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The Routledge Companion to  
Butoh Performance



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### Butoh as an Approach to Performance in South Africa

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# BUTOH AS AN APPROACH TO PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

*jacki job*

I am a female solo dancer, teacher, and researcher currently based at the University of Cape Town. My formative dance years were in release-based contemporary dance,<sup>1</sup> contact improvisation, and mpantsula<sup>2</sup> in Cape Town. To that I later added eight years of study of butoh in Japan with Ohno Yoshito. In my work, I embrace my background in multiple dance and cultural forms that include but are not exclusive to Africa.

When I took my first journey out of South Africa in 1994 as an independent artist,<sup>3</sup> I travelled to London and created a work with the intention of responding to reductive, binary stereotypes that put South African people in White or Black race boxes. Singular stylistic expectations of dancers are usually based on these racial descriptions. I wanted to introduce myself in dance, but not as a Black body that does traditional African dance and moves to the beat of a drum with foot stamps, syncopated rhythms, and a fluid, undulating torso. I wanted to deliver a more nuanced description of my identity, stemming from my upbringing in apartheid South Africa and an involuntary absorption of the meticulous attention paid to officially dividing people into four racial categories. White (defined as of European descent) was placed at the top end of the economic spectrum. Much further down the scale of socio-political advantage were those classified Indian (of Indian descent). They were followed closely by the Coloured category (described as neither White nor Black), and at the bottom of the scale, positioned with the most disadvantages in terms of education, economics, job opportunities and living opportunities, were those classified as Black (of African descent). For me, growing up as Coloured in a community of people who largely believed themselves to be neither White or Black, but someplace in between, became a lens for me to create a solo work called *Daai za Lady*, a colloquial expression in English for “That’s a Lady.” The main intention was to create a dance language that like my identity could not be described in unitary terms. *Daai za Lady* is a self-constructed, imaginary hybrid figure that explores the physical, psychological, and emotional aspects of a woman imbued with the spirit of a horse. From 1994 to 2004, several installations of the character *Daai za Lady* emerged and her hybrid parts, including male, female, horse, and flower parts, explored.

Upon my arrival in Japan in 2003, I thus brought with me an established body of work that focused on expressing a dance identity that provokes a more nuanced and complex perception of identity through the leitmotif of *Daai za Lady*. This repertoire aims to find a holistic way of being that is not contained within the structures of race and gender, as well as its associated stereotypes. It is a liminal state that subverts structure, roles, and relationships encumbered by categorizations

of self (Turner, 2017). When I worked with Ohno Yoshito in Japan, he often asked a question that I understood on quite a personal level, “What is your butoh?” (Ohno, 2004–2011). I do not replicate the methodologies of butoh as I received them in Japan. However, I purposefully draw specific principles from butoh philosophies and its notions of the body to deepen my solo practice and focus on hybrid identity. These principles have led to my developing a methodology of teaching and understanding of performance that I call “my butoh.” Through *Daai za Lady* I use the idiosyncrasies of my body, upbringing, and everyday experiences to find meaning in who I am, on my own terms and not subsumed by Western aesthetics of performance. These intentions connect with the founders of butoh, Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo, and their desire to find a unique body language. Whilst I was living in Tokyo from 2003 to 2011, butoh became a viable tool for deepening my solo performance and visceral conviction that we are not just our bodies but entail bodies of wisdom from multiple sources within and around us. This sensation and conviction has intensified since my return to South Africa, a country still fraught with racial conflict and economic disparities.

This chapter begins with contextualizing my investigation of butoh as a form, methodology, and pedagogic tool within Dance, Theatre, and Performance Studies in South Africa. It briefly discusses my research with professional ballet dancers from Cape Town City Ballet, my artistic role as choreographer and director of *African Angels* with the Cape Town Opera Company, and my role as teacher of drama students of the University of Cape Town. Finally, I theorize some of the philosophies that underpin my research and teaching that is applied to a range of performers seeking creative ways of engaging with multiple issues concerning identity and socio-political transformation in South Africa, in order to problematize notions of the Body and Performance.

### Re-imagining “South African”

Making sense of the complexities of identity in South Africa requires imagination, or as South African sociologist Zimitri Erasmus says, “a re-imagination of our identities” (Erasmus, 2001, 21). In addition, I believe a willingness to engage with the unfamiliar is of fundamental importance. In terms of dance in South Africa, ballet, contemporary, and African dance are entangled in processes, methodologies, and performance aesthetics that are best described by South African theatre-maker Jay Pather as “shaped by a colonial hangover that we have not shaken off” (Pather, 2007, 11). Pather claims that we need to develop a set of aesthetics that are informed by a life lived within and of our communities in this time and in this place. Personally, butoh has provided me with the tools to ameliorate self-styled aesthetics, and from both theoretical and practical positions I have been able to interrogate ways of applying it to performance processes in South Africa.

Theoretically, I use indigenous research methodologies in combination with philosophies in phenomenology as a means to make sense of butoh in a South African context. Indigenous research methodologies, as expounded by Linda Tuhiwai-Smith (1999), suggest the centering of our own concerns and experiences as a way to understand theories and research from our own perspective. Examining these experiences with a phenomenological methodology suggests an analysis of imagination and the perception of the world beyond simple descriptions of what they are. Drawing from Gallagher and Zahavi (2008), phenomenology reflects on how things appear and expands an understanding of how that description correlates to and informs our experience. Therefore, it helps us pay attention to the way in which we experience reality and as a consequence, how combinations of different actions affect the world in which we live. These notions of indigenous research methodologies and phenomenology connect to butoh, especially when we consider how the insertion of personalized characters give performances of butoh various manifestations of form and content. Butoh artists are described as understated and nude, antiheroic, wild, spiritual, mystical, existentially dark and void, and

uplifting; sometimes a single artist can portray all of this. Fundamentally, I believe performances framed within phenomenology's introspection and butoh philosophy have the possibility to move one beyond the "categorical formations [that] we inherit" (Sokolowski, 2000, 167).

In practical terms, I draw on principles from butoh that relate to broadening notions of the body and performance, and assimilate these philosophies into my performance and teaching. There is the principle of restraint, which I interpret as a restraint from oneself, achieved by repressing the urge to respond to stimuli in ways that one usually would. Another is a conscious physical and psychological focus on oppositional forces, such as the idea of the beauty in the monster, or the continuum of life in death in life. The principle of perception, physically experienced by imagining eyes under the feet, on the back, hands, as well as the surrounding environment, is useful in developing multiple perspectives of the processes of creation. The inversion of body weight and body parts also serves to re-imagine the body and psychically will a different expression, presence, and understanding of narratives. The idea of learning from both animate and inanimate elements, such as embodying the density of stones, or delicateness of a tissue, shift the quality and dynamics of movement in the body. Combinations of butoh principles enable a specific body language and conscious choice in how movements, narratives, and characters are articulated.

This process is extremely physical and requires a particular understanding and awareness of the body. To this end, I have developed a style of movement, called *Movement Dynamics*<sup>TM</sup>, often taught in the warm-up phase of my teaching sessions. It comprises a series of physical, cardio-vascular, and muscle toning exercises and movements, to bring awareness, release, and a different perception to what may be considered as smaller or even hidden parts of the body. For example, realizing the middle fingers as alternative spines, releasing the neck by tapping the bone behind the ear, utilizing the armpit and shoulder to initiate arm movements, finding balance by focusing on the heart, or consciously inhaling to elevate and expand the body, or exhaling to deflate and release certitudes and perceived limitations of the body. *Movement Dynamics* also brings a consciousness to the surrounding environment and prepares the body to find meta-physical meaning in the exploration of various butoh principles.

In my teaching, metaphors inform many of the butoh exercises following the warm-up and are helpful in challenging stereotypes. For example, psycho-physically imagining and embodying the vastness of the sky, or slow-moving heat of the summer sun can problematize the stereotypical representation of Black people as energetic, colorful, or loud. In addition, imagining eyes under the feet and on the fingertips enables a sensitive movement quality and forces a close up look at where, what, why, and how we touch and tread as go through our daily lives. Butoh classes taught by Ohno Yoshito in Japan end with the drinking of tea. The end of my class draws from this custom. No actual tea is drunk; however, a "cup of tea" is the phrase that marks a moment of consolidation and coherence, whereby the performers can decompress and assimilate the work into their practice by sharing their experiences. I have drawn several comments from the final cup-of-tea phase of the class, which reaffirm my conviction that butoh has relevance and is a viable tool in approaching performance making practices in South Africa.

### **Butoh approaches to ballet, opera, and theater-making**

The fact that we are all encased in bodies that signify meaning extends my work beyond dancers who generally use their limbs in a conscious way to deliver meaning. It includes actors and opera singers, who may be less aware of the potential of their bodies and how it could add meaning to their performance. My aim is not to get them to move in a butoh-esque fashion. Rather, I find that butoh puts the body in research and interrogates its potential and significance in

performance. Therefore, the performer's skill is intensified as they become capable of demonstrating different depths and nuances to their narratives and more adept at creating a sense of magic that all performers yearn for.

According to Cape Town City Ballet dancers (job, 2014), butoh heightened their imagination and embodiment of characters. One dancer mentioned that following her butoh experience, when next playing a character in a classical ballet, such as *Giselle*, she would first look with the eyes on her back before moving. For her, realizing this sensation and awareness of the body makes a huge difference to the more conventional, controlled rendering of the back in classical ballet. This active and different engagement of the body changes the interpretation of the music and provokes a different emotion within the dancer. If done consistently, this can infuse classical ballet with new meaning and alternative ways of expressing aesthetics. This ideology fits into Spivak's notion of aesthetic education and how it requires going beyond agendas set by established centers of learning. It creates the sense of shifting the sacred from its pedestal by proposing alternative ways of performance. For me, butoh has become a provocative tool in nurturing "an epistemological performance through a rearrangement of desires" (Spivak, 2012, 125) and shifts the conventionally undisputed authority of what we hold as ideal. I apply butoh in an aesthetic training that engages the imagination to not only see what is there, but also what is not, by rendering the invisible, visible, and in the process, destabilizing power structures.

Shifting notions of what is held as sacred and thus formulaic in theater-making processes into a more indigenous and contested place, is demonstrated in the production *African Angels*, performed by Cape Town Opera. This opera concert is performed by 18 singers and moves through classical repertoire, gospel, traditional African tunes, as well as jazz. During the time of my association with the production from 2013 to 2016 it was performed in the biggest opera houses and concert halls in Germany and Holland. The prestige of venues associated with what is perceived as sacred in the way classical opera repertoires are delivered, increased the performers' anxiety and sense of responsibility to live up to the ideal. My directing processes, however, lean toward the notions of Antoine Vitez, who claims that performance work has to be "both the preserver of ancient forms of expression and the adversary of traditions" (Vitez in Pavis, 1996, 127). In the rehearsal processes with *African Angels*, I considered how to ignite what has been submerged and internalized, in order for the performers as well as the audiences to listen, recognize the familiar in the unfamiliar, and at subliminal and visceral levels, establish a different connection to their traditions and their skill. Would it be possible for their bodies to sing and, thereby, provoke audiences to listen differently? I found a way to experiment with this idea in the transition between a medley of songs from the musical *Showboat* (1936) and a rendering of a Nina Simone tune, "Strange Fruit" (Simone, 1965).<sup>4</sup>

In this scene, we first considered the unspoken racial prejudice and stereotypes in the narrative of *Showboat*, as well as Nina Simone's graphically explicit outcry against racism with the metaphor of strange fruit portraying Black bodies hanging from trees, and connected that to Black lives in South Africa. The invisible was made visible by reflecting on how human injustices associated with perceptions of race are still experienced in South Africa but remain silenced. Instead, positive images and romantic notions of transformation and multiculturalism are perpetuated in South African productions on international stages. Around the time of rehearsing *African Angels* in 2016, an incident occurred in South Africa where two White men, Willem Oosthuizen and Theo Martins Jackson, threatened to kill a Black man, Victor Mlotshwa, for trespassing on their farm. They put him in a coffin, threatened to douse him with petrol and bury him, all the while filming their sport. Fortunately, they did not follow through on their threats, but seemingly unaware of the gravity of their crime, posted this sickening incident on social media three months later. The video (Newsdesk, 2016) went viral and led to their arrest. In the wake of this, the cast

of *African Angels* felt obliged to say something about the ongoing racial disparities and hatred that continue to govern our actions in the country. It was important to generate a response within their performance of *African Angels*, and the song “Strange Fruit” became the perfect conduit for their emotions.

In staging the scene, I employed a butoh-esque aesthetic that might be considered disturbing in conventional opera. Instead of employing the center, the lead singer was placed far back on the left-side of the stage, and the rest of the cast positioned across the lip of the stage, where they silently stood, covering either their eyes, mouths, or ears. This staging could have forced the audience to employ their imagination in interpreting the scene, negotiate meaning between themselves and the silent, up close bodies, and then connect that to what they heard from a distance. Unfortunately, the scene was perceived by management as being racially provocative in its protest of violence and injustices toward Black bodies, and two days before the opening performance, management removed the scene from the December 2016 rendition of *African Angels*. However, the rehearsal processes and butoh experiences of the singers could not be censored and are noted hereafter.

I believe that just as the cast were required to sing differently and use their bodies, the scene could have provoked the audience to listen differently, and become conscious of bodies – both theirs and the performers. I like to think this scene could have led to an “affirmative sabotage” in Spivakian terms (Spivak, 2012). The inclusion of indigeneity, something derived and produced naturally, or born from the region, enabled the singers to shift what they held as sacred with imagination. In addition, the singers’ embodiment of butoh principles transmitted a performative energy from their silent bodies. In shaping the scene, they imagined eyes under their feet, back, and hands, and accessed an endarkened aesthetic that was not determined by Western rationale, but informed by inhabiting a metaphysical, phenomenological sense of themselves and their environment. When referring to the rehearsal process one singer claimed that the experience of placing eyes on her feet made her feel more careful as she moved through the space. This sensitivity forced a different connection to the body and the space. She poetically claims, “to wear the song [. . .in order to] truth-sing and deliver the message of what is hidden within my body” (Pam, 2017).<sup>5</sup>

In *African Angels*, butoh was a legitimate tool for placing the singers’ bodies in research and specific exercises triggered their desire to look into darkness. I believe the scene potentially demonstrates one way for performers and the audience to re-establish visceral connections with traditions, as well as re-imagine their assumptions of knowledge. According to Molefi Kete Asante, if language possesses an instrumentality, it provides a way for persons to understand and transform their reality. In other words, “It must be able *to do something* toward transforming particular ways of knowing and producing knowledge” (Asante in Denzin et al, 2008, 279). Whether this knowledge is demonstrated in the mode of dancing, singing, or acting, I believe the process of creation should “shift the boundaries of the familiar, of what we assume that we know” (Ahmed, 2000, 7) and broaden the thinking around transforming bodies in South Africa from the perspectives of both participants and the observers.

At the University of Cape Town, my third year drama students created practical work that required a phenomenological engagement with their performance space. Here, the notion of possessing multiple eyes extends to the space and its way of looking, thus creating a partnership and dialogue with the environment, including the walls, floors, trees, and sand. The process of artistically examining what might otherwise be taken for granted or represented mimetically, enables the actors to find lateral ways of engaging with site specific work and link it to their personal narratives. The actors’ historical research of various sites on campus identified one toilet building to be a place where slaves had been killed. An actor whose work focused on the shame experienced with an abnormal menstrual cycle chose to use the toilets as her performance site

and draw from its abhorrent history as a place of bloodshed. Approaching the work with the previously referenced butoh principles enabled an embodiment of the phenomenological narrative of the site together with the crafting of a particular movement language, texture, and dynamic of the body, thus rendering a re-imagining of the body and its environment.

When I asked the students about their experiences with the butoh principles, several actors related how the physical processes specific to their engagement with butoh built strength and a sense of having multiple foundations in the body. This was especially heightened with one student, an above-knee amputee, who claimed the combination of *Movement Dynamics* and butoh principles facilitated an exploration of different ways to balance and stand. The actors also spoke about how the processes in butoh relating to ways of seeing can be applied to how they view their performance scripts. For example, they relate it to looking at the material peripherally and finding meaning hidden in and in between the lines. They found the introspection of butoh to enable a stripping of their bodies as well as the text, allowing them to portray their vulnerabilities from a truly corporeal perspective. One Coloured actor claimed to have found ways to validate her story, including her fears and ambiguous support experienced in the politics of everyday social life, even if they do not easily fit into the popular narrative of a non-racialized South Africa. Another actor mentioned how inhabiting a different perception of the body, discovered when, for example, initiating movement with the wings on the back, seemed to trigger memories of another being, perhaps an animal being, rendering the self unfamiliar and curious.

Ideas of transformation and feelings that several performers describe as love seem to be the most frequently expressed views from those with whom I work. In terms of transformation, after engaging with butoh principles in their performance-making processes, they do not claim to be butoh artists. They are aware, however, of how this Japanese mode has been made specific to a South African context and, in the process, precipitated a transformation of themselves and the space, in turn creating a third or in-between space. Rustom Bharucha states this in-between space is “found when we open ourselves up to other spheres and find overlapping in blurred spaces that bring us together” (Bharucha, 2000, 122). For me, it is also found in the interrogation of love, which, similar to bell hooks (2000), I understand to be an action rather than a feeling. As an action, we can interrogate the complexities and ambiguities of love, as well as be accountable and responsible for what we do. Ohno Yoshito claims that love is the primary intention behind all of his father’s work (Ohno, 2004). This is echoed by the actors, dancers, and opera singers who engaged with butoh processes in their performance making. After trying to express love with a sense of a disabled body, an actor claims “to find beauty and love within his ugliness” (Charles, 2017). One ballet dancer, initially embarrassed to do an exercise that forced broken and incomplete lines, claims to feel “so in love” (Cindy, 2013) at the end of the session. Finally, I will risk being esoteric and recall one opera singer who mentions how, “it is our job to change the energy in the room and realize that we are all brothers and sisters. Respect me, and I will respect you” (Pam, 2017).

## Epilogue

*Daai za Lady* is always there, as evidenced in *Love Is . . .* (job, 2012, 2017). This leitmotif remains a palimpsest in my journey with butoh and ultimately my exploration of love.

To find the feeling of being born again,  
have a sense of not knowing  
as we go through  
this world.

To know that when I fall,  
 I will find  
 invisible strands of support  
 on which to hang,  
 and move  
 through.  
 Always curious  
 to find what it means to be a person  
 through what may be  
 deemed as different,  
 difficult  
 and strange.

### Notes

- 1 Between 1988 and 1993, I was associated with the Jazzart Dance Theatre, established in 1973 in Cape Town, South Africa. In the 1980s and 1990s, a time when oppressive apartheid separatist systems were rife, Jazzart Dance Theatre was known for its anti-establishment choreographic works that incorporated people of different age, gender, sexuality, and race descriptions.
- 2 Mpantsula is a form of South African street dance that requires multiple, fast footwork syncopated to the off-beat rhythms of Township Jive, a genre of popular music in South Africa.
- 3 I was a professional dance member of Jazzart Dance Theatre from 1990 to 1993. In 1994 I co-founded an independently funded dance company called Jagged Dance Theatre, and embarked on making solo performances. Jagged officially disbanded in 1998 and since then I continue to perform, choreograph, produce, and direct inter-disciplinary works in my capacity as a solo artist.
- 4 The song is based on a poem written by written by Abel Meeropol in 1937, and later set to music by Meeropol. The song was first recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939.
- 5 Note: pseudonyms have been used to provide anonymity for all persons interviewed and whose comments are reflected in this chapter. First names are specifically used as opposed to the convention of surnames, in order to signal the value of personhood and individuality.

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