

<Ankoku Butoh >

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Chapter Three

ANALYSIS OF NIWA (THE GARDEN)

Muteki-sha is a second generation Butō group directed and choreographed by Nakajima Natsu. Nakajima was born in 1943 on the island of Sakhalin, about 20 miles off the coast of Hokkaido (the northernmost island of Japan). After World War II when the island was taken by Russia, all the Japanese were evacuated by sea and forced to leave their homes and most of their possessions behind. The trauma of that event has been captured for Nakajima in the sound of the ship's foghorn (the muteki), which "still resonates in her memory and her work."¹ She began taking dance classes in 1955, studying ballet and modern dance in Tokyo until 1962, when she saw her first performance of Ankoku Butō. She was deeply impressed by the performance, seeing in it an alternative to Western dance forms and principles and immediately began studying with Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo. "In some ways," Nakajima has said, "I feel that I was the first real student of Hijikata and Ohno. Before me there was Ishii (Mitsutaka) and Kasai (Akira), but they were more like colleagues than students."² That year (1962-63) a group of dancers was meeting on the weekends in Hijikata's studio. According to Nakajima, "Ohno was mostly teaching improvisation; Hijikata gave us a list of books to read during the week. We'd gather together on Friday and work non-stop--whenever we weren't dancing, we were discussing books. It was kind of crazy, but I was only nineteen at the time, so it was very exciting for me."³

¹Niwa (The Garden), program notes for performance at The Asia Society, New York City, September 27 and 28, 1985.

²Nakajima Natsu, interview with the author, 5 February 1988.

³Nakajima, interview.

At some point that year Hijikata and Ohno went their separate ways, and from then on Hijikata refused to teach improvisation. Instead, he became more interested in developing a new formal vocabulary for dance, a new range of techniques more suitable for the Japanese body. Nakajima felt that she had to choose between Ohno and Hijikata, and although she kept in close contact with Ohno, she elected to study with Hijikata. In 1969 she left his studio to form her own company, which she named after the foghorn whose sound expressed for her the very personal psychological trauma caused by the wider play of super-power politics.

Niwa (The Garden), a two act performance lasting about 100 minutes, was presented for the first time in Tokyo in 1982. It had its North American premiere at the Montreal Dance Festival on September 18 and 19, 1985, and was presented for the first time in the United States at The Asia Society in New York City on September 27 and 28. In the following discussion the program is briefly outlined, a few generalized comments are made on the structure and theme, and then the entire piece is analyzed section by section to show how Nakajima's work fits into the Butō aesthetic as described in the previous pages. I should note here that I was only able to see Niwa once, so there are points where I am not completely confident of the way the sections were ordered or how the transitions worked, especially in the latter half. However, as I found this piece one of the most compelling, as well as exemplary, of the Butō performances I have seen, I have chosen to work with it.

The program was divided up into seven sections as follows:⁴

Nanakusa. Dance of seven autumn flowers, recollections of childhood. Dry flowers rustle with sadness or pleasure. Muttering lips recall the spring garden, calling and playing with cherry blossoms falling in the wind. (Nakajima)

The Infant as a baby evacuated from Sakhalin, the world is viewed from a boat as a hell, chaos and shouting, exhaustion and the defeat of soldiers. (Maezawa)

The Dream of the girl is a sweet dream, the dream of the child becomes the nightmare of the adult, return to the girl in the forest, shimmering light. (Nakajima and Maezawa)

⁴The following descriptions are taken from Niwa (The Garden) program notes.

Izumeko. The baby lives within the tiny world of the cradle --eating, sleeping, playing--tiny, but with a primitive energy. (Maezawa)

Masks and Black Hair. Old age masks recall her mature womanhood--her black hair and the memories of love. (Nakajima)

Ghost. Regret for lost days reflected in the face--loss of power, weakness of muscle, loss of features and all human character. (Nakajima)

Kannon. World of innocence, stillness--fluent energy of eternity. (Nakajima)

Another dancer, Maezawa Yuriko joined Nakajima in this program. As indicated in the program given above, the two dancers alternated section by section. The white makeup, which in Butō acts to mask particular individuality, was here used to good effect: it allowed the two dancers to play one character, the single role of Nakajima as child, young girl, old woman, ghost, and Buddha. In only one scene were the two dancers on stage together; the section in "The Dream" where they were transformed into two insects in a garden. Otherwise there were never any "duets" (although occasionally one was coming on stage as the other was leaving). Since the two dancers could be seen as two aspects, two sides of the one woman's character,⁵ the overall effect was of an evening length solo.

In the program notes, Nakajima describes the piece this way:

Niwa is a forgotten garden, very small and very Japanese, this is the garden of my memory, my childhood...I created this work to see my own life, placing myself as a woman, sitting in the garden, looking at it grow old and fade away.⁶

⁵According to her Village Voice review, Marcia Siegel perceived it that way: "They seem to be two aspects of the woman: Natsu Nakajima, the choreographer, is the one who suffers and changes, Yuriko Maezawa (sic) is more playful and demonic..." Siegel, "Flickering Stones," p. 103. Although it seems like an obvious response to the strategy of using two dancers to play one character, I was unable to make such a clear distinction in personality between the two dancers.

⁶Niwa (The Garden), program notes.

The darkened stage thus represented the darkened inner space of the mind, with the various tableaux presented as if seen through memory's distorting mirror. And like memory, while the sections could be intellectually reordered to form a chronological sequence (beginning with pre-birth and ending with enlightenment), the actual ordering was not so straight-forward: 1) young woman offering flowers, 2) infant, 3) young girl in garden, 4) infant, 5) old woman, 6) ghost reliving the woman's prime, 7) Kannon. In performance the individual images flowed together as though called up by a process of association, a process set off by the accident of metaphoric similarity or metonymic congruence, rather than by the linear narrative chronology of cause and effect.

The overall structure of time in the piece (that is, the cyclical movement from birth to rebirth), combined with the non-linear quality of the linkage of imagery, accords well with the model of metempsychosis that I discussed in the previous chapter. The structure of the dance program has two interconnecting sets of cycles: one is the overarching metempsychotic cycle, which begins with a Shinto ritual, moves through life, and ends with Buddhist enlightenment. This movement also happens to parallel the pattern of ritual in Japanese religious life: ceremonies that have to do with life, such as birth and marriage, are usually Shinto, while those that have to do with death tend to be Buddhist. The second set is the smaller cycles of *jo-ha-kyū* rhythm and pacing, in which moments of peace and tranquility give way to dances that illustrate the pain and suffering of existence, climaxing in solo dances in front of the spotlight that end abruptly in a crescendo of noise and excitement, before cycling back to another moment of peace, that is however, at a higher level of tension than before.

Whereas Amagatsu Ushio's *Sankai Juku* uses the metempsychotic mode to present us with an archetypal vision of the collective unconscious, particularly in his visions of prehistory, Nakajima follows in Ohno Kazuo's footsteps in her attempt to show us how that mode can be used to reveal the inner workings of the subconscious level of the individual psyche. The opening scene of *Niwa* can be seen as a kind of pre-birth God time; there is the trauma of childhood, the dream of a young girl, the memories of old age, the experience of death and the ghost's longing for the past, and finally, rebirth as Buddha.

And while *Sankai Juku* literalizes Zen's "fall of self" in their signature piece from *Jōmon Shō* (Homage to Prehistory), in which four of the dancers, nearly naked, hang suspended head-first from the proscenium and are slowly lowered to the stage, in *Niwa*, a more political dimension is added. The dance as a whole points toward the negativity attached to the position of the individual self--traumatized psychologically as a child by powers it cannot

control, alienated and isolated as an adult and as an old woman, in the end swept away by catastrophic change--in order to contrast it with scenes of communal bliss that illustrated the ecstatic joy to be had when one loses one's sense of individual self in the great cosmic unconsciousness, what art historian Haga Tōru has called, "the bottomless and formless (or, rather, pre-formed) I."⁷

Turning now to the analysis of *Niwa*: after a prefatory section in which one of Astor Piazzola's lively modern tangos is played as slides of autumn scenery are projected, the dance itself opens in absolute darkness to strongly rhythmic electronic music. For the space of a minute or so, one cannot make out anything at all, even the stage. Slowly one begins to see a vague form, a glimmer at the far back, at stage-left. Soon it becomes apparent that there is a dancer there, making her way forward by imperceptible inches. It is significant that the dance begins here, as this space is considered the most "jō" of the jō area of the stage, and thus is the most appropriate place to begin a dance as agonizingly slow as this one. In fact, this opening is very much in line with what the jō aesthetic calls for in an opening dance, that is, it puts the audience into an attentive and felicitous mood. There is a very strong tension between the driving beat of the repetitive electronic music and the unbelievably slow pace of her movement. As in other Butō opening sequences, this minimal, repetitive movement combined with trance-inducing music, creates a mystical feeling of great depth, as well as a heightened feeling of awareness. In fact, Marcia Siegel's review provides us with a good example of how one begins to read all kinds of emotional changes into the minutest variation in gesture: "without changing her expression at all, [Nakajima] seems to be turning away, hesitating, recoiling, submitting, but never ceasing her advance."⁸

This use of tension fits perfectly into the definition of jō put forth recently by Eugenio Barba: "The first phrase is determined by the opposition between a force which tends to increase and another which tends to hold back (jō = withhold)."⁹ In addition to the powerful outer tension between the dancer's movement and the music, there is also a great divided tension within her body: her upper torso is tilted far back, yet her arms stretch forward and

⁷Haga, "Japanese Point of View," unpaginated.

⁸Siegel, "Flickering Stones," p. 103.

⁹Barba, "Theater Anthropology," p. 22. I should note however, that although this definition fits the opening of *Niwa* extremely well, I have been unable to verify this definition of jō as "to withhold" in any source on Nō.

upwards, in order to hold out a bundle of dried flowers (the *nanakusa* or "seven grasses"). She seems to be offering up the flowers to someone or something (to us? to an unseen god?), and this gesture emphasizes the dialectical tension between her slow approach towards us and this stretching backward arch, so that she appears to be gripped by an invisible power which mercilessly pulls her forward against her will.

In the first half of a typical Nō play a local woman or man appears who presents an offering to the gods. In the course of the play the woman turns out to be possessed by a ghost tormented by an attachment to the past, who seeks Buddhist salvation. The climax of the play comes when the ghost is released from its attachment through the telling of his or her story and thus receives enlightenment.¹⁰ In "Nanakusa," the opening scene of *Niwa*, we seem to be in the presence of exactly the same kind of young woman that opens a Nō play; a woman making an offering to the gods. Or perhaps, going back to the original basis for Nō, she is a shamanistic *miko* caught up in the ritual trance that is her art. In addition, the bundle of dried flowers and grasses strongly suggest that we are witnessing some kind of harvest ritual. This use of harvest/agricultural metaphors (repeated later on in the portrayal of a farm woman) corresponds with Butō's attempt to go back to the spiritual roots of dance/drama in Japan, since, as Komparu Kunio points out:

sacred agricultural festivals formed the basis for nearly all the entertainment arts in Japan, and in them we see clearly a tendency toward cycles and assimilation with nature that might even be called the foundation of Japanese culture, created by a farming people.¹¹

Returning to our analysis of the dance: at long last, after what has seemed like an infinite amount of time, but has probably been less than 15 minutes, Nakajima reaches the moment of *ha* (or "break"): suddenly liberated from the force of *jo* she freely enters a pool of bright light, center

¹⁰Of course there are a number of other possible narrative structures for a Nō play, but the one given above is seen as the most typical. This model strongly suggests Nō's original basis in the ritual performance of an exorcism, in which a possessed *miko*, or shamaness, becomes a mouthpiece for a tormented ghost who has sought attention for her or his case by possessing someone. For a comprehensive treatment of shamanistic practices in Japan, see Carmen Blacker, *The Catalpa Bow* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986).

¹¹Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, p. 4.

stage. Having made it to the central, *ha* part of the stage, she turns to us, raising her flowers higher, and we can see the tears of release pouring down her cheeks. Here again I was struck by a resemblance to Nō, particularly in the emphasis on her arrival as being some kind of epiphany; I suddenly recalled the famous definition by the French poet and dramatist, Paul Claudel: "Le Drame, c'est quelque chose qui arrivé, le Nō, c'est quelqu'un qui arrivé" (In drama, something happens, in Nō, someone arrives).¹²

The lights drop and the *ha* level continues in the next section, "The Infant," which begins as the second dancer, Maezawa, comes on stage from the rear. This is a reenactment of Nakajima's traumatic evacuation from Sakhalin as a child after World War II. Everything emphasizes the helplessness of the child in the face of super-power politics, whose terrifying force is represented both as a hurricane wind that sends the child tottering from one end of the stage to the other, and as a barrage of chaotic noise that assaults us at top volume. The section reaches its climax as she comes all the way downstage to squat in front of the full force of a spotlight angled upwards.

Here the dancer is fulfilling the requirements for *kyū* spatially (all the way downstage, right up against the audience) and aurally (we hear a tape loop of Wagner which keeps cutting off just at the melodic climax, frustrating us over and over again). Her dance also fulfills those requirements visually (in Nō a *kyū* piece should be an "exuberant spectacle of vigorous gestures, rapid dancing and strenuous movements that fill the audience with wonder"¹³) as Maezawa goes into the *beshimī kata*, the Butō visual tour-de-force of expression.

This particular *beshimī* is a marvelous example of the Butō technique in which the body acts as a container of fluid whose constant flow keeps internal and external pressure in precarious balance. At first Maezawa reacts to the noise, the fury of the music, as though it were not external to her but rather, the external expression of what is happening inside her. This results in a sense that devastation is welling up like water, a fluid psychological energy

¹²In the French there is a play on "arrivé," which can mean both "to arrive" and "to happen."

¹³Komparu, *The Noh Theater*, p. 26. Nō plays have themselves been divided into categories according to *jo-ha-kyū*; I should note that albeit quite apt here, the description quoted above is of a *kyū* dance from a play that is itself categorized as *kyū* (a fifth category, or "demon" play). The dance described is therefore much more powerful than a *kyū* dance in a *jo* play (first category, or "god" play) would be.

that thrusts outwards through her puffed cheeks and bulging eyes, threatening to burst at any moment. Then there is a reversal; suddenly one senses that she is deep under water, and all her gestures seem to indicate that she is holding her breath, struggling to get to the surface as though she were trapped in an oppressive, suffocating nightmare. Paradoxically, Maezawa's performance is an exhibition of almost perfect control over movements that on the surface seem to epitomize a utter lack of control over the ways in which psychological pressures of internal anxiety and external oppression affect the body.

During the beshim sections of Niwa (which repeated at regular intervals throughout the dance) a very effective form of lighting was used to dramatize the strange contortions of the dancer: a single spotlight was angled upwards from below, less than a foot from the dancer's face as she crouched down. Once again this seems to be an example of a technique borrowed from traditional performance practice, in this case from Edo period Kabuki. In the Edo period there was, of course, no electric lighting and when an actor was going to do a mie, a kōken (stage assistant) would hold up a candle right under his face, so that the flickering light from below lent greater dramatic ferocity, even a supernatural aura to the pose. In Niwa too, the single spotlight used in a completely darkened stage adds a much heightened dramatic force to the "mie-in-motion" that is beshim.

After this climax, the third section, "The Dream," brings us back down to the jo level of an idyllic garden scene. It opens with a young girl in a long dress, a scarf knotted around her throat. She crouches down, fluttering her fingers in gentle waves. When the second dancer enters, they seem to metamorphose into insects. Long steel springs act as their antennae, keeping them constantly in touch with their surroundings, which the dappled lighting indicates is a garden (the set is minimal). Occasionally the springs also act as balancing poles that literally keep the dancers' bodies in balance as they explore an imaginary natural world. The insects' intimate relationship with nature and with each other is emphasized by the fact that this is the only time the two dancers are on stage together. The contrast with the chaos of the preceding scene could not be more explicit: only in the natural world is communion (or even connection) to other living beings possible.

The lights go down and when they come up again a young woman stands alone downstage right, her head bowed to the left. The music, heavy and ominous, seems to oppress the woman as she struggles to lift up her head. She looks helpless, overwhelmed. The idyllic garden scene has been left far behind as "The Dream" reaches its climax in another beshim. In the first act we have thus cycled twice through the pacing of jo-ha-kyū. The kyū climax in the spotlight, which occurred at least one more time in the second half of

the program,¹⁴ emphasized the internal structure of jo-ha-kyū repetition by its regular alternation with the meditative sections of "Nanakusa," "The Dream, and "Kannon."

As part 2, "Izumeko" (literally, "basket baby"¹⁵), opens we are again plunged into total darkness. Soon however, we can make out a large, rounded object, placed downstage stage-right, which seems to be a simple woven basket. As the lights come up a bit, we can see that someone is hunched inside it. Suddenly, bright eyes appear over the rim, followed cautiously by the rest of the figure, dressed in a scarlet kimono. In this transitional section Maezawa could be either a child who is afraid of the dark, or a figure of evil checking to make sure that no one is around before it begins its witchery. The creature--whether child or woman--climbers stealthily out of her basket/cradle, holding up a lantern to peer out into the dark, while the murmur of chanting and the high-pitched sound of a shakahachi flute begins.

Maezawa then starts on a series of wide loops around the stage, her knees bent, her arms spread wide, her fingers crooked in classic witch style. It was at this point that one could see most clearly the German Expressionist influence of Mary Wigman. As it happens, I saw the film fragment of Wigman's Witch Dance the week before I saw Muteki-sha's performance, and I could not help being struck by certain similarities. Wigman describing the origin of Witch Dance in her book of essays, The Language of Dance, might very well have been describing the dancer in "Izumeko": "when one night, I returned to my room utterly agitated, I looked into the mirror by chance. What it reflected was the image of one possessed, wild, dissolute, repelling and fascinating...there she was--the witch--the earth-bound creature with her unrestrained, naked instincts, with her insatiable lust for life, beast and

¹⁴This is one place my notes break down for the second half. I know that in the second act there was a climactic beshim section in which both Maezawa and Nakajima performed, down front on opposite sides of the stage, but I have been unable to discern from my notes exactly where in the performance this occurred, and so I have been forced to leave it out of my analysis.

¹⁵In Japanese farming communities during the busy harvest season no one could be spared to look after the small children, so they were often tied into a basket called an izume and left by the side of the field. Hijikata claimed that when he was a child he was one of these "basket babies," and that the experience of being bound and unable to move for long periods of time had left an indelible mark on his body.

woman at the same time."¹⁶ The continuous movement from the gloom of upstage to the relative brightness of downstage and back furthers the resemblance to Wigman, who felt that "through the play of question and answer between a remote background plunged in twilight and glaring foreground action" the *Witch Dance's* true character could be found.¹⁷

At the beginning of "Izumeko," Maezawa seems to simultaneously control, and to be controlled by, the forces that she has called up. However, as the dance progresses, there is the sound of a great wind rising, and with arms spread wide (incidentally revealing the gorgeousness of the lining of her kimono) the dancer gives herself up to the force of the wind, blowing backwards around the stage like a brightly colored kite. During one of these wide loops, Maezawa runs briefly offstage right, and Nakajima comes back on with the kimono; a trick to make the casual observer believe it is the same woman. From Nakajima's entrance onstage, however, the woman's movement changes: she seems to gradually grow more and more feeble, so that every movement forward, taking place in small, painful increments and accompanied by the shaking of old age, begins to look extraordinarily difficult. As "Izumeko" ends, Nakajima turns from downstage and bends to pick up a bundle, simultaneously taking on what until recently has been the characteristic stance of old people in rural Japan, bent over practically double at the waist from a lifetime of carrying heavy loads. As we watch, she sheds the bright red kimono, and at the far back of the stage (spatially signalling a cyclical return once again to the peace and quiet of a *jo* phase) she dons a grey mask and kerchief, so that when she turns to face us, she has taken on the persona of an extremely old farm woman.

The use of the mask here seems significant on a number of levels. First, it is overtly marked by its direct contradiction of the usual *Butō* makeup, which emphasizes the humanity of the character portrayed:

The white face of the Geisha represents a being transfixed,
but the whitened face of the *Butō* dancer is the moving face

¹⁶Mary Wigman, *The Language of Dance*, trans. Walter Sorell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1966) pp. 40-41. I was not the only one to note this resemblance; Marcia Siegel also pointed it out in her review: "I imagined it all as the lost sections of Mary Wigman's *Witch Dance*." Siegel, "Flickering Stones," p. 103. Coincidentally, Ohno Kazuo is presently at work on a dance based on *Witch Dance*, that he plans to present next year.

¹⁷Wigman, *Language of Dance*, p. 42.

of humanity, actually in touch with innocence, wonder, fear, and mortality.¹⁸

In *Niwa* we are instead presented with a very different face, a mask face colored grey, emptied of expression. It makes an interesting comparison to the calm, neutral type of *Nō* mask, called *ko-omote* (the young woman mask), which has little expression of its own, but instead invites us to project our own feelings onto it. The vacant, haggard look of the mask in *Niwa* reflects the heavy oppression of the farming woman's life, and reveals by its very inexpressiveness the ways in which society acts on individuals to cut off and control their access to their natural instincts, to their natural sources of emotional expression.

A second reason for choosing to use a mask might be that the disruption of gaze caused by the mask (we cannot see the dancer's living eyes, and the dancer's sight is itself disrupted), is linked to both a loss of humanity (eye contact being one of the most fundamental of human gestures) and to a loss of contact with the phenomenal world. In Japan, old age is traditionally supposed to bring a progressive detachment from material things. This detachment is both actively sought after (by "taking the tonsure," i.e. shaving one's head and becoming a Buddhist monk), and passively suffered (the loss of sight, hearing etc., that comes naturally with old age). The idea is that this Buddhist renunciation of worldly life prepares one for death and the enlightenment that comes only to those who have freed themselves from the delusion of worldly attachments.

As "Masks and Black Hair" continues, the woman kneels quietly at the rear of the stage. She hits her neck with the palm of her hand once or twice (a sign that is culturally defined in Japan to mean the stiff neck of old age), taps her knees in time to the music for a bit, and then slowly begins to mime such daily activities as eating soba noodles, playing the Japanese lute, pouring tea, and sewing. She then comes forward to where she left the red kimono. She picks it up and cradles it, slips her hands into its sleeves, and holding them up to her face, finally pulls it over her head. When she reemerges out from under the robe, she has exchanged the grey mask for a red one. Once again the stage business reminded me of a traditional technique from *Nō*. Here the sudden emergence of the red mask from under the kimono bore a remarkable

¹⁸Lizzie Slater as cited in David Wilk, "Profound Perplexing Sankai Juku," *The Christian Science Monitor* (8 November 1984). Wilk here quotes from Slater's essay in the program for a Sankai Juku performance at the Boston Opera House, Fall 1984.

resemblance to the scene in the Nō play Aoi no Ue, where a woman possessed by jealousy is transformed into a demoness. In the Nō play, the woman enters with a kimono pulled over her head, and after much suspense, at last lifts the kimono to reveal a horrifying demon mask, tinted red. In Nō a mask tinted red often signifies the wearer is a ghost with supernatural power or is possessed by demonic forces. A Japanese ghost differs somewhat from the Western conception of a ghost, and the ghost that characteristically appears in Nō plays has a lot in common with the ghost that appears in Niwa, as can be seen from the following description of a Nō ghost by Kunio Komparu:

a human being who has departed from this world but maintains some kind of attachment becomes a ghost, and at the moment of death such a person loses the future and is fixed into an eternal present. The only time allowed is the past. Thus, the ghost always appears as the figure it was in life and reminisces about the single experience of profound memory that entraps it within the web of delusion.¹⁹

On the edge of death, the woman in Niwa was remembering the prosaic, ordinary activities of her lifetime on a farm. Now, she has become a goryō, the Japanese ghost who is doomed to be an ageless wanderer, a perpetual refugee driven from place to place with no rest in sight. The reenactment in death of Nakajima's experience in life of being a political refugee brings the section to yet another kyū climax, as a storm of sound repeats and amplifies the chaos of the Sakhalin section. The last image we see is of the woman/ghost frantically running back and forth across the stage with one arm above her head as though to ward off approaching catastrophe. Grabbing up her bundle, she finally escapes from the stage as the music/noise reaches the peak of its crescendo.

When the woman returns to the stage, the mask is gone. Now, we seem to be watching her reenact a positive memory of her youth. As popular music begins to play (a kitschy, romantic mixture of lieder music, dance hall, accordion, and tango) the woman appears to become a singer or a dancer in a nightclub. Eyes closed, arm curved above her head as though she were about to plunge into a flamenco dance, she looks as though she were drowning in ecstasy as she remembers her long lost beauty. At this moment in particular one can see traces of the influence of Ohno Kazuo: the resemblance to portions of Ohno's Admiring La Argentina were truly striking.

¹⁹Komparu, The Noh Theater, p. 86. This description is of course not necessarily true of all Nō plays, but only for those in which a ghost appears.

In the classic Nō manner, the simple act of retelling the memory through dance allows the dancer's release from her attachment and as the Bailer from Songs of the Auvergne comes on, the woman achieves enlightenment. In the last section of the dance, her final transformation into Kannon (the Japanese Buddha) transforms her into a living statue that glows with golden light as she slowly assumes iconic poses from the statuary of all the major religions, including Christian, Buddhist and Hindu. The dance has returned once again to the jo phase, to a "world of innocence, stillness--fluent energy of eternity."²⁰

As a final note, I'd like to point to at least one way that Butō has been influenced by Japanese traditions other than performance. Although I have suggested above some of the similarities between the structure of Niwa and the premodern religious structure of the Japanese life, in closing one might note that it is not only in the structure of Butō pieces that the influence of Buddhism is found. The Butō use of heshimi and other metamorphosis-based improvisation techniques aimed at bringing the body into mystical union with nature can be seen as grounded in Zen Buddhism as well. Following in a long tradition of essentially irrational art, these improvisations might be compared to Zen kōans, the improvisatory, poetic-symbolic paradoxes that the art historian Haga Tōru has described as, "discharges of an intense energy that should pierce at once and suddenly illumine the darkness of our confused minds."²¹ The darkness of the soul in Ankoku Butō, which rejects our analytical interpretations, can be seen as a necessary step towards enlightenment, that is, the necessary "fall of self" into darkness that proceeds the light of mystical oneness with nature:

At the end of the arduous and assiduous path of negation...the very foundation of self will be shattered...disclosing within us an abyss in which will be diffused, pure and innocent, the light that is Buddha. Such is the crucial experience of 'the fall of the self'...which led St. John of the Cross beyond illuminations and ecstasies to the 'dark night of the soul' and to 'the sonorous solitude.'²²

Ankoku Butō, "dark soul dance" or "the dance of utter darkness," has its philosophical basis in this "dark night of the soul" which allows us to wrench

²⁰Niwa (The Garden), program notes.

²¹Haga, "Japanese Point of View," unpaginated.

²²Haga, "Japanese Point of View," unpaginated.

free "from the restricting, additive, static humanistic vision of the world."²³ In this sense, the very attempt to analyze Butō in the manner undertaken in this essay may be seen as essentially contradictory to its spirit, since such an analysis reduces the works' possible meanings by employing the explanatory apparatus of rational thought. Although most audiences need some background for Butō to seem anything more than a new wave of spectacularly visual expressionist theater, one should always keep in mind that this attachment to critical analysis is, from the perspective of the Butō dancer within the Japanese artistic tradition, a delusion. By way of conclusion, it seems apt to paraphrase a description taken from an essay by Haga Tōru on Japanese avant-garde art, as an illustration of how the Butō dancer in the last section of *Niwa* would herself wish to be seen: as a figure advancing inexorably toward enlightenment, exorcising the ghosts of interpretations, those demons who blind us to the true reality, while it simultaneously causes the collapse of that scaffolding of concepts which clutter up our meager intellect, in order to restore us, as it were, to ourselves, to our original selves.²⁴

²³Haga, "Japanese Point of View," unpaginated.

²⁴Haga, "Japanese Point of View," unpaginated.

Appendix A

"A Preface to Butō"

by

Ichikawa Miyabi

If postmodernism's escape from the modern era lies in the ordeal of somehow getting beyond modernism, Butō, which is based on an Asian philosophy of the unity of the body and the soul, is a current flowing back towards the premodern era. Butō was born more than 20 years ago, a bit earlier than Western postmodern dance. A long time has passed since then.¹

The 1980 appearance of Ohno Kazuo and Sankai Juku at the Nancy Dance Festival in France was the turning point that signalled Butō's assumption of a leading role in the international dance scene. Although Ashikawa Yōko and the group Butō-ha Sebi had given sporadic performances in Europe before then, after 1980 Butō's popularity swelled so rapidly that, astonishingly enough, they sold out the Paris Opera House. At the 1982 Avignon Festival, Ohno Kazuo appeared along with Dai Rakuda-kan, and in 1983 Hijikata Tatsumi's group participated in the "Six Country Festival" in Europe.

Although the look of Butō has a number of unique features, the strangely transfigured appearance of the body is probably the most characteristic. Butō dancers wear white makeup. At first, the dancers smeared themselves with white chalk dissolved in glue, so that their skin had a bizarre roughness like that of a shellfish. These days, however, they simply mix white makeup with water and paint themselves, so their white skin seems no different from that of a Kabuki actor. Why is it that this white makeup has become such a characteristic feature of Butō?

According to Ohno Kazuo, in the early years the dancers relied on white makeup to cover up the fact that their technique was still undeveloped.

¹This translation is from Ichikawa Miyabi, "Butō' Josetsu," in *Butō: Nikutai no Suriarisutotachi* (Butō: Surrealists of the Flesh), ed. Hanaga Mitsutoshi (Tokyo: Gendai Shokan, 1983), unpaginated.