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The Routledge Companion to  
Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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Bruce Baird, Rosemary Candelario

### My Dairakudakan Experience

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Julia A. Vessey

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# MY DAIRAKUDAKAN EXPERIENCE

*Julia A. Vessey*

My introduction to butoh was *Mark of the Sun*, choreographed and performed by Muramatsu Takuya, a senior member of Dairakudakan, the Japanese butoh company founded by Maro Akaji. The year was 2006 and I had finished my first year of graduate school at Arizona State University (ASU) and interned that summer at the American Dance Festival (ADF) in Durham, North Carolina. Caught in a fishing net, grimacing and writhing on the floor, Muramatsu was surrounded by male and female dancers painted white. I was struck by the hauntingly raw and expressive movement. I spent the next two years of graduate school studying everything I could about butoh and returned to ADF after graduating to intern once more, this time with Dairakudakan. After this internship, I was invited to join the company in Japan for their summer intensive, held in Nagano, Japan. That summer of 2008 was the beginning of my journey reevaluating and reconfiguring my concepts as a dancer, artist, and teacher.

Dairakudakan's summer intensive is open to interested dancers who train and perform alongside company members. Maro lectures each evening, discussing his teaching philosophy, concepts of choreography and movement, and creation of personal style. Different from my formal training and dance experience, I found his lectures bewildering, but I was intrigued and determined to understand. Led by Muramatsu, each day at the summer intensive began with movement training that gave dancers the opportunity to explore the evening lecture topics through dance. A performance for the public with Dairakudakan members and students is held on the final evening of the camp. At the end of the summer intensive, the night before I was to return home, I met with Maro. He invited me to return to Japan the next year to study and perform with Dairakudakan. I was the first westerner invited to do so. One year later I returned to Tokyo to do just that.

In July of 2009, I arrived in Tokyo with one suitcase ready to study, dance, rehearse, perform, and live with members of Dairakudakan for the coming year. Work, classes, rehearsal, and performance all take place at the Kochuten Theater in Kichijoji, Tokyo, the home of Dairakudakan. Most days included rehearsals and classes of some kind, both mornings and afternoons. Maro taught some and rehearsed his work, but Muramatsu, Mukai Kumotaro, and other senior members also led classes and rehearsals.

At this point in my training as a choreographer and dancer, I was reasonably skillful at imitating the styles of teachers, choreographers, and dancers, having not yet developed my own teaching, choreographic, and performing style. Therefore my early approach to butoh was to mimic the movement of my Dairakudakan teachers. Additionally, I attempted to learn butoh through

the lens of modern and ballet techniques. I soon learned words like “alignment” and “rotation” are not used in butoh training. I struggled to achieve the butoh aesthetic while maintaining “proper” ballet and modern technique because I did not realize that these skills are foreign to the execution of butoh. Of all the dancers who are currently in Dairakudakan, only two are trained classical dancers, one in ballet and one in Korean dance. Dancers trained in western styles of dance, including myself, have a difficult time learning butoh. For example, the corps de ballet in companies incorporate dancers close to the same body size and type, with arms and legs creating the same lines at all times. This is not how butoh works. Dancers are to embody a feeling, image, or idea and let that experience influence the way the body moves, as opposed to matching the movement of others. My western approach to butoh began to fall away. I stopped trying to mimic the other dancers and truly allowed my body to find its own way to move. As soon as I began letting go of my dependence on habits of western training and stopped limiting my body by keeping those rules, I began experiencing the exhilaration of this new, free form of dance.

The next step in my journey was to focus on the choreographic process of butoh. The way that Maro and the Dairakudakan members created work was, again, breaking the rules of my previous training. The butoh pieces had scenes that collectively told a story. However, this story was never given to the audience as in a classical ballet. The scenes were simply titled in the program and that was all the information the audience was given. Maro values the experience of his audience and their willingness to allow the suspension of reality and exploration of the unexpected. For one of his full-length performances, he might find inspiration in one simple idea creating a world for the dancers to perform in. There may be a story with characters that he develops for his dancers, but the story is only minimally conveyed to the audience by titles of the piece and names of scenes. The bulk of the story is uniquely experienced by each audience member. For the audience to completely understand every moment of the piece is not significant. What makes the work come alive is the personal history of each audience member and his own life experiences that attach significance to the scenes. This is Maro’s gift to the audience. The humanness of butoh, the honesty of the movement, makes butoh an individually understood experience that is not dependent on shared language or culture.

For the choreographer and dancers, however, the story was essential to the development of movement. The movement we learned during butoh training classes was not necessarily what was performed onstage. In ballet and modern, we practice in class what will be performed onstage. In butoh, these class exercises are designed to develop the mind and body connection. Interestingly, the Dairakudakan members do not take daily butoh classes. They learn by going through the choreographic process and by performing. Division of sexes and seniority are prevalent in the choreographic process and performance. The more senior dancers are the “leaders” of their groups, meaning they are responsible for remembering all the choreography, counts, and corrections, and making the vocalizations that are used to inform dancers of a choreographic change. Dairakudakan does not use music to inform tempo or duration of movement. The counts are given and set and practiced without music. The music is usually added a week or two before the performance.

Toward the end of my time in Japan I was invited to choreograph for Dairakudakan’s Kochuten Series. The Kochuten Series provides an opportunity for emerging Dairakudakan members to choreograph and perform under the guidance of Maro in order to further develop their own butoh style. Started in 2001 and named after the small Tokyo basement that Dairakudakan uses as office, workshop, rehearsal, and training space, as well as a performance venue, the Kochuten Series has seen numerous unique performances choreographed and performed by Dairakudakan members. The first piece presented in this series was the iconic *Paradise in a Jar Odyssey 2001*, choreographed by Dairakudakan’s senior member Mukai Kumotaro. Maro describes the butoh

that is happening in this series as “post-post-post-butoh dance.” This is the place where Maro’s butoh is evolving.

For my Kochuten Series performance, I was joined by Dairakudakan dancers Takakuwa Akiko and Yang Jongye in my piece that I called *With Weight*. With its presentation I became the first western performer and choreographer to be a part of this series. The preparation, choreographing, and training for my performance constituted a grueling two-month schedule filled with rehearsals that often lasted all day, as well as set and costume construction. Maro periodically attended my rehearsals along with the rest of the company to provide feedback. However, Takuya was the senior member who worked with me daily. Under Maro’s guidance, the choreographer of butoh must have an image and a reason behind all movement in the piece. The storyline must be clearly thought through and translated into the most appropriate and honest movement. Honesty of movement is considered vitally important. Maro then pushes these ideas even further, delighting in pushing to what seems like a ridiculous place, an odd or unexpected result. He then pushes for extreme movement and powerful physical imagery to convey this ridiculous place. The pace of choreographing, intensity of rehearsal, and endurance of the constant pressure of pushing the boundaries is emotionally and physically exhausting. However, the final product under Maro is always breathtaking, fresh, and vibrant.

Maro created a word for describing his concept of butoh, *temputenshiki*, which he translates as “being born in the world is a great talent itself.” This concept has profoundly influenced me as an educator and a choreographer. I am currently an adjunct faculty member at James Madison University (JMU), where I teach ballet, modern, dance improvisation, and butoh. Students often seek to replicate the western vision of dancing and this now seems to me to be limiting. Strongly influenced by my butoh experience, I see expressive beauty in the less trained and more unusual movers, and encourage everyone to approach ballet and modern techniques in their own unique way. The second invented word is *miburi-teburi*, which refers to the daily, elemental movement (e.g., pouring tea into a cup) that Maro prefers to use as the foundation of his work.

In addition to *temputenshiki* and *miburi-teburi*, Maro has developed three specific concepts which are the basic building blocks of his philosophy, teaching, and choreography. The first is *ma*, the second is *igata*, and the third is *chūtai*. These concepts also fully inform my pedagogical and choreographic approaches. The concept of space, or *ma*, is important in Maro’s butoh. It encompasses not only the body’s space but the space which surrounds the body. This can include such things as the space between body parts, such as between fingers, or between the arm and torso. *Ma* can also refer to the space between dancers on stage, the space between the dancers and the audience, the space between dancers and the people in the city, country, the world, the universe. *Ma* has also been described by Maro as the breath between sentences, or between words, or the space between conversations. Every word, every movement must honor the vastness of *ma*. There is an endless use of *ma*, and we are connected at all times to everyone and to everything in the universe.

*Igata* is called mold body and is used to explore fundamental movement derived from conscious and unconscious thought. Maro describes *igata* as a moment of time in the mind and body, and, perhaps more richly, as the sum of all. Like a spinning top, the body looks still and quiet but is dense with movement. There is a Buddhist saying that Maro quotes: *shikisokuzeku kuzesokushiki*, which is translated as “everything is empty, empty is everything.” Butoh exists because of me, I exist because of butoh. To find and explore *igata*, the dancer begins with a situation occurring in daily life, such as walking down the street or sipping a cup of tea. Then an incident occurs, a *jiken*. This incident is not clearly defined and can be something as simple as tripping or having your mouth burned by the tea. The significance of the incident is not the incident itself, but the response that interrupts the flow of daily activity. Normal activity is interrupted and a different

movement is called for. This is the moment when the dancer enters the butoh experience, the moment of connection between the conscious self and the *jiken*.

*Chu tai* is space body, the idea that the body is manipulated or affected by something or someone. First the dancer is asked to imagine the body as a bag made of skin, full of water, and this water is moved by something from either inside or outside the bag. The skin is your brain and you must think with your skin. This exercise is designed to stimulate fresh and interesting movement. Movement is developed from exploratory play. It is important to remember this exercise is not mime. There are five tools that Maro uses to develop the exploration of *chu tai*. They can be used individually or in any combination. The first tool is time. The dancer is encouraged to study the effects of time. For example, he might study the transformation of a baby into an old woman, a tree blossoming in spring and losing its leaves in the fall, or rust spreading across a fence. The evidence of the passage of time influences the shapes and movement of the dancer conveying these changes. The second tool is the environment. Imagining frigid cold, stifling heat, fierce wind, or gentle breezes exerts influence over movement. Just as the passage of time alters shapes and movement in butoh, so do imagined environmental influences. The third tool is occupation. A Japanese rice farmer might display a chronic hunched back from working the rice paddies; a sumo wrestler would be large, aggressive, and powerful; a Japanese businessman might be small, intense, and anxious. Occupation affects body shapes and actions, thereby influencing how a dance might reflect that reality. The fourth tool is emotion, as the dancer's emotional state affects the shape of the body. The fifth tool is an awareness and acknowledgment of physical differences in people, such as a handicapping condition like palsy or the loss of a limb. The idea of the *chu tai* being affected by something can perhaps be related to Maro's idea of "flavored *ma*," meaning there is an emotion, a situation, an animal, anything imaginable that can influence the space of your mind and your body, your *ma*.

When I first learned these three basic aspects of Maro's butoh philosophy, I did not see their connection with my previous training. As I spent more time immersed in butoh, however, my understanding of these concepts deepened and I began to internalize them into my own performing, teaching, and choreographic styles. Additionally, I realized that I was now intuitively using these ideas on a regular basis in my own classroom experiences. Where these concepts seem most useful is when I am teaching performance quality, the qualitative execution of movement. Performance quality is that *je ne sais quoi* of a dancer, the light that radiates from within someone that makes the audience want to watch them. The dancer must connect with other dancers and with the audience and must radiate the intention of the piece, defined by the choreographer. The butoh dancer is always living within the intention of the movement while being connected to all those around him. Students of western schools of dance are taught the physical and technical locations of the body, but intention may be an afterthought. In my early experiences as a student and as a teacher, I focused on this physicality and left out intention. I then realized that I was moving differently onstage during the performance experience because I was incorporating performance quality. When I saw my students perform, I made the same observation. The classroom dancer was completely different than the performing dancer. This was not how we practiced and performed in Dairakudakan. I started to adjust how I took class and also how I taught based on these butoh principles. Instead of focusing entirely on proper movement of the body, I began focusing on the equally important space around the body. Imagining the studio as a performance venue, feeling the energy of the imaginary audience, applying an image to inform the overall feeling of the phrase, and responding to that image all became important butoh inspired ingredients in my classes. Imagery is not an unfamiliar aspect in my training, but my comprehension of *chu tai* helped me to more fully understand the application of imagery to movement. This made my use of imagery as a teacher and choreographer more specific and effective. The ability to feel the

image in every cell of the body makes the movement become more authentic. The dancers do not act out or mimic the image, but allow the image to resonate throughout their bodies. Effecting stillness, sustaining movement and suspension are aspects of dance that can be challenging to execute. Often when a dancer attempts to execute the very slow, sustaining movement often seen in butoh, he will experience painful tightening of his muscles, leaving him off balance and unstable. Utilizing the concept of *igata*, sometimes described by Maro as the “spinning top density of stillness,” will help the dancer to find grace and smoothness in sustained stillness. Thinking of the body in constant motion changes the dancer’s perception and therefore the execution of stillness. It is impossible to move well with muscles tense and clenched. Using the concept of *igata* allows the dancer to find the fluidity inside of stillness.

Maro sees butoh and unique talent in all dancers. He calls it *ichinin-ippa*, which means “one dancer, one school.” This idea is that each individual should be able to create and express his or her own movement vocabulary, and each dancer has the talent to do that. The applauding of individuality and uniqueness in dancers, the connectivity of all humans, the embodiment of imagery have been the most influential aspects of my experience with Dairakudakan. Maro’s butoh is about seeing the world with fresh eyes and studying the world with honesty. Everyday is an opportunity to study and deepen one’s understanding of dance. Remembering *temputenshiki*, we are already talented dancers because we were born.

My time studying and performing with Maro and Dairakudakan has affected who I am as a teacher, choreographer, and performer. In particular, as a teacher and performer, my use of imagery has become essential to how I communicate performance qualities and technical execution. I believe the imaginative mind has great influence over the body, so I encourage imagination in the students to aid in their physical understanding of dance technique. Maro’s *temputenshiki* philosophy has expanded my acceptance and recognition of specialness in all students. It has also become more important in my choreographic approach. When I am commissioned to create work on a new set of dancers, I do not force my specific choreography onto them. Before I begin choreographing, I first watch to see how each dancer moves, looking for some special thing about each of them. Then I set a piece on the dancers that incorporates their uniqueness. My work has become more about discovery of individuality in movement and celebration of that individuality. Maro, through his butoh teaching, has taught me to see butoh in every aspect of life and in every person, and to constantly study the world around me for expressive butoh moments. He has, in other words, opened my eyes to see more clearly the unique and expressive beauty that is always all around us.