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The Routledge Companion to
Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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Body Weather Laboratory Los Angeles

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BODY WEATHER LABORATORY LOS ANGELES

An interview with Roxanne Steinberg and Oguri

Joyce Lu

Body Weather Los Angeles was, by definition, its own version of Body Weather Laboratory. All Body Weather Laboratories around the world, despite their subjugation to similar, almost identical training regiments, are distinct and unique . . . pointing to the potency of these practices; their potential to take the body to layers more sublime and rare.

Boaz Barkan, personal communication

Roots

Summer in Los Angeles, 1992: I see a flyer on a telephone pole advertising an “open opportunity” for “determined physical expression” – something I found lacking in my undergraduate theater education; something that I was looking for. The address leads me to Roxanne Steinberg, Oguri, and Melinda Ring, who are leading workshops in an old church sanctuary in South LA. We begin by crawling, jumping, reaching, and more: everything across the floor. The movements they propose challenge my strength, flexibility, and coordination. They demand that I bypass my cognitive brain and move spontaneously with my whole being. Blindfolded, we explore the area around the church outside; we carry each other and compose human sculptures with the architecture of the environment. I try to introduce several friends to the training, but they all say it’s too hard and refuse to return after one try. I don’t understand, because I personally need to exert and express myself in this way. I feel like I’ve found something essential that has been missing in my life. At the end of the summer, however, I take a job in the Bay Area. Before leaving LA, Ring gives me information about Min Tanaka’s Body Weather farm in Hakushu which I carry with me for seven years until I finally make it there for a month in 1999. Serendipitously, I also keep encountering other people who trained on the farm, like Naoko Maeshiba and Sherwood Chen. I do the training on my own as much as it is possible to do that . . . and when another job finally returns me to LA fifteen years later in 2007, I re-find Oguri and Roxanne who are now based at the Electric Lodge¹ in Venice. Eventually, they invite me to perform with them and offer me the opportunity to construct solo dances in their Flower of the Season² series. Along with other workshop participants, we hike in the San Gabriel Mountains, dig sand on the beach, push and pull sculptures by Hirokazu Kosaka in the moonlight in Little Tokyo, Downtown LA, and the Getty Museum. We become, in this way, part of the landscape of Los Angeles in the



BODY WEATHER LABORATORY IN L.A.

Conducted by: Naoyuki Oguri, Roxanne Steinberg, Melinda Ring

RIGOROUS DANCE TRAINING CONTINUES

SATURDAYS	1:15 PM - 3:45 PM	SATURDAYS 4:00 PM - 5:30 PM
SUNDAYS	12:00 PM - 3:00 PM	ongoing open workshop
WEDNESDAYS	10:00 AM - 1:00 PM	especially designed
		for community participation

LA BOCA Sunshine Mission 2600 South Hoover St. (corner of Adams)

\$5.00 for participation \$25.00 for a month

Body Weather Laboratory is an open opportunity for anybody determined to be involved in physical expression. A demanding attitude towards a thorough re-examination of the body is one of the main themes of B W L work.

Call for information 310 396-0367 or 310 395-8215

Dress in comfortable training clothes and bring a change of training wear.

Each participant is responsible for his or her own body and the space.

Figure 51.1 Flyer for Body Weather Laboratory workshops at La Boca, photograph by Gary Matteson.

larger landscape of time and the universe. International Body Weather dancer friends also come through town from time to time, like Boaz Barkan, Christine Quoiraud, Frank van de Ven, Yasunari Tamai, and Andrés Corchero. They lead workshops, create performances with us, and also perform their own work, sometimes solo and sometimes with Oguri. In other words, the

space remains an open opportunity just as it first advertised itself to be. And this opportunity spills from the studio, down the street, to the Oguri-Steinberg residence, where these two are always ready to shelter and feed wayward artists. So I find myself again in their kitchen over tea and beer and snacks trying to explain to them this book project about *butoh* although I have heard them say so many times that their work is not that:

OGURI: So this book is for . . . ?

JOYCE: Dance scholars, dancers, students –

ROXANNE: And the section we are in is –

O: “Beyond *Butoh*,”

R: Beyond *Butoh*

J: Or “Besides *Butoh*” or . . . I mean, we don’t have to worry about it really . . .

O: I’m not worried. I think what is important for me to tell is this: I performed [in the] 80s start[ing] with Min Tanaka. I wasn’t particularly thinking about *butoh* –

R: I first heard the term *butoh* in Paris in 1982. I had already worked with Min and *butoh* was a big thing in Paris. There were *butoh* companies that came there and performed and it all sounded really obscure to me because I related to Min. He was an improvisational dancer; I totally related to where he was coming from, and I felt like I wanted to learn from his practice. Soon after, I began working with the musician Yas Kaz who composed music for many *butoh* dancers. In 1987, he invited me to Koyasan, Japan, to choreograph a mandala and spinning dance for Buddhist acolytes and the model/dancer Sayoko Yamaguchi – an event to increase tourism by displaying new robes created by designer Emi Wada. That summer, at a *butoh* Festival at the Saison Theater in Ginza, Tokyo, I began to see and understand Hijikata’s legacy. What I saw was – in many of the dancers – not a form, and not a style either, but a spirit, an empowerment . . . that went in many different directions. They each had their own approach.

O: Yeah, I took a workshop with Hijikata around 1984 . . . He was already a legend. He wasn’t dancing on stage anymore. My dear friend took me to his workshop demonstration. It was really unnamable; something almost like ugly, but I cannot stop watching; just so strange. And he was so beautiful . . . In his workshop, I had to bring some imagination from outside myself . . . it was not simple imagination. That was a very special strength that he gave to people – Hijikata. He was maybe 54 or 55, but he looked like an old man; a very wise man . . . And his voice was . . . not beautiful, but the rhythm and connection to the body . . . like a coffee or caramel or something coming into my inside . . . coffee is like a bitter taste, like you can’t forget that taste . . . You feel like you know this person before and he knows me, or . . . that was amazing.

R: He knew you. Those kind of people they know everything . . . He already knew Oguri was coming.

O: It was a free and very unique time before Hijikata died . . . Nobody wanted to capture or trademark . . . That’s why the best idea is to –

R: Just let the label of *butoh* go.

O: Yeah let go.

R: Just say it died.

O: Died . . . I don’t think died –

R: Not died.

O: I chose that word before: “昇華”

R: “Sublimated”?

J: There’s other ways to translate it.

R: “Evaporated”?

O: Yeah . . . kind of.

J: Evaporated in a state of perfection? In Chinese that term means to raise to a higher level; the level of the sublime.

sub-lime [sə 'blīm] *adjective*

1. of such excellence, grandeur, or beauty as to inspire great admiration or awe.
– used to denote the extreme or unparalleled nature of a person’s attitude or behavior.

verb

2. Chemistry (of a solid substance) change directly into vapor when heated, typically forming a solid deposit again on cooling.
– cause (a substance) to do this.
3. *archaic* elevate to a high degree of moral or spiritual purity or excellence.

Google 2017

O: This *kanji*, this *hanna* is like something very central comes up. *Sho* is like going up, as in like after Jesus died, three days later . . .

R: Ascending.

O: I also had seen Min. I didn’t label Min Tanaka’s work *butoh*, and at that time I was not interested in dance. Min’s work and Mai-Juku³ work was kind of like a black sheep in the *butoh* community, you know? But he was collecting 40 male performers to make work in the 1984 *Butoh Festival*, so I was one of those 40 men. I wasn’t in Mai-Juku yet. Our performance was pretty amazing. We brought gigantic trees on the stage inside the theater. We went to the mountain and cut them down and brought them by truck. . . . That work with Mai-Juku was very minimal, but at the same time the size was unlimited. . . . There was the influence of the *Mono-ha* art movement in Japan at that time, like [Koji] Enokura, or [Noboru] Takayama . . . something very similar to like what Richard Serra was working with too. Normally an art movement has some strong leadership who is in charge, but *Mono-ha* was very open, using a lot of plain material . . . and Min had a lot of sculptor –

R: – and architect –

O: – friends – same age and very cutting edge . . . so there were many collaborations that happened at that time at Plan-B. . . . And I started taking training – I didn’t say I was a dancer – I said “train.” You know that time, in ’84, ’85, we called performances: “Oguri solo performance.” That was what we put on flyers and such, and then like two or three years later someone said: “Hey you guys, maybe you can write ‘dance performance’ or ‘solo dance’ now,” or something like that. We didn’t say “dance” before. It very much started from performance . . . And some people shifted to become visual artists with Takayama and Enokura.

R: Your first solo performance you shared the evening with Simone [Forti] at Plan-B.

O: Yes, Min produced a week-long program featuring the sculpture of one artist. Everyday a different dancer would dance in the space with that artist’s sculpture. Simone was, of course, a highlight. When I was just in my first year participating in Mai-juku, Min asked me: “Oguri are you interested? Can you do that?” That was my first time dancing solo on a public stage . . . Simone was like my age now. I think she was 51 or 2 at that time.

J: What is your memory of that performance?

O: I was naked and I moved a lot; like some movement I learned from a Hijikata workshop and some martial arts movement and just continued moving, I just kept going, *ne?* I was about 22 years old.

R: I first saw Oguri dance in 1988. I was struck by a shocking simplicity, a purity. Oguri was doing things that forced me to challenge myself, to simplify and strip away.



Figure 51.2 Oguri at Plan-B, Tokyo (1986), photograph by Christine Quoiraud. Courtesy of Médiathèque du Centre National de la Danse, Paris.



Figure 51.3 From L to R: Simone Forti and Oguri, *Flower of the Season* (2016), photograph by Sally Stein. Postcard Art + Design by Kio Griffith.

Who is this sacred fool Pure as water from a mountain spring Imagination tumbling through sensation.

Simone Forti, personal communication

Spirit

- J: Oguri, a lot of people use this word “pure” to describe your dance: Roxanne, Simone, Judith Hamera, various other dance critics. How do you feel about that word? Do you know what they mean? Do you know what they’re referring to from your perspective?
- O: “Pure” has a really beautiful sound, yeah? But pure is at the same time like “Puritan.” It can also mean like very stiff too. To be pure in collaborating is like to accept from the outside. But “pure” is a very positive word, no?
- R & J: Yeah.
- O: Then actually I don’t want to lose that.
- J: Does it have something to do with “essence” or “spirit”?
- R: I was thinking about the spiritual piece before in the way that some of the musicians that we work with have a strong Buddhist practice or something like that. For me, I think of spirit as the thing that’s moving me . . . So like when I use the word “inspiration,” it means that something’s giving me impetus to move whether that’s, you know, inspiration to read a book, or inspiration to cook a meal. I think dancing also brings me face to face with the fact that I’m moving and that sometimes it’s hard for me to move. Sometimes there’s not much inspiration there, but there is a kind of a desolate fact that I’m moving so that becomes a point of questioning and I think of a spiritual practice as that point of: “okay, I don’t believe in anything, but the fact is I’m here and I’m moving and I have to move, and I continue to move, so, you know, recognizing that place of desolation or that place of inspiration and also the ability to reflect and to be present.”
- J: Were you raised with any particular religion or spirituality?
- R: I think from Judaism the most interesting thing to me was the sense of the unknown and an understanding that there are no answers, and I can’t hold on to anything, and that it’s about all that I’m questioning, and if there’s darkness to be able to search for the questions.
- J: I think you more so, Oguri, because you’re Japanese in the United States, people project some kind of exotic spirituality on you.
- O: Maybe so. But my sense of spirituality is about responsibility rather than sitting on some mountain cultivating “wisdom” or trying to feel “peaceful” or anything like that . . . It’s about embracing all aspects of life, including the bad moods, the fighting . . . It’s about ethics and purpose in dance, a committed ability to participate, respond, and be fully present.
- J: Do you think it’s significant that you both come from two cultures that suffered these atrocities: the Holocaust and the atomic bombing during World War II? A lot of people mark avant-garde dance, or the spontaneous gesture, as a necessary response to reckoning with the aftermath of that war.
- R: Yeah, that’s all present, but to identify that as a purpose is unfortunate. I think having to identify with other kinds of meanings, whether it’s a meaning of a Holocaust or Hiroshima, or an apocalypse, or pain denies us the possibility to be present . . . and that notion

of being present and able to respond in a resourceful way, however limited those resources might be; that's dance. That's how I've always responded to the calling to be a dancer . . . I just love the risk of improvisation . . . It's a risk each time of "can I do what I came with or not?" And it's really important for me to honor the element of change that's always there. It's lovely when you have a fixed thing. And of course, you know, a fixed set of choreography – it's always going to change when you perform it: timing, rhythm, temperature, people, all of that, but with improvisation it's a higher platform to fall off of . . . For me, a dance needs a certain balance between things that are magical that are unplanned and things I have in place as a structure and when the two things can come together with the right timing at the right moment then a third thing happens. That's for me when it works . . .

- J: So this last performance you did at the Electric Lodge in February, *Person's Body*, what was the inspiration for this work?
- R: Oguri got really obsessed with [Gustav] Mahler's Symphony No. 1, the third movement. It has many starts – as in a round – and folk song themes, and also some very heavy parts that sound like a dirge – very interesting as a structure. Dynamically, this piece was interesting to work with as a dance study. We read the score and tried to understand the patterns and layers. We worked to embody the composition, then turned the music off. The dance came to us partly from the inventiveness of the music. It served as a vehicle for personal and shared stories, and an exploration of emotional stimulus and cultural cues
- O: Yes, for example, for a long time I didn't know I wasn't part of my mother's body. Then, when I was very little, in an instant as she was washing her hair in the sink I realized that I was separate. Last summer, I spent time with her during her death and the traditional process for her departure and cremation; her body becoming thin, transforming and finally evaporating in ashes and smoke. These are the thoughts that filled me as I was making this dance. I was thinking: Can we be in another person's body? Can we feel through this other person's senses?
- R: The concept of social observing was also inspiring us. The year before this, in June of 2016, also at the Electric Lodge, Oguri and I did a duet and used almost the same title: *person's body . . . flower*. Oguri was inspired by a museum that took the initiative to share its exhibits with visually impaired people by having docents describe paintings verbally. He thought, "How could I dance for someone who can't see with their eyes?" We were curious about how the process of verbalizing work changes the experience of perceiving it. So we asked the audience to pair up and discuss with each other: (1) what they saw – is dance visible or not, (2) what they embellished or how their own thoughts may have amplified or changed what and how they saw, and (3) what discussing these things with another person did to their viewing experience.
- O: Yes, how is it different to see, not as individuals, but in the company of another? We wanted the audience to witness aloud, to experience the transparency of their impressions and/or interpretations with another person. Through this social observing, I felt that the dance could be revealed instead of imposed.

Oguri did a solo Performance at LACE in 1992. That was one of the last performances at LACE downtown. Fucking blew my mind. I could not move for a while; I was locked between tears of disgust, lust, and grief. I had just left the army, was put through the mental health system and managed to escape to LA, and here



Figure 51.4 L to R: Steinberg and Oguri, *Person's Body* (Electric Lodge, 2017), photograph by Moses Hacmon facesofwater.com.

I was being sucked into a Japanese body as the first glimpse of redemption and rebirth into something I felt was mine . . . Joined the workshop and stuck to it like religion . . . Abandoned the BFA program I was in, turning to the BWL path.

Boaz Barkan, personal communication

Training

It takes a certain kind of person to be attracted to this work. Like most things, it is not for everybody. Like Barkan, I feel it leads me to feeling a sense of “mine” – not in a selfish way – but in an empowered way, like what Steinberg reports witnessing when she first saw contemporary

Japanese dancers in the 1980s who were influenced by Hijikata. This empowerment comes from my ancestors, my life experience, and also from connecting these things to the environment and other forces beyond my body. This practice feels best to me when I can touch a complete relinquishing or offering of the body to show what needs to be shown. It is a means to experience total freedom if only for a second or a millisecond. I train with the wish to be able to touch and share this sensation with more frequency.

Steinberg and Melinda Ring began Body Weather Laboratory Los Angeles in 1988, after training with Min Tanaka in Japan for some time. Following his established structure of MB, followed by improvisation and sensory exercises, and sometimes manipulations,⁴ they led workshops three times a week at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Oguri came from Japan to join them in 1990, and then they moved BWL to the Sunshine Mission, Casa de Rosas, the city's oldest shelter for homeless women, where I found them in 1992. Choreographer and director Sarah Elgart was given the space in 1990 when she received funds from the City of Los Angeles to do a performance piece with transitional homeless women. Elgart named the space La Boca, or "the mouth," because the surrounding community was primarily Spanish-speaking Latinx, and because she felt the mouth was a symbol of how the space would speak to the community. Elgart founded a performance group there called Mothers and Daughters Reaching Empowered States (MADRES) and also opened the space as a common ground for people to experience the performing arts regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.

R: We were part of an early wave of a downtown Los Angeles arts scene.

O: We did a lot of performances at La Boca.

J: Could you talk about the training praxis: how MB and the improvisation and sensory work we do in workshop relates to performing?



Figure 51.5 From L to R: Oguri, Melinda Ring, Roxanne Steinberg, *Galvanic Murrur* (La Boca, 1992), photograph by Gary Matteson.



Figure 51.6 Roxanne Steinberg, photographer unknown.

- O: Dance is about instinct and the first thing we have for dance is the body. We train to connect back to what we were, or who we are before language.
- R: We train together so we become very connected and to know each other's tendencies and energy. We challenge our limits, and by doing over and over we are ready to be open to the space and ideas as they arise. All of the sensitivity work and putting ourselves in vulnerable situations readies us for the risks necessary to take to create an interesting performance.
- J: Part of what really appeals to me, and maybe again relates to this sense of "mine" that Barkan talks about, is that the movements we do don't have to look a certain way as in ballet or other dance forms; they just have to find a home in my body in the present moment. This helps me to improve my capacity for honest expression. Even if it looks like we are doing the same movement week after week, it is never exactly the same.

- R: One thing I really appreciated when I first started doing Body Weather training was that it wasn't about demonstrate and then you do that. You couldn't ask lots of questions. You couldn't say, "Oh should I do it like this or that?" It wasn't about learning by mouth. It's what you can watch and learn, and really watching the others. . . . But as soon as I started leading Body Weather workshops here, people would ask me, "So how do I become a butoh dancer and how does this relate to butoh?" I feel like to learn any kind of serious approach to theater or dance it takes years and years of doing without asking questions, because you can't even know what questions to ask until you've practiced a long time. And if you ask the wrong questions you're set off in a totally weird direction. How can you even know what to ask? So what I really liked was that you do and do and do and finally some honest questions come up and you learn to solve them through the practice. So when people think they're coming to "butoh class" I feel "what do you think I can teach you? Nothing!" You know? I think learning involves a lot of breaking down. Learning, at least for me, it's always involved destroying what I know. . . . And the techniques I've encountered, or the – let's say exercises – that I've worked with, with other dancers that perhaps identify as butoh dancers are similar to acting practices or Anna Halprin's Movement Rituals or other creative dance work. They're physical practices and they're infinite. So I find it surprising when people say, "Oh, this is the butoh dancer, the master," or however people want to identify either Oguri or me. Isn't it enough just to be a dancer?
- O: Some [people] want me to give them some movement or technique or something, but it doesn't start from there. What is happening in the body? What is gravity doing? Where is stillness? What is a quiet body? Let's start from that point . . . just making a big voice; you don't need to make any "movement" but, it's still very much about the body.
- J: So, what about how you've observed each other's dance change over the years?
- O: Well, definitely changing, yeah?
- R: So, what about me?
- O: Yeah, change, *ne* . . . Roxanne [is] now getting more free to be dance. Maybe before it was more like there was always some idea that you might get stuck in, but now it feels much more free. Maybe this is something I'm reflecting about myself too.
- R: I would say the same thing about you: I think your improvisation has grown so much.
- J: And what about your relationship now to this term: "Body Weather"?
- R: It wasn't my invention. I find it a very beautiful term, but I didn't come up with it myself. I feel it can honestly identify the way I think about the body and dance, you know; it's always changing and Body Weather seemed to aptly define that kind of relationship. Dance is change. But Body Weather also seems to be the hook connected to some kind of notion of butoh. So, I might sometimes feel disingenuous to use the term "Body Weather." Honestly I love it, but it's not mine. It's everybody's.
- O: When I came here, to the United States, it gave me some strength. And in my heart, I appreciate this work, but I don't need to name it that. Like she said, it's not mine. I'm with it. I'm totally with it. I'm still very interested in it, but I cannot stay there. . . . So many great artists have been dying. The persons I always followed, who inspired me, many are gone. We have a lot of responsibility, you know, to go on.

Continue

Exactly 25 years after meeting Oguri and Steinberg near downtown LA, I am excited and honored to work with them this summer on their next piece, a collaboration with composer Paul Chavez, and French video and performing artist Lola Gonzales. *The Distance Is Beautiful: La*

Distance la Plus Courte Entre Deus Points n'est pas Une Ligne Droite is meant to question ideas of collaboration and community in the context of urbanization and gentrification, and will take place in several downtown LA sites, leading ultimately to Grand Park. Someone asked me recently, "So this dancing thing, doesn't it have an expiration date?" If anything, I hope this conversation helps people to understand that if you maintain a relationship with roots and spirit, and if you continue training your body and mind, if you use these things and let them use you, then your dance, your evolution is forever without limit. That is how we can always become, as Oguri says, "more free to be dance."

Notes

- 1 The Electric Lodge was established in 1996 by Dr. Joel Shapiro, who bought an old Masonic Lodge in Venice and transformed it into one of the first solar-powered theater and community spaces in the country. It is the founding venue of Arts: Earth Partnership and meets the highest standards of environmental excellence, striving for a zero carbon footprint. Oguri and Steinberg have been artists in residence at The Lodge since its inception, and Dr. Shapiro also trains and performs with them on occasion.
- 2 Oguri and Steinberg started the Flower of the Season dance series in 2004 as a platform for the development of new and important dance explorations by a variety of local and international artists. See: <http://lightningshadow.com/Flower.html>
- 3 Mai-Juku was a performing arts group begun by Min Tanaka in the early 1980s. See Bonnie Sue Stein, "Farmer/Dancer or Dancer/Farmer: An Interview," *The Drama Review: TDR* 30 (Summer, 1986), p. 148.
- 4 MB is series of movement proposals that the workshop leader offers and that workshop participants follow, usually moving across the floor. MB can stand simultaneously for many things, such as "Muscle and Bone," "Mind and Body," whatever you can think of. Manipulations are a series of hands-on studies done in pairs to move and stretch the body in ways that one could not accomplish alone. This sequence of seven partner manipulations were originally formulated by Min Tanaka based on his study of various somatic practices.

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