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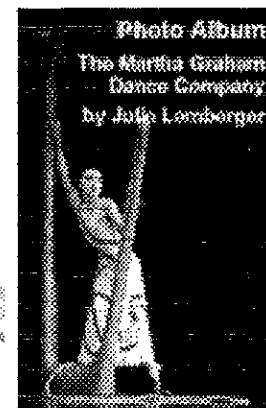
Out of the Fog, 12-1: Butoh or not Butoh  
Blissed Off with Sankai Juku

By [Aimee Ts'ao](#)  
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SAN FRANCISCO -- The world-acclaimed Butoh ensemble Sankai Juku, presented by San Francisco Performances, sold out its shows November 14 and 15 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater months in advance. That left a lot of people, including many of my friends, out in the cold. But in the end, I can't say that it really mattered.

Earlier in the evening of the 14th in the YBCA screening room, the Dance/Screen series, co-presented by the San Francisco Performing Arts Library and Museum (SFPALM), SF Performances and YBCA, shows the Butoh documentary "Dance of Darkness" by Edin Velez. (The term Butoh is short for "Ankoku Butoh," literally dance of darkness.) While there is a lot of archival footage of Butoh originators Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, Velez includes Akaji Mori's Dai Rakuda Kan, Isamu Ohsuga's Byakko Sha and Yoko Ashikawa's Hakutoboh among other artists and companies to show the diversity of styles that evolved in the first 30 years of Butoh's existence. (Butoh started in 1959 and this documentary was made in 1989.)

Sankai Juku is not among the companies featured. Since 1982, this company, founded in 1975 by Ushio Amagatsu, has received 11 commissions from the Theatre de la Ville in Paris and has toured those works extensively throughout the world. Narrator Mark Holborn says that if you see it at Lincoln Center,



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then it's not Butoh. (Of course, some of us laugh since we will shortly be at Sankai Juku's show in the theater next door.) There are those who believe that Butoh is necessarily subversive, transgressive and could only be found in underground performance venues, not mainstream theaters.

Less than half an hour later, I walk in to find my seat in the theater. The curtain is already up and the stage is filled with giant floating flowers, two-foot wide white lotus-like blossoms atop three-foot long white stems. I turn to fellow dance critic Ann Murphy and ask her if the abundance of blooms makes her think of Pina Bausch's "Nelken" (in English, "Carnations"), and whether she thinks they will also be trampled underfoot in the course of the performance. We both agree that they are too exquisite for such a fate.

The lights fade and director, choreographer and designer Agamatsu's "Kagemi – Beyond the Metaphor of Mirrors" begins. When the lights come up we see a half-dozen bodies lying or squatting among the stalks. Stage left, standing on a round platform, a lone man, costumed in a simple robe with his skin powdered completely white in the typical Butoh fashion, begins a series of slow contemplative arm and head gestures to spare Japanese-like music. He exits, the flowers rise to hover like a canopy above the stage, and the six men slowly unfold their bodies and begin passages of movement that are quite ritualistic, at times evoking a feeling of ancient Egypt. Except for this company's performance of "Hiyomeki" in Berkeley in 1999, what I am witnessing now is certainly the antithesis of everything I have ever encountered in all my not inconsiderable Butoh experience. No primal spasms, no rebelling against the crushingly restrictive Japanese cultural prescriptions and proscriptions, no darkness. Indeed, at this point the lights are intensely bright, and the aesthetic of purity and simplicity seems the direct descendent of all the traditional Japanese theater forms, Kabuki, Noh, and Kyogen, not the repudiation of them. While the choreography may send small ripples gently outward, nothing so much as even suggests rocking the boat. Even the actual movements appear to be generated superficially, the arms, legs and heads moving separately, not as the result of unified impulses from the torso. The only exception is a short segment in which four men in dark costumes with white paint spatters are quite playful with each other and use red paint to mark each other's ultra-white faces.

I reflect on Tolstoy: "All happy families are alike. Each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." At the end of the evening (an hour and 25 minutes without intermission) I am totally benumbed by beauty and utterly gorged on gorgeous scenic



design that leaves me hungry for depth, for a slice of reality stewed in turmoil. My heart, unmoved, beats steadily under my ribs; my feelings lie frozen beneath the skin of my face.

A few nights later I interview Shinichi Iova-Koga by telephone from London, where he's teaching. Iova-Koga founded inkBoat, a San Francisco-based collaborative Butoh group, and also works frequently in Europe. We discuss the state of Butoh past and present, and if it is really possible to define the form. He says that even Butoh's fathers, Hijikata and Ohno, changed their ideas about it over the course of their careers. Hijikata, toward the end of his life, thought of his work as a new Kabuki and stopped using the term Butoh, replacing it with Tohoku Kabuki. (He was from the Tohoku region of Japan.) So maybe one true aspect of Butoh is that of embracing change. Iova-Koga also says one of the problems is that Butoh has spread to so many countries and so many people have formed their own personal interpretations of it that there really is no single authority that can say what is or is not Butoh.

Amagatsu's journey has been vastly different from most of the other Japanese Butoh artists. He had studied ballet and modern dance and was a founding member of Dai Rakuda Kan, leaving in 1975 to pursue his own artistic vision with the formation of Sankai Juku, now the most widely known Butoh troupe. While most Butoh companies were struggling to survive in Japan, Sankai Juku was receiving support from the Theatre de la Ville in Paris, allowing Amagatsu to create an evening-length work every two years. But how Butoh is Sankai Juku really? It has achieved an exceptionally high level of aesthetic excellence, but, as Iova-Koga says, "Perfection is not interesting."

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