

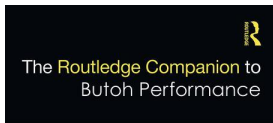
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Burn Butoh, Start Again

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BURN BUTOH,
START AGAIN*Shinichi Iova-Koga*

Butoh dance opened my senses to an unseen, mysterious, buried, and fragile world, disrupting my assumptions and expectations of order. In 1999, I and thirteen other choreographers (from Japan, Europe and the Americas) participated in the German-based international Butoh dance-exchange and performance festival known as eX . . . it!'99. Our discussions led us to this agreement: "Butoh is life, life is Butoh." We agreed on nothing else, arguing incessantly about the form, intent, spirit, and validity of any one particular dancer's definition of butoh.

Though I only recently become acquainted with the Japanese concept of *shu-ha-ri*, (*shu*: form, *ha*: break form, *ri*: re-create form), I look back on my training and notice my relation to butoh through that filter. My formal training began with Judo, my father's practice, at age eight. The discipline of Judo provided a path to follow and a clear form (*shu*) to work within. However, after nine years of Judo, I left the martial arts in favor of theater arts. Both Judo and theater were practiced at night and I needed to choose between the two. In university, I studied photography and filmmaking while performing in Shakespearean works and founding my own theater company, performing original or "devised" work. I jumped into this creative process with very little theatrical training, going straight for the experimental tinkering, the *ha* and the *ri* of breaking and re-creating (though I had little idea of what, exactly, I was breaking). Recognizing the limitations of operating without formal foundations, I began studying Tadashi Suzuki's Method of Training for Actors, incorporating elements of noh theater, kabuki, kagura, flamenco, ballet, and balinese dance. In Suzuki's method, the spirit must struggle with and meet the demands of discipline. The training requires precise expression from the practitioner within deliberate constraints: it demands the impossible. As Leon Ingulsrud of SITI company says, "In Suzuki's method, you never get it right."¹

It was during this period of personal ferment that Yuko Yuki's Suzuran-toh company appeared at Noh-space, San Francisco, in 1991. They performed Ezo-men, choreographed by Bishop Yamada. In this work, linear logic vanished; there was no plot, though plenty of mood. My attention remained riveted to the smallest motion. Energy and gesture were brutally economized. Playing this first experience back in my memory, I recall these images:

A man under a thick *kakefuton* (blanket/comforter) seems to sleep as he slowly drifts on a thin mist carrying him centimeters above the ground, across the stage. A woman slowly ascends . . . a small eternity passes as she rises from a squatting position to standing, as loud, driving music vibrates the walls. Two women perform mock sumo wrestling. Stomping feet. Shouts. Comic effect.

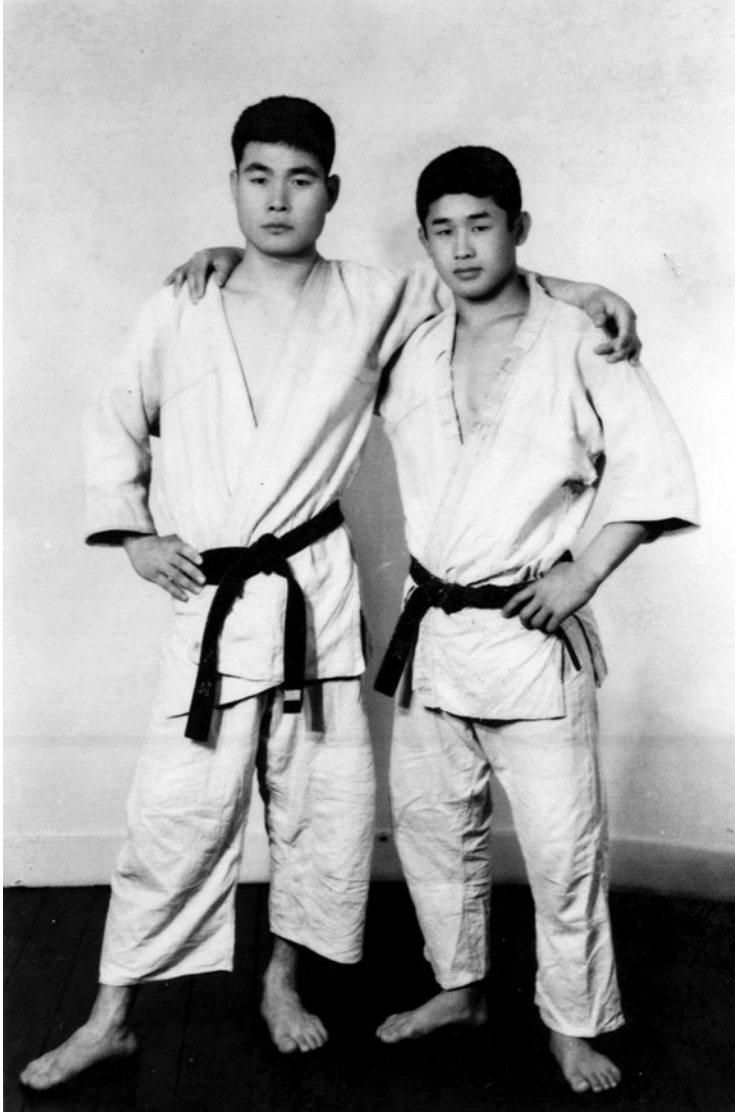


Figure 56.1 Father, Yuzo Koga, pictured on right, provides early influence on Shinichi Iova-Koga's physical discipline. Courtesy of the author.

This jived with the dark, shadowy aesthetic I entertained in my photography of dead, decayed, rotting rats; my films of lonely people gathered in dank cellars, cutting onions and crying; my early stage productions where tortured recluses walked slanted stages, arguing with themselves via video projections, surrounded by shadowy beings whose slow, circular steps formed a living cage. I wanted to connect with the butoh dancers from the cold, remote countryside of Hokkaido and taste their mysterious world, so resonant to my sensibility.

I didn't have long to wait. Soon afterwards, dancer Ashikawa Akeno from Hakutobo (a company founded by Ashikawa Yoko, Hijikata Tatsumi's principal dancer) conducted a workshop. She used words to feed us images – cockroaches crawling inside our bodies, feet sliding on razor

sharp rails, lightning striking the body, prompting us to convulse and burn up, leaving behind an empty shell. The imagery connected with me and I quickly adopted its code. I accessed a visceral feeling state, leaving behind actor motivations and plot analysis. Through crystalline images, I transformed my body from the inside out: words made flesh.

Unlike Suzuki, Hijikata was not interested in synthesizing a form to be repeated and perfected (*shu*). Instead, he sought to escape the trap of form and break (*ha*) his own previous developments. Hijikata, in a sequence of *ha*'s, changed his dance every 4 years (Ishide 2013).

Hiroko Tamano, formerly of Hijikata's company, also used evocative images to elicit bodily response and shape. I began training with her in late 1991 and joined Harupin-ha in 1993, led by her husband Koichi Tamano. She required me to dance paintings one by one, create zigzags in my body, to transform into a bull/cow/monster and hoof it in the noon-day sun, barefoot on a

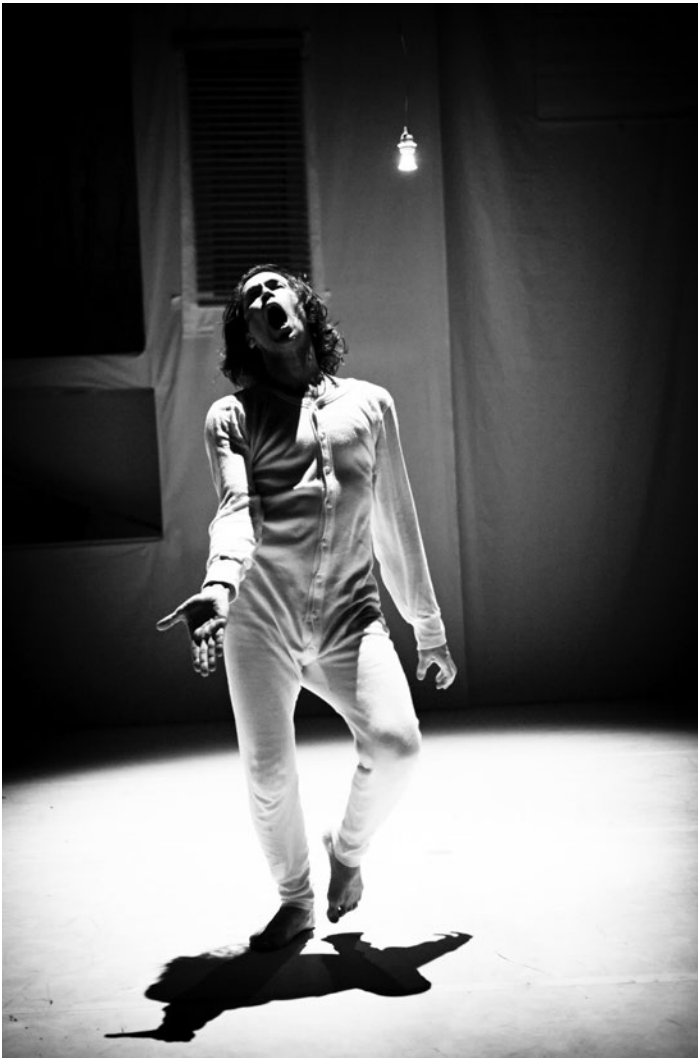


Figure 56.2 Shinichi Iova-Koga, influenced by butoh even when not explicitly performing butoh. Photograph by Pak Han.

blistering black platform. Hiroko asked me to erase myself so that I could dance. Words yanked the “me” out of me. My everyday relationship to objects, people, and place acquired an off-balance balance. My grandmother and her grandmother and her grandmother stepped as I stepped. The universe expanded infinitely and simultaneously compressed itself into the sub-atomic.

I abandoned scripts and storyboards to immerse myself in this ever-shifting and unreasonable dance. When Hiroko would show me a piece of choreography, she never demonstrated it the same way twice. “The feeling is more important,” she would say. She once took a pencil to paper and drew a long, nearly un-trackable and un-broken squiggle and stated “this is the dancers’ life,” then singled out minute elements on the long path and stated: “this is the dancers’ time on stage.” Hiroko consistently pushed the boundaries between the quotidian and the mystical/imaginal. If a pair of *tabi* (fitted Japanese footwear) did not fit me, she would demand “make your feet smaller.” This was no joke. She meant for me to try. She once insisted that I should levitate, not jump. Reason proved a liability. And yet we worked in highly structured ways, from how we washed the floors to the Qigong-influenced exercises that were part of our regular dance preparation.

Butoh dancer Yumiko Yoshioka entered my sphere in 1996. She commented that I danced like “a little Tamano.” My relationship to butoh was imitative, like a child, grappling with the *shu*. I soon joined her company TEN PEN CHii in Germany. We lived, ate, practiced, and prepared performances together in the countryside outside of Berlin. Yoshioka’s practice was informed by Dairakudakan and as a company member of Ariadone with Kō Murobushi and Carlotta Ikeda. As well, Noguchi Taiso, a training method focused on the motion of waves as manifested through images of water or a whip, was integral to our dance, six hours a day, every day. By the time I left the company in 2002, Yoshioka’s influence had clearly marked my practice.

During this time of defining myself as a butoh dancer, I simultaneously desired to break (*ha*) myself of butoh’s physical signatures. In 2000, I sought out Ruth Zaporah, a teacher of improvisation, creator of Action Theater. With her, the body provides the cues for movement, sound, text, and feeling. Action Theater performers embrace the flickers of recognition and momentary reactions as performative material. Where butoh places emphasis on memories and the influence of the image on the body, Action Theater demands that the body, in experiencing the moment, create the image. Images can alter the physical/energetic state and encourage the body to adopt new material, movement, information. And so I found another way to break and re-create.

For some time, I purposefully walked away from butoh. And then walked right back: a four-year collaboration with Kō Murobushi from 2008 to 2012. This could be thought of as a kind of *ri* in my personal performance history. Though, rather than re-creating, I re-experienced butoh with a new lens. Murobushi helped me strip away the tendency to add more and more. He knew how to cultivate a simple moment. Our final iteration of Crazy Cloud (co-directed by Murobushi and myself) in 2012 included four bodies simply shaking for an extended time, the only respite being the intrusion of “I Want a Little Sugar in my Bowl,” by Nina Simone. Murobushi asked me to dance as a mummified skeleton, laying on the ground, alternately contracting and releasing to the earth. Now that he is dead, these instructions remind me: dance is fragile.

Ralph Lemon, describing his work *4Walls*, said: “It’s dancing that’s beyond shape or style – dancing that’s beyond dance, as I know it. There’s something infinite and primal about it. It’s a metaphor for life itself – things break down, collapse and die, and yet life goes on” (Weinstein 2012).

Lemon’s comment touches on my experience, that the creative process is not a linear one. Life does not just rise and rise. It gets sick and frail, falls down, rises, falls down again, then appears elsewhere in a new form. The form supports a spirit that cannot exist without some container. Form and spirit change each other. In my current practice, I rely on structures (*shu*) to contain the liquidity of feeling and spirit. I also abandon (*ha*) such structures to let life flow. From the



Figure 56.3 “Crazy Cloud,” co-directed by Murobushi Kō and Shinichi Iova-Koga. Photograph by Pak Han.

flow comes the re-forming (*ri*), which regularly returns me to the basics, to being a beginner, clarifying shape (*shu*, again) and refining the energy within. I enter a discussion between the solid and liquid, the rock and the water within the contractions and seeming oppositions between my practices: Action Theater, Noh Theater, Qi Gong, Shakuhachi, Aikido, Tadashi Suzuki Method, and Noguchi Taiso. Body mobility and circulation, awareness of weight, breath, and physical mechanics connect to the feeling state, the mood, the space around. When I work within the basic components, close my eyes and step away from the particulars, they all meet. Butoh informs the way I give attention to the play between the hidden, imaginative body and the visible dance.

If, after my death, someone dissects my body, they might be surprised to find that some essence of butoh has weaved itself into my fascia, integral, yet hidden, and holding together the many parts.

Note

1 From a Suzuki Method workshop with Leon Ingulsrud, March 10, 2015.

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