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The Routledge Companion to  
Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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## 50

## TANAKA MIN

## The dance of life

*Zack Fuller*

Tanaka Min is an innovator in international contemporary dance who has extended the legacy of the radical experiments of the avant-garde dance movements of the 1960s into an experimental practice unlike that of any other major dancer/choreographer. He has performed thousands of improvised outdoor solo dances. His training methods have been disseminated around the world, including such places as Denmark, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. His version of *The Rite of Spring* (*Haru no saiten*) was featured in the film *Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis*, his collaboration with avant-garde pianist Cecil Taylor and his solo performances in Indonesia have been the subject of feature-length documentaries, and he is an award-winner film actor. In the Czech Republic he retains the status of an avant-garde hero, having risked imprisonment to perform secretly in communist Prague. The French Ministry of Culture awarded him the title of *Chevalier des arts et lettres* in 1990. He has collaborated with writers such as Felix Guattari and Susan Sontag, and visual artists such as Giulio Turcato, Murakami Takashi, and Noriyuki Haraguchi. The musicians and composers he has worked with represent a wide variety of different styles of twentieth century music, and include the free-jazz percussionist Milford Graves, the multi-instrumentalist noise musician Haino Keiji, Velvet Underground founder John Cale, and the composer Iannis Xenakis. He is a unique figure in the dance world in that each aspect of his dance practice (improvised dance, training, and choreographic methodology) is informed by his daily life as an organic vegetable farmer. While it is impossible to do justice to such an incredibly prolific and mercurial artist in an essay of this length, I will here clarify certain aspects of his praxis, with an overview of his career highlighting some of his major contributions to dance in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.

Tanaka's work is characterized by periodic renewal and experimentation rather than the development and mastery of formalized structures. He once stated that his conceptualization of dance does not include the dance "piece," because for him dance is never finished (Tanaka 2011). His dances are series of explorations rather than fixed works. Those where he is the sole dancer are entirely improvised, with titles such as *Subject: Heurystic Ecdysis* (1999) or *Locus Focus* (*Ba odori* 2006–2016) that provide a pretext for open experimentation rather than a defined subject. Dances entirely different in structure and movement vocabulary are presented under the same title. While his group work is generally much more precisely composed and rehearsed, with a relatively defined subject, dances such as *Rite of Spring* (*Haru no saiten*) (1990), the *Goya* dances (2000–2002), and *Kidnapping* (*Hitosarai*) (2000) were restructured, often radically, each time they

were performed in a different place. The training exercises that Tanaka proposed in his workshops (often termed Body Weather training) were likewise very open, with clear methodological principles but no fixed or ideal form (Fuller 2014).

While Tanaka's improvised dance, training practices, and choreographic methodology are characterized by a resistance to formalization, he began his life as a dancer with a strong training in dance technique. Like the first generation of butoh dancers, Ohno Kazuo, Hijikata Tatsumi, and Kasai Akira, Tanaka was trained in Western style modern dance before developing his own radically experimental practice. He began training in modern dance and ballet in 1963 in Tokyo with Hiraoka Shiga, a prominent dance teacher and choreographer strongly influenced by the work of Martha Graham (Marshall 2006). Graham's technique was the dominant style of modern dance training in Japan at the time (Kusaka 2002). In the late 1960s and early 1970s Tanaka performed with Hiraoka's dance company and became established as a modern dancer in Tokyo (Harada 2004). In 1974 he abandoned this career to concentrate on developing improvised, site-specific, minimalist dance. He shaved his head and body hair, dancing wearing nothing but an Ace bandage covering his genitals, using primarily *bisoku* (extremely slow) movement, in a widely differing array of spaces including public areas such as streets, parks, and subway stations, as well as art galleries and private homes. For approximately seven years he danced in this manner, lowering himself, in full contact with the ground where countless people had walked, spit, and deposited their refuse. In December of 1977 he danced on *Yume-no-shima* (Dream Island), a small island in Tokyo Bay that was used as a garbage dump, in what was essentially a field of garbage, exposing his body to broken glass, metal, and filth, at times covered by countless flies (Uno et al. 2007). During this period he was frequently arrested, though his use of the elastic bandage and lack of pubic hair prevented him from being charged with an actual crime. He called this dance practice by different names: *Subject*, *Butai* (Dance State), *Dance Doings*, *Hyperdance*, or *Drive*, and would often dance three or four times a day. Many of these performances were done in collaboration with Noguchi Minoru, a musician and composer working in the *musique concrète* mode (Fuller 2012).

Harada Hiromi, in her *Butō Taizen* (*Butō Encyclopedia*), writes that during this period Tanaka was bringing postmodern dance to Japan, comparing this early work to that of Anna Halprin and Judson Dance Theatre. She foregrounds his interest in breaking away from the conventional relationship between audience and performer, challenging audiences to see themselves and their environment in new ways (Harada 2004). While Tanaka's "naked" dances arose out of a similar questioning or search for new possibilities in dance, what he was doing was something quite different from the American postmodern dance of the 1960s and 1970s. The originality of his project consisted in part in of unprecedented layering of a multiplicity of experimental tactics employed by both the U.S. and Japanese avant-gardes.<sup>1</sup> While in the 1960s, dance artists experimented with minimalism, nudity, pedestrian movement, endurance, the use of non-traditional performance space, site specificity, improvisation as performance, playing with the relationship between audience and performer, and blurring the boundaries between art and daily life, no one combined all of these into a practice of dance and sustained that practice for so long. Tanaka has acknowledged his admiration for Anna Halprin, yet whatever inspiration he may have had from Halprin or accounts of the postmodern dance scene in the United States, what he was doing was quite unlike the work of Halprin, Judson Dance Theater, or the much more figurative work that Hijikata and others associated with butoh were doing.

It was during this "naked" period, in 1977, that Tanaka began collaborating with the cultural critic Matsuoka Seigo, then the editor of *YU* (Play) magazine. Tanaka's discussions with Matsuoka formed the conceptual basis for the work of Body Weather Laboratories, a collective they formed in 1978 whose investigations into language, music, and the body under Tanaka's

leadership marked the start of his ongoing experiments with group work in his workshops and choreography (Kobata 2011). While the term Body Weather (*Shintai kisho*) later came to be associated primarily with the workshop exercises developed by Body Weather Laboratories and by Tanaka after that group was no longer in existence, Tanaka maintains that Body Weather is not a type of performer training but an ideology or personal philosophy of life informing all of his activities, including his farming work, dance, and training methodology. Body Weather considers the body as omni-centric and, like weather, in a state of continual flux. Body Weather values personal autonomy, collaboration, and constant variation as means of resisting the stratification of habituated form (Fuller 2014).

Due to Matsuoka's influence, Tanaka was invited to perform in the *Espace Temps-MA* exhibition, an exhibition of Japanese art, cinema, and performance at the Festival D'Automne in Paris in 1978 (Kobata 2011). This was the first time he had performed outside of Japan. At the festival, the French press categorized him as a butoh dancer, along with the other Japanese dancers who had been invited to perform there (Aslan and Picon-Vallin 2002). While the image of a naked dancer with a shaved head carries associations with butoh for many, what Tanaka was doing was starker and much more minimalist than the butoh of Hijikata and those directly influenced by him. After the festival Tanaka continued to travel, performing in Europe and in New York City at the Clocktower Gallery under the Auspices of PS1 Contemporary Art Center. In subsequent appearances in New York City and events such as the Avignon and Nancy Festivals in France and the Reykjavik Festival in Iceland, he met the artists Karel Appel and Richard Serra, both of whom he would collaborate with in later years.<sup>2</sup> In the same period he began collaborating with the percussionist Milford Graves (Uno et. al 2007), a major innovator in what is often termed "free jazz," or what Valerie Wilmer in 1977 termed "the New Black Music" (Wilmer 1977). Tanaka's collaboration with Graves is particularly significant in that Graves was the first musician Tanaka encountered whose playing technique mirrored the use of the body that he had been developing in *Hyperdance*, what might be termed an ametrical polyrhythmic independence. When in my interviews with him I suggested to Tanaka that his relation with music might correspond to counterpoint, Tanaka referred to the term polyrhythm, which he learned from Graves: "Maybe I have a kind of polyrhythm in my body" (Tanaka 2011).

In 1981 Tanaka formed the dance group Majjuku (Dance School), which was initially composed of dancers who had participated in his Body Weather Laboratory (Kobata 2011). Majjuku was composed of performers from Japan, Spain, The Netherlands, France, and New Zealand. Over the next sixteen years the group would create dances such as *Moon at Noon* (Hiru no tsuki, 1985), *Can We Dance a Landscape?* (Wareware wa fukei o odoreru ka, 1987), and *Ancient Women* (Kodai fujin, 1994). Generally speaking, Tanaka's approach to choreographing group work is collaborative. He does not choreograph in the traditional sense of teaching his own dance to those he works with, but proposes images, actions, and qualities to the dancers, who develop their own individual movements, which Tanaka then develops through verbal feedback.

After years of training in modern dance followed by years of rigorous experimentation, Tanaka encountered Hijikata Tatsumi. This meeting complicated both Tanaka's relationship to butoh and the categorization of butoh itself. In 1983 the Tokyo *Mainichi Shinbun* (Daily Newspaper) published a report that Hijikata appreciated the minimalist outdoor performances Tanaka was engaged in at the time (Misaki 2000). In response to this, Tanaka wrote a homage to Hijikata that was published in *YU*, titled "I Am the Avant-garde Who Crawls on the Earth" (*Watashi wa chi wo hau zen'ei de aru*) in which he declared himself the legitimate son of Hijikata Tatsumi (1986).

This exchange of mutual admiration eventually led to Tanaka helping Hijikata, who had been relatively inactive for about five years, to produce a series of performances at Plan B, a small theatre space in Tokyo run by Tanaka and his associates. These included a retrospective of Hijikata's

dance through film and slide projections, and a series of live performances: *Hook-off 88: One Ton of Hairdo for the Scenery* (Huku ofu 88: Keshiki e no ittan no kamigata). Tanaka performed in one of these: *Bromide That Can Be Inhaled Incredibly Quickly* (Hijō ni kyūsoku na kyukisei bromaido),<sup>3</sup> a duet for Tanaka and Ashikawa Yoko, and in the following year Hijikata directed him in the solo dance *Performance for the Foundation of the Love-Dance School* (Ren'ai butō-ha teiso koen). According to Tanaka, this collaboration was a great surprise to many in the butoh world, as he was seen by many as being, in his own words, “against butoh” (Tanaka 2011).

Harada Hiromi classifies Tanaka as a dancer who challenged butoh from the outside (Harada 2004), and since his encounters with Hijikata, he has continued to challenge received notions of butoh, primarily the notion that the most significant result of the experiments of Hijikata Tsumi was the development of a form of dance entirely distinct from contemporary dance outside of Japan.<sup>4</sup> He has frequently refused invitations to perform at butoh festivals in the United States and Europe, and in a statement on his official website announcing his 2009 summer workshop, he wrote, “My workshop is by no means intended to teach butoh; I’d rather like to smash down the tendency to believe as though there exists a genre of dance called butoh” (Tanaka 2010). He has made similar statements over the years, and these do not simply indicate resistance to the butoh label or a desire to place himself outside of butoh, but a critique of the very notion of butoh as a genre, style, or category of dance. Despite his objections Tanaka has been seen through much of his career as a major figure in the butoh movement, referred to as a “butoh master” by those promoting his work in the West (MOMA PS1 2007), a designation that erroneously suggests he has studied and achieved mastery of a culturally specific dance form. Tanaka is opposed on principle to categorization and formalization of method, which he sees as restricting both the freedom of both the human body and the human spirit. His improvised “solo” dances, training methods, and group projects are all strongly influenced by (but rarely imitative of) Hijikata and in turn true to his understanding of the original spirit of experimentation embodied by Hijikata. His contention that to live as a farmer is the best training for dance parallels the importance Hijikata placed on the sensations he experienced growing up in rural Tohoku on the development of his own dance.<sup>5</sup>

Tanaka’s encounter with Hijikata took place at a time when he was initiating a major shift in his dance. Prior to meeting Hijikata, Tanaka had begun a series titled *Emotion* (Kanjo). *Emotion* was strikingly different from *Hyperdance/Drive* and the *MMD* performances (collaborations with Milford Graves and Derek Bailey) that preceded it. *Hyperdance, Drive*, and *MMD* were exercises in pure movement; they avoided emotional, figurative, or narrative expression (see Figure 50.1). *Emotion* by contrast was characterized by intense emotional expression, physical actions, and the incorporation of elements of daily life (Viala and Masson-Sekine 1988) (see Figure 50.2).

The importance of the *relation* between daily life and dance in Tanaka’s work is fundamental in contextualizing his choice to leave Tokyo and become a farmer. In 1985 Tanaka opened Body Weather Farm in Hakushu (now Hakuto City), a small village about four hours west of Tokyo. He and the members of Maijuku lived there with other collaborators, learning farming methods from local villagers (Van de Ven 2007). Over the next eleven years they lived as farmers while continuously training and rehearsing, performing in Europe, Japan, and the United States. Tanaka’s ongoing commitment to agricultural labor as a lifestyle constitutes his most radical experiment with the intersection between dance and daily life. After moving to Hakushu, farming came to inform every aspect of his dance practice. On the most mundane level farming provided a means of subsistence income (and food) for the people that lived, worked, and danced with him, alleviating the need to rely entirely on outside funding sources. The farming lifestyle also provided access to a wealth of materials to be used in set construction and spaces in which to dance. More importantly, farming a wide variety of small crops exposed the body to a multiplicity of



Figure 50.1 *Drive* (Performance Space 122, New York City, 1980), photograph by Charlie Steiner.



Figure 50.2 *Emotion* (Kanjo) (La Mama E.T.C., New York City, 1983), photograph by Charlie Steiner.

stimuli and physical actions, functioning as dance training not bound up with a specific cultural context. The practice of farming as dance training constituted a decommodification of dance practice, involving a use of space overturning conventional hierarchical relations between places for dance training and the dancers who engage with them (Fuller 2014). It relates directly to a fundamental aspect of Tanaka's personal philosophy: daily life should be as experimental and physically rigorous as dance itself.

Tanaka disbanded Majjuku in 1996. Some of the Japanese members (Tamai Yasunari, Natsui Hidekazu, and Suzuki Keishi) continued to live at and maintain Body Weather Farm, with the help of various volunteers who stayed there for periods of time. After the dissolution of Majjuku, Tanaka directed several group dances including *El Conquista*, an adaptation of Antonin Artaud's *The Conquest of Mexico* (1996) featuring Brazilian performers; *The Poe Project: Stormy Membrane* (1997), developed from a libretto by Susan Sontag based on the works of Edgar Allen Poe, with a cast of U.S. based performers; and *Romance: Love in Fluxus* (1999) with an international cast.

In 2000 Tanaka formed a new group, Tokason (Plum Arcadia), and founded Honmura, a farm that became his new home base, at a largely abandoned collection of small farmhouses in Shikishimacho (now Kai City), a mountainous area about one hour south of Body Weather Farm.<sup>6</sup> The members of Tokason worked and lived at either Body Weather Farm, which was by that point a self-sustaining agricultural enterprise, or at Honmura. While Body Weather Farm produced a wide variety of crops, at Honmura, Tanaka initially focused on cultivating tea, along with other crops such as buckwheat (*soba*), and activities as such making charcoal using a traditional clay oven.

While there is no fixed method to Tanaka's approach to choreography, there were some essential differences between his approach to creating group dances in the work of Majjuku and that of Tokason. While with each group, dancers developed their own movements based on Tanaka's proposals, which he then altered in regards to movement quality, timing, and nuance, with Tokason there was in general more of an emphasis on the individual performers developing their own images as well as their own movement, rather than working from images supplied verbally by Tanaka or by Hijikata. There was less of a direct relation with the training exercises known as Body Weather, and outside of annual summer workshops, Tokason members did not collectively participate in training other than farming work itself. There was also a focus on the development of a series of complex individual physical characters that was not present in Majjuku's work, where dances tended to be constructed from image work, physical actions, animal studies, and studies of generalized human types (such as children or pre-modern human beings).

In the first decade of the twenty-first century Tanaka began working as an actor in feature films and initiated new agricultural projects. In 2002 he appeared in *The Twilight Samurai* (Tasugare Seibei), for which he won the Japan Academy prizes for both best supporting actor and best newcomer. Since that time he has worked fairly extensively as a film actor. There was a shift in the focus of his solo dance in 2003 when he began dancing in remote villages in Indonesia and India, for audiences who had never been exposed to types of performance other than their own traditional ones (Yutani 2007). This led to his initiation of a forest preservation project in Kalimantan Island, Indonesia, in 2004.<sup>7</sup> In 2006 Tokason stopped performing in large theatres and gradually suspended their activities altogether. Body Weather Farm dissolved sometime around 2011. As of this writing, Tanaka has stopped leading summer workshops and accepting requests from those who wish to live and train with him. He no longer maintains a group of dancer/farmers, focusing on his own improvised practice of dance, often under the title *Locus Focus* (Ba odori), as well as directing solo performances for his disciple, Ishihara Rin.

A major innovator in international contemporary dance, Tanaka Min's experimental practice encompasses the interrelated fields of improvised performance, choreographic method, training,

and daily life. Leaving a successful career as a modern dancer to explore minimalist site-specific dance, he then moved beyond this to develop a practice of improvised dance not based in any specific technique, but on an accumulation of physical experiences acquired through collaboration with different spaces and bodies, exhibiting an expansive range of movement quality and physical vocabulary (a practice that he, at the age of 72, continues today). His body training and choreographic methods are likewise based in a collaborative methodology where bodies received numerous stimuli from other spaces and bodies. Tanaka is an avant-garde artist deeply concerned with the interaction between dance and daily life, and his devotion to agricultural labor altered his own body and the bodies of those who worked with him for long periods of time. Since declaring himself the legitimate son of Hijikata Tatsumi in 1983 he has maintained an ambivalent relationship to butoh, developing a practice of dance extremely different from Hijikata Tatsumi's in many ways, while remaining deeply inspired by him.

### Notes

- 1 I employ Certeau's concept of tactics as an "anti-discipline" in positioning Tanaka's dance as a spatial practice that contests the boundaries between dance and everyday life in a struggle for personal agency (Certeau 1984).
- 2 On *Can We Dance a Landscape and Rite of Spring* respectively.
- 3 I have used Susan Blakely Klein's translation for this obscure title. See Susan Blakely Klein, *Ankoku Butoh: The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness*, Cornell East Asia Series 49 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University East Asia Program, 1988), 81.
- 4 In my interviews with him Tanaka stated his opinion that the *butoh-fu* constitutes "1 percent" of Hijikata, and that Hijikata was not only important for butoh, he was important "for dance."
- 5 While Hijikata's accounts of his childhood in Tohoku are fictionalized to some degree, they are filled with examples of his body being stimulated by natural elements.
- 6 I performed in several of these dances during the interim between Maijuku and Tokason, and participated in a small portion of the work restoring the houses at Honmura Village.
- 7 Tanaka suspended the Forest Preservation Project in 2015 because of demands for bribes by corrupt government officials.

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