

Text by Susan Kerr

BUT OH: Shades of Darkness

Photographs by Mourit Sekine-Messou



GREEN PEOPLE: Above, Misuzu Hishikawa (left) and Marianna Nakamura, both students of Kazuo Ohno, as they perform an event in a rice field in 1966. Although both also perform solo, together they created the company — "Dance Green People." Below, Misuzu Nakajima dances a tribute to Hijikata at Paris in 1987. The photo of Hijikata was taken by Hans Eick.



But oh is a phenomenally Japanese modern dance form that has to be experienced to be fully comprehended. There are Japanese critics who have written about the visceral dance form at length, but for the foreigner who doesn't read Japanese, there has been precious little to illuminate this often difficult and controversial art.

Suddenly there are several books available in English which combine descriptive text with substantial photos documenting the form of the movement. "But Oh: Shades of Darkness," now written, edited and photographed by two French artists residing in Tokyo, Jean Viala and Mourit Messou Sekine.

Viala is an actor and freelance writer who came to Japan eight years ago, and who has studied with the late theater director Shuji Terayama and Butoh dancer Kazuo Ohno. Messou Sekine is primarily a painter, but in this book her talents as a photographer and editor are in evidence. The two have attempted to put a structure on a very amorphous subject, to give the history of Butoh a sort of order.

They begin by tracing the history of Butoh back to European expressionism as well as to five festivals and forty-five rituals in Japan. Then they look at Butoh's two so-called founders, defining Kazuo Ohno as the soul of Butoh and Tatsumi Hijikata as the architect.

All things Ohno didn't begin dancing until he was in his 40's, he is 82 now, giving him the longest career of any Butoh dancer, living or dead.

It is not strange that Ohno should be called the soul of Butoh, because he has been preoccupied throughout four decades of dancing with giving expression to the spirit, unconcerned by a body that has a will of its own.

This has led him to explore the concept of the dead body, because in death, the body has no language. Only then can the soul speak, free from habitual gestures.

When it comes to Hijikata, the editors here to make personal considerations, labeling him Butoh's architect because he was responsible for delineating a form that would have few Butoh dancers without.

His "Ashiko Judo" (Dance of Darkness) involved dramatic transformation of the body to create images of violence and erotica. This technique was a because many without groups that have continued to perform since his death in 1986.

The photography in the book covers a wide range of styles, some of it by a foreign eye — Messou Sekine's, some of it taken by Japanese photographers like Eishi Inoue and Minotaru Hasegawa, and some of it the exclusive property of the Butoh dancers themselves, like Hijikata's estate and the Kyoto-based troupe, Ryuko-sha.

The editors found that some groups wanted to retain tight control over how their images were reproduced and reproduced, and were wary of some photographs or posters being sold irresponsibly. There was also concern by a few dancers that "genre" can't understand Butoh properly and may appropriate the images for themselves, without preserving the original context, according to Messou Sekine.

The book also treats Hijikata's legacy and the improvisational directions into which Butoh has evolved. Groups like Yuko Ishikawa and Hideo-take, Dairakaba-kun, Sankai-juku and such soloists as Misuzu Hishikawa, Masaki Inoue and Yoru Got are portrayed.

What the book doesn't cover is basically any dancer under the age of 40, with the exception of the young dancers belonging to Hideo-take.

Messou Sekine justifies her choice to focus on the older, better-established dancers, saying that many of the younger dancers today are hit with the task of trying to perform an act of suffering in a very successful, complacent society.

"They are originating in this tradition, but they are living in the 20th century, and they are not sure of what vision they are having," Messou Sekine said. "The world could collapse, but everything is still. Everything is taken for granted, and even if they take a risk, there is not a high price to pay ... But in a way, the price they pay is that they are loved."

The question remains as to where the future of Butoh lies. Will the form be rejuvenated by foreign influences and a merging with the plastic and visual arts? Or is Butoh too deeply rooted within the Japanese consciousness to ever be exported from it? (This as well as a matter of costliness — some argue it is a universal form), and if it must remain fundamentally Japanese, how can it renew itself and continue to evolve, when by definition it is located within very narrow parameters?

It would take another book to answer such difficult questions.



GROUP PORTRAIT: Kyoto-based group Ryuko-sha perform to the audience after a 1984 performance. (Center in past Kazuo Shiwaki.) The costume has staged works that also portray a Dionysian landscape (yearning for complete anonymity).



BAROQUE IMAGINATION: Above, a performance of the Dairakaba-kun troupe in 1986. Company director, Akaji Mura, possesses a baroque imagination that trends toward the spectacular in performance. Below, Butoh artist Kazuo Ohno performs "Over" (The Table) in 1980 at the Festival of Nancy in France — on his first performance abroad.

