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OHNO KAZUO'S LESSONS FOR A
FRENCH CHOREOGRAPHER*Ô Senseï* by Catherine Diverrès*Miyagawa Mariko*

Catherine Diverrès, a French choreographer and dancer, studied under Ohno Kazuo (1906–2010) in the early 1980s. Although she does not insist on the direct influence of Ohno on her recent work, she choreographed a piece entitled *Ô Senseï* in 2012 to pay homage to Ohno after his death in 2010. “Senseï” means master or professor in Japanese, and “Ô” suggests the first initial of Ohno’s name. Diverrès studied with him in the 1980s, and this experience impacted all of her subsequent choreography. But how did Ohno’s lessons change Diverrès’ way of creating her dances? How was Ohno seen by this French choreographer? What of his influence may be seen in her choreography today?

French dancers in Yokohama in the 1980s

According to Sylviane Pagès, the French dance researcher, there were two different paths that young French choreographers took for their studies in the 1980s. Some of them went to the United States to study postmodern dance with Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) or Trisha Brown (1936–2017), and others visited Japan to study butoh.¹ Diverrès is one of the earliest dancers who went to Japan to study butoh under Ohno. Before leaving for Japan in 1982, she had studied classical dance and was trained at Maurice Béjart’s (1927–2007) L’Ecole Mudra, before joining Dominique Bagouet (1951–1992) at the Centre chorégraphique national de Montpellier, where she met Bernardo Montet (1957–). She and Montet received a fellowship to study in Japan and stayed in Yokohama at the Ohno Kazuo Dance Studio for half a year (1982–1983). The experience with Ohno changed everything about dance for her. She later shared her impressions:

I experienced no part of Japan without the presence of Ohno. And it was a profound, radical revolution of all of my being. I swept away all the choreographic language and vocabulary accumulated during my years of training. Having arrived as a dancer in Japan, I became a choreographer there.

Diverrès 2012a²

Diverrès and Montet created their first piece at the end of their stay in Japan. Entitled *Instance*, the duet premiered in Nakano, Tokyo at Terpsichore. It was subsequently presented in Europe

and won the Premier prix au concours International de Chorégraphie de Nyon (Switzerland) and the Prix de la ville de Vernier in 1983. It could be said, then, that the piece opened the door to becoming a choreographer for Diverrès. Then Diverrès and Montet created the company Studio DM and became one of the main companies in the French contemporary dance scene. In 1994, she was elected the director of the Centre Chorégraphique national de Rennes et de Bretagne.

Diverrès had the following impressions about Ohno's lessons:

Ohno is a master who teaches nothing that you would be looking for such as function, attribute, technique, method, knowledge, system, secret, or philosophy. He is.

*Diverrès 2006*³

For Diverrès, Ohno seemed to not have taught what she expected. And also, she and Montet were encouraged to improvise and to find out what the dance is by themselves. She says:

Ohno might wait 10 years before saying a single thing to anyone. It is up to each person to ask themselves questions. Ohno urges [us] to improvise and says to dance without arms and legs. The dance is reset to zero.

Diverrès 1993b, 40

She also shares her impression of the first day with Ohno:

When we arrived at his house, he offered us a meal that his wife had prepared and immediately, he told us about *The Dead Class* by Tadeusz Kantor . . . Then, he spoke about the flatfish that stays at the bottom of the ocean for a long time, enduring the pressure of the water, before rising. And in a two meters square area of his living room, he began to dance. Our first "class" started like this. . . . Questions that he posed to us non-stop like indecipherable riddles turned us around and upside down, feet in the air. The more we looked for meaning, the more we ran into obstacles. When finally we released everything, something profound began to move. To dance while being immobile. This absolute reversal, for the Western dancer, of the concept of dance, which for us is associated with movements expanding into space in an organic way, with the idea of physical energetic exercise and so on.

Diverrès 2010, 74

By reading Diverrès's observations, it can be seen that the words of Ohno seemed like riddles to her and that it was difficult to understand his thoughts in the usual (western) way. But over a long period of time, Diverrès felt something profound began to change. The call to "dance without moving" seemed to shift the notion of movement that she had accumulated during her training in classical ballet and contemporary dance.

Not only her notion about bodily movement itself, but also her notions about space were transformed. Diverrès recalls that Ohno said in an interview: "Don't break the atoms in the space." She then observes the space is not empty, but filled with atoms that we cannot see (Diverrès 2012b). This leads to the kind of movement that gently touches space. Pagès points out characteristics of the connection with steps and space.

The steps for Catherine Diverrès, Sidonie Rochon or for Ohno Kazuo are based on a non-expansionist conception of space: there is no projection, nor conquest of territory

in these movements, but rather a space to be created, to transform, through the metamorphosis of one's own corporeality.

Pagès 2015, 210

Thus, according to Pagès, Diverrès's dance movement calls for a change to the dancer's own body, and from this transformed body a new space will be created. The space then becomes a kind of partner to dance with.

To know how Ohno taught in the studio, the comments of Bernardo Montet are also beneficial. He wrote that he was told to dance only with his arms. Ohno took Montet's hand and said, "Be conscious of the space between your fingers, the space under your hand, the space above your hand, the temperature of your hand, and that of the air, sense your hands, be conscious of your bones" (Montet 2002, 332).

"Are you free?" and "Is it new?" these were the words of Ohno. . . . There was no training, no warm-up. We had to improvise for two, three, four hours, it was horribly long, we didn't know what to do anymore, we were tired of ourselves, and we had to continue searching, continue endlessly. . . . He told us to dance without psychology, thoughts, desires, or memory; to hold back the moment of movement. After a tremendous wait, the accumulation, it led us, we didn't know by what, to dance almost without the willpower to dance.

Montet 2002, 332

These comments suggest that Ohno's lessons were really surprising for the dancers who were used to western dance training and warming up as part of a class. Ohno's lessons, in contrast, required his students to improvise through a deep inner searching prompted by Ohno's words. They were confused by being asked to dance without moving anything but the arms, or to be conscious of their bones or the space between their fingers, etc., because these elements were, at the time, outside of their notion of dance. It is also important that Montet noted Ohno told them to dance without psychology or thoughts. It seems contradictory because Ohno often referred to his mother or La Argentina, and his feelings towards and affection for these women are usually thought as a motivation for his pieces. Diverrès understood Ohno's comments to mean that what exists without thought and feeling is the soul (Diverrès 2012b). It seems that she received from Ohno philosophical instructions rather than physical ones. According to accounts by Diverrès and Montet, Ohno taught students neither his characteristic bodily stances, nor his method for moving his body, nor how to create a piece; rather he made them improvise and observe their own bodies in minute detail.

Ô Senseï

So what then did Diverrès take away from Ohno's lessons? I would like to investigate this question through an analysis of her piece *Ô Senseï*.⁴ In the dance she cites some characteristic Ohno gestures. Here I focus on her usage of eyes and the position of the rib cage to argue that these citations reveal traces of Ohno's corporeality in Diverrès's *Ô Senseï*.

This piece is separated into three parts. In the beginning of the performance, there is only a white screen on the stage, barely taller than a human. One dancer, Katja Fleig appears in front of the screen wearing a man's suit.⁵ This image evokes images of Ohno wearing a black suit, for example, in his piece, *My Mother* (1981). She moves her arms in a manner reminiscent of Ohno, only stronger and faster. After her solo dance without music, Fleig exits into the wings and

Diverrès appears on stage wearing the same kind of suit. She takes off her jacket and the music starts; she walks like a somnambulist. The second short section, beginning with Diverrès's exit, is mainly a projection on the screen. The silhouette of Diverrès there recalls Expressionist dancers. Her long robe brings to mind those of Mary Wigman (1886–1973), as well as the image of Ohno in a kimono. In the last section, Diverrès reappears on the stage wearing a bright red dress. She dances to "Ave Maria," Elvis Presley's "Are You Lonesome Tonight?," and Bach's "Prelude and Fugue," which was also used in *Admiring La Argentina* (1977).

Viewers who know Ohno's work will recognize some characteristic gestures of his being used in *Ó Sensei*. In the first part, Fleig moves her hands like a butterfly, shaping them in the form of flowers, moving them fluently in front of her body. She also dances with crossed bent legs, tapping the floor by jumping with bowlegs that suggest the section of *My Mother* in which Ohno wears a black suit. Other particularities, like the control of the tension of movements and the sudden change of steps or levels of the body are common in both Ohno and Fleig. In the dance by Diverrès, one can also notice references to Ohno, for example, the somnambulant walk, the gaze toward the sky or, on the contrary, toward her interior, the soft movements of bending arms, and the incline of the head, etc.

It could be suggested that these gestures are simple imitations, but as Diverrès says, it is impossible for her to completely imitate Ohno's gestures because his movement is quite singular. She knows the utilization of body and the structure of movement in Ohno's dance are different from hers. To the contrary, Diverrès interrogates the methodology that Ohno used to create his homage to *La Argentina*. As he shared in interviews, Ohno himself did not perfectly imitate his idol. Instead he used his memory and emotion (even if this is a contradiction of Ohno's direction to Montet to dance without emotion). The method he used in that dance has no relation to the actual technique of Spanish dance or Argentine tango, but rather reflects his own imagination of an Argentine tango. His dance instead begins from his memory of *La Argentina*; the usage of his body in the piece is completely original. Similarly, Diverrès calls to mind Ohno's gestures in her dance based on her memory, with no aim to perfectly reproduce Ohno's movement. Diverrès remains grounded in her way of dancing that includes the techniques of classical and postmodern dance.

Diverrès interprets the philosophy of Ohno's *butoh* as a connection between the dead and the living. Being influenced by this thought, she elaborated the concept of the other in her dance.

To dance, to choreograph, it is to situate the other, whether it is absent or present. The other is the condition of all movements, of all desires, of all knowledge. This consciousness of otherness, joined with memory, gives to the human path its value, it's right balance. The dance is this thread that circulates upon this path surrounded by the dead.

Diverrès 1993a, 29

When Ohno dances with the dead, he utilized an unseeing gaze. The usage of the eyes is also significant in Diverrès's piece. In the last section, she wears a red dress and dances as if she is at a ball, only she has no partner. Her eyes, however, seem to see someone who is not there. In an unpublished archival recording of a 1990 lesson, Ohno said that the gaze is significant for meeting the dead on the stage, for experiencing the encounter by crossing the border of the living and the dead (Ohno 1990). Ohno insisted that students be able to create such a gaze in which the eyes are open yet unseeing. In other words, the eyes see one's inner world.

This usage of eyes observed in Ohno's lesson above is also seen in some scenes where Diverrès shifts her gaze to an internal one. For example, when she does her somnambulant walk, she moves delicately, arms outstretched as if holding something, her head slightly inclined, eyes vacant. These

postures give an impression of delicateness or fragileness. When she dances with such eyes, it also evokes the presence of someone who is absent.

In *Ô Senseï*, Diverrès also utilizes her characteristic retracted sternum, which Pagès attributes to Ohno.

In the solos of Catherine Diverrès, . . . the posture of the dancers gives the impression of humility or weakness. The most notable element of this posture appears in the absence of projection and openness of the rib cage, a retraction of the sternum that connects to Ohno's work, when he evokes, in his lessons to Catherine Diverrès, removing the ego and the [solar] plexus.

Pagès 2015, 206

It is interesting that Diverrès interprets this posture in her work as a humbleness or removing human ego. She insists that she inherits its philosophical aspect and not the technical one.

If Diverrès thinks of the words of Ohno as a kind of spiritual or philosophical inspiration, she also, I argue, inherits his corporeality in her solos. Ohno did not specifically teach his way of dancing, nor was it easy for Diverrès and Montet as foreigners to understand his words; nevertheless, in Diverrès's solo I can see traces of Ohno's postures and philosophies. This corporeality is the heritage of butoh, and it forms a foundation of Diverrès's dance. The characteristics of her works are not necessarily imitations of Ohno, but sometimes the corporeality of Ohno comes into being like a specter in her body.

Notes

- 1 For example, Pierre Doussaint, Isabelle Dubouloz, and Sidonie Rochon in 1988, and this stream continued into the 1990s. Cf. Sylviane Pagès. 2015. *Le Butō en France: malentendus et fascination*. Pantin: Centre national de la danse.
- 2 All translations from French by the author.
- 3 There are only a few documents that tell what it was like in Ohno's studio during that era. These include notes made by workshop participants, and also books and videos that recorded his lessons. Although I focus on the impressions that Diverrès and Montet recorded, these other sources have been useful points of reference. Of course, there were problems of language for foreigners who visited his studio. Some Japanese students or Ohno himself tried to speak in English or convey what he said. But for Diverrès and Montet, the interpretation of his words was always necessary.
- 4 Diverrès clarifies that this piece is different from her current style.
- 5 It must be noted that in the premier presentation in Avignon, Diverrès herself danced this role and the piece was a solo performance. This chapter is based on the performance in 2012 at Théâtre national Chaillot and the video of that performance.

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