally marked (Foster 2010, 71). On the other hand, Thomas DeFrantz calls into question whether the concert dance stage itself can ever be unmarked as a "white space" (DeFrantz 2004, 198). In a rethinking of black bodies in performance (specifically the work of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater), DeFrantz proposes a "counternarrative of public spaces" including the dance concert stage (DeFrantz 2004, 198). DeFrantz challenges the notion of culturally unmarked performance and instead questions whether culturally unmarked or universal automatically equals white (DeFrantz 2004, 198). The consideration of the powdered, bald Iraqi bodies on the Western concert stage as universal, or culturally unmarked, warrants further considerations as whether the butoh-inspired *The Baldheaded* should additionally be considered an

embodiment of whiteness. At what point and how did a Japanese avant-garde form acquire the whiteness and universalist attributes of the Western concert stage? What are the implications of butoh's alignment with international universalism and whiteness? Would this alignment, in fact, make more dance forms, more white? Or does it illuminate the fraught shortcomings of ethnic and racial categorizations which have always already haunted embodied performance? While *Iraqi Bodies* capitalizes on the literal powdered whiteness of butoh inspiration, their abilities to transcend ethnicity in this performance illuminate that Western avant-garde international concert stage is complexly both marked and unmarked with ethnicity, whiteness, and universalism.

Iraqi Bodies, these Iraqi bodies in *The Baldheaded*, literally young Iraqi theater students from war-torn Iraq, are inextricably linked – because we know they are Iraqi from the mediated titling – to larger and (currently) negatively stereotyped Middle Eastern, Arab, refugee, or Iraqi figures. The homogenizing, de-ethnicizing, whitening visual inspiration of butoh, also inextricably linked to imperial violence, highlights the stakes of representation for contemporary Iraqi bodies in performance. The theatrical elements of butoh render Iraqi male bodies unreadable as Iraqi and therefore unthreatening, rather than as ferocious terrorists or helpless – negative stereotypes that commonly circulate in Western contexts. An alternative to being marked as terrorists, and thus marked as targets, or marked as victims in need of being saved, the lack of ethnicity and masculinity serves to revision stereotypical depictions of Iraqi masculinity as aggressive and destructive. This revision – from negative stereotype to unreadable ethnicity – provides insight into the current trends that influence the global spread of butoh-inspired performances, in addition to being a reminder that global atrocities akin to Hiroshima exist in the present day.

The importance and implications of this performance travel far beyond the discrete performance of *Iraqi Bodies* in Sweden in 2010 or in Jordan in 2005 or the replayed video of the performance on YouTube around the globe. Similar to butoh, the outward expression of the horrors of war will be viewed by some as an artistic critique of the imperial invader (in this case the United States and its allies). An Iraqi contemporary choreographer would be the perfect contender to politically critique the United States via any artistic medium, particularly on the United States and European dominated concert dance stage. The presence of a political dance theater work by an Iraqi choreographer would eliminate the problematic of often white over-privileged Westerners, interpreting and displaying the plights and struggles of people (often people of color) elsewhere. *The Baldheaded* gives audiences around the globe the opportunity to experience what an Iraqi theater-maker has to express about his first-hand experiences of war. *Iraqi Bodies* dancing is compelling and noteworthy given their personal tragedies that surround the choreography, the creative process, the inspiration for the work, and the performance as resultant in the successful theater career of Taha. *Iraqi Bodies'* inspiration from butoh, in this early choreographic work, is a means to respond to the circumstances of war while countering pervasive negative images of what an Iraqi looks and acts like. *Iraqi Bodies* performance in *The Baldheaded* demonstrated a well-rehearsed and concise composition with clean lines, clearly intentioned movement, variations of rhythmic structures, performed by skilled dancers complete with the lean muscular bodies typical of contemporary concert stage dancers. The choreography contains dynamic and unpredictable shifts of energetic states, at times comical, mesmerizing, and heartbreaking.

In the moment of current imperial violence, Iraqi dancers were struck by and inspired by the Japanese dance form of butoh. The result of this intercultural, neocolonial complexity is the performed paradox of the universalized, de-ethnicized, yet negative stereotype countering, modern Iraqi body, shrouded in white powder, with no hair, technically not embodying butoh, but inspired by Hijikata. *Iraqi Bodies* performance of *The Baldheaded* alters perceptions of contemporary Iraqi masculinity yet *Iraqi Bodies'* choreographic products are sites of conflicting social trends. Western-influenced theatrical productions are always tinged with power, yet part

of artistic products' complicity with power is that strands of contemporary performance (such as the complex, butoh-inspired, Iraqi-crafted *The Baldheaded*, for example) are critical of power. The indistinguishable baldheaded individual within the homogenous group in the spotlight of the concert stage, swathed in white powder, affirms this statement and symbolizes that not all Iraqi men are hyper-masculinized Muslim terrorists. As we traverse these war-torn time periods, bombarded by the sheer speed of the Internet and images of social media, we zoom through a vast array of culturally specific and media-promulgated stereotypes. We hurriedly travel from Internet site to Internet site searching for contemporary Iraqi dance or perhaps for a moment of understanding about war (even someone else's experience of war). In the end we are blessed to encounter the physical expressions of Iraqi Bodies – not quite the Iraqi bodies that are typically fed to us on our computer screens, but nonetheless fascinating ones.

Notes

- 1 Since 2009, I have virtually followed Iraqi Bodies across multiple geographic locations. On June 15, 2016, I conducted an email interview with Anmar Taha, which I used for this article. In my role as virtual follower of Iraqi Bodies, my guiding questions include: Why, in the 2010s, as a dance scholar who writes about the relationship of political oriented dance to twentieth-century war, is this butoh-inspired performance by an Iraqi refugee so compelling for me? How are the dances of Iraqi Bodies a new way in which war-exiled artists perform social critique? What did I expect an Iraqi contemporary dance theater company to do? How did Iraqi Bodies exceed my expectations?
- 2 There are multiple authorship claims to *The Baldheaded* by several of the performers in the original piece. Taha explained in our correspondence that once the original student performers disbursed, some in Iraq and some, such as Taha, in Europe, "many of those who were in the piece claimed that they had created it because they saw that European festivals and programmers were interested in the work." The multiple claims of authorship are a source of soreness for Taha and an expected consequence in war-torn artistic communities. Taha states his frustration at the circumstance: "If Iraq would have stood strong today, without an invasion, there would still be functioning institutions and its people would have still stood up for their morals. It would have been impossible to claim authorship of other people's written texts, performances, films etc., since the elders, teachers and colleagues would know who did what and there would be records. All that is destroyed" (Anmar Taha, pers. comm.).
- 3 *The Baldheaded* is available on Vimeo and in several iterations on YouTube also under the title *The Bald*.
- 4 Prior to interviewing Taha, I had watched and shared this video with numerous dance scholars including those with a specialization in butoh dance with overwhelming agreement that there was visual evidence of butoh inspiration (perhaps even technique) in this dance.
- 5 The lack of ethnicity portrayed in *The Baldheaded* does not reflect the theatrical work that Taha has produced since 2010.

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