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On and through the Butoh Body

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ON AND THROUGH THE BUTOH BODY

Katherine Adamenko

I am blindfolded on my hands and knees, picking up dried black-eyed peas one by one off of the studio floor, all the while I am weeping and weeping for the lost souls of humanity.

Such is the world of butoh

I am walking in a straight line toward the other end of the room encased in saran wrap. I am desperately trying to free myself, my soul, in anguish and more so in anger toward liberation.

Such is the world of butoh

Butoh training and performance has made a deep and lasting impact upon my artistic practice and upon my soul. I am a better artist and a better human being because of it.

From ballerina to bodybuilder, from modern dancer to actress and performance artist, I come from a body specially trained. It's a theatrical body, ignited early on by the dance theatre of Pina Bausch, Stanislavski's method acting, dance educator Margaret H'Doubler, and the theatre theory of Antonin Artaud and Michael Chekhov. It was a body ripe for butoh just as it was making its way to the United States at the turn of 21st century.

What attracted me so strongly to butoh, both performing it for the first time and then in subsequent workshops, was the process of experiential learning and freedom of exploration with the body as its locus. I am excited to share my journey into butoh with you, realizing only now that it is a historical journey at that.

Butoh by accident

I happened to be in the right place and the right time when an actress friend of mine, Delphine Kini Mei, asked me to be in a butoh dance piece in 2000 while I was living in the San Francisco area. I was intrigued as I knew very little about butoh and there was not much of it online (and no YouTube for easy access).

It was a performance set to poetry choreographed by members of the Ancient Touch Butoh Ensemble. The rehearsal process consisted of imaginative movement explorations grounded in nature and dichotomies such a life/death, light/dark.

I am fortunate to have recorded this experience in my performance journal:

Put on Global Meditation CD and started to move. Getting inspired by a book from the library *Butoh—Dance of the Dark Soul* – reading about its origins, what it's made of – it is pure physical theatre not based on a “technique” per se, but on this grand earth – the relationship in a purist way it seems. Mind you, I know very little so far and have been exposed even less, but so far it is as if a hole has opened only to expose my own passion and desire to explore this new world. It feels so good on my body and my mind stays free. I become free.

A new world opened up to me. After having battled dance injuries from the past, I had found a satisfying way to move without pain. Butoh began to inform my performance art work.

Into the studio

By 2003, I had been back in New York City for a couple of years and decided it was time to look for some butoh training. It's as if the butoh gods conspired and like magic, the teachers appeared.

The following are recollections of the early workshops that I attended during these first heady and impressionable years of my training, some with master teachers such as Akira Kasai, Murobushi Kō, Takuya Muramatsu, and Diego Piñon and down through impassioned students such as Vangelina, now an esteemed teacher and choreographer in her own right.

I learned who came from the Ohno Kazuo or Hijikata Tatsumi lineages, often times they were influenced by both. In these early workshops with the masters there was a consistent thread: the breath. It all began with the breath. Each master gave me a new perspective. The workshops also differed. Some were deep explorations of the imagination, some were deep explorations of concepts such as space/time, while in others we danced the dance of physical exhaustion.

My very first workshop was with Akira Kasai in February 2003 where we worked on the breath for hours it seemed. The natural breath and the unnatural breath. Metaphorical death and dying. Here are a few paraphrased notes from class:

Breathing is what you do before you die. The unnatural breath – dancing with death in a cell. Natural is boring, unnatural is out of the cell, on the outside, you become the cell (especially if you have a life sentence).

Dance as if you are dying. We don't really die, we don't want to lose body and soul, we want to take the body with us. Dance that way here.

The following year in Murobushi Kō's workshop, this time we focused on the breath in its vertical form, emphasizing its highest point, dancing from its highest point to inform the movement. In one unforgettable moment in class, Mr. Murobushi emulates a bird, reaching his arms high above his head, dancing at the highest point, dancing, dancing, until the breath is released and with a grace and speed that floored me, down to the ground he went only to rise again, higher and higher, effortlessly moving in space.

Also in 2004, I attended a workshop with Takuya Muramatsu. This workshop in particular stayed with me. He introduced to me the concept of the empty (neutral body). This resonated strongly with me. My acting training had taught me to attain a neutral body, ridding oneself from distracting bad habits on stage so to appear more truthful while in character. I was able to translate that in this

workshop. I saw the parallel. One must start with the same neutral body. As Mr. Muramatsu put it (and I paraphrase from notes), “we are the empty vessel – you can fill it with whatever you like.”

Later that year, I would experience something a little different with Vangelina, whose teaching at that time was influenced by her extensive training with butoh master Diego Piñon and his Butoh Ritual Mexicano. Her classes and workshop were electrifying and emotionally charged, something that I had not experienced in previous workshops. I was also experiencing a new level of intimacy and community, and something Vangelina is particularly keen at creating. She seemed to effortlessly guide us to our inner depths and a shared humanity. She put a fearlessness inside of me. We were asked to explore our soul and bear witness to each other’s suffering or joy, happiness or disappointment. We pushed and pulled each other and carried each other’s weight upon our backs. It was the perfect introduction to Diego himself.

Diego Piñon – the Stanislavski of butoh

Cabbages, eggs, potatoes, flowers, dried beans, saran wrap, and rope. These are some of the examples of items that were woven into Diego’s workshops. The day began with four bellows from a conch and a deep bow for each direction of the earth. We warmed up with rhythmic and repetitive tribal-like moves in a circle for an hour at a time. As the workshop progressed, Diego asked us to use objects to restrict the movement of the body, a cornerstone of his training. We carried eggs in our mouths or kept a potato lodged against our perineum as we walked through space. We unlocked the memories in our joints, hands gripping and releasing each other’s knees, elbows, shoulders, feet, and ankles, while he shouted “liberation!”

What Diego provided was a safe space to deeply explore emotions. He utilized exercises reminiscent of Constantin Stanislavski’s method acting training and emotional memory exercises. Diego guided us on emotional memory journeys of our mothers, fathers, and lovers whether fraught with pain and anguish or embellished with joy and abandon; no emotional stone was left unturned. Sometimes we worked with partners, acting as a witness to each other’s dance. Other times we would close our eyes and embed ourselves in our own universe, into our own private dance. In the end, however, just like with Vangelina, a community was built. A few hours together and a boundary had been lifted and a humanity was created with fellow classmates.

I was able to explore myself in ways that were otherwise inaccessible in other workshops – it was the physical satisfaction of dancing and sweating (with sore muscles and all) to emotional exhaustion – it was a grand catharsis each and every time.

On the stage

By 2004, I had been performing physical theatre vignettes, movement installations, and what I like to call ‘cabaret performance art’ for some time. Now I was ready to take my butoh training from the studio to the stage (or gallery or lawn or alley). My work was most definitely feminist and theatrical and I enjoyed creating female characters with a story to tell. With butoh, however, there was a natural broadening of perspective toward female archetypes (still with a story to tell) such as the madwoman (see Figure 46.1), the fallen woman, the beauty, and the diva. In terms of performance, the biggest shift was in the way that these characters moved. There was a new vibration, an intensity, a slowing down of time that I reveled in.

There is something primal about reaching down into the depths of my soul. Then, going even farther into the depths of the collective soul (for that is the space that I believe butoh inhabits and



Figure 46.1 Choreographer/performer Katherine Adamenko. *Water Cure* (Galapagos Art Space, 2005), photograph by Steve Zak.

a good explanation of its world-wide appeal), and bringing that back up *on and through my butoh body*, past the fourth wall, and into the stomachs of the audience members.

I am moving wildly with my water bottle, my lover, whom I love and hate simultaneously – feeling the deep penetration of heartbreak and ecstasy in just this one dance.

Such is the world of butoh.