Rebellion and expression

in contemporary japanese dance

Thomas R.H. Havens

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Among the many art forms in Japan today, dance presents unusual opportunities for rebelling not merely against traditional artistic regimens but also against the accepted conventions of a tightly structured society. Dancers seek to express in movement the world of contemporary reality-life as it exists. Among the four main forms of dance in Japan today—folk dancing, classical Japanese dance, ballet, and modern—the latter clearly offers the greatest choice of expression through movement.

The meaning of modern dance is no less elusive in Japan than elsewhere. In a performance on public television, Merce Cun-ningham (1978) pointed out how individual and personal an act it is to watch the movement of dancers on a stage. More so than for other dance genres, watching modern dancers forces the viewer to make choices: each person reacts to the movement individually, without relying on much of a received tradition or background of accepted taste.

Nor does the performer find it easy "to talk systematically about the dance/' as the Japanese modern dancer Akiko Kanda (1972:36) has admitted. "I hardly ever consciously think about what dancing is, what dance means to me," she says. Instead she keeps on dancing, and like almost every dancer she misses it when she's not dancing every day. Movement for Kanda, as for most modern dancers, is a creative expression of some aspect of our complex world. Even the act of watching the dancer's art requires initiative, and often creativity, on the part of the viewer.

As in America and Europe, ballet was the parent of the modern dance movement in Japan. It began with a performance by Ishii Baku (1892-1962), then twenty-four years old, at the Imperial Theater in June 1916, Ito Michio (ca. 1892-1961), Takada Seiko and her husband Masao, and Eguchi Takaya and his wife Miya Misako were others who, like Ishii, first learned ballet and then studied at the Denishawn School or Mary Wigman's Institute between the wars (Machida 1968:51-628).

After the surrender in 1945 ballet in Japan was blessed with sudden popularity, and even today audiences return to see "Swan Lake" again and again. At the same time, modern dance turned from solos and duets toward performances by ensembles and full groups. But modern dance was fully revitalized only in the mid-fifties, partly because of a visit in November 1955 by the Martha Graham Dance Company (Machida 1968:719-92; Yamakawa 1975). By the mid-sixties dance audiences In Japan had been as well exposed to the range of modern dance styles äs any in the world, except for those in a few large American cities. Meanwhile more and more students were being trained abroad, with government scholarships starting in 1964, and modern dance studios were opening all over Japan. Clearly modern dance was an art form that was no longer allen.

Dance education in Japanese schools goes back to the turn of the Century, but only since the reforms of 1947 has the education ministry officially recognized instruction in modern dance along with ballet for schoolchildren. The universities have lagged even further behind. Japan's first M.A. program in dance began in 1964 at Tokyo University of Education, cloaked as a master's degree in physical education. Most modern dance on the campuses remains extracurricular, capped by the annual concert of the Kanto Student Dance Federation for dance clubs at the major Tokyo universities (Matsumoto 1974; Hayakawa 1973).

An impressive number of people are dancing in Japan now. Although no precise figures are available, the executive directors of the Modern Dance Association and Japan Ballet Association both put the number of ballet students at more than 750,000. Modern dance is currently being studied by at least this many if not more pupils (Ezaki 1980; Shimada 1980). Since the mid-seventies the number of modern dance concerts has exceeded 500 annually, many of them clustered in the steamy months of July and August when stages are most available (Yamano 1976; Eguchi 1977). For those at the top of the modern dance world in Japan, teach-ing and performing schedules are at least as hectic as those of artists elsewhere. A 1973 survey of 134 modern dancers showed that a third of the performers appeared on stage or television more than ten times a year and that a third of those engaged in choreography and production were involved with more than 100 performances each year. The poll also showed that most modern dance instructors devoted at least 150 days a year to teaching and that nearly half taught 250 days, which means five days a week. A separate survey of fifty-eight modern and ballet dancers, conducted in 1974, revealed that nearly eighty percent earned all their income from the dance, although other reports show that many part-time performers and teachers have to work in other occupations to support themselves (NIHON GENDAI BUYO SHIRYO III 1974:103-107; GEINOJIN NO SEIKATSU TO ISHIKI I 1974:5-41). As with the arts in the United States, such statistics for Japan are difficult to obtain, but it seems likely that even fewer modern dancers are able to support themselves exclusively from their art than is the case in America.

Japan's most creative performers have discovered that modern dance offers dusters of visual images rather than the simpler clarity of ballet, and they have found that these complex and often elliptical images appeal strongly in a society where communication without words is much favoured. The artistic realism of modern dance seems especially well suited to the competitive Status System of Japanese life in the twentieth Century. Art as an Imitation of life has had its outlet in movement mainly through modern dance, which takes its themes from all of society and nature rather than limiting itself to religious or aristocratic subjects. Modern dance often conveys the texture of daily existence in a complicated urban world, a world that choreographers neither idealize nor condemn but simply attempt to present as it is.

No Japanese dancer has shown a greater array of themes through movement than Akiko Kanda, who is Martha Graham's best known pupil in Japan. If there is a unifying thread in the diverse choreography Kanda has presented in the past ten years, it is probably the trans-formation of woman, past and present, young and old, both Japanese and foreign. But she would be the first to reaffirm that it is the movement itself which counts most in her works. Kanda was born in 1935 and went to New York in 1956 for five years' training under Martha Graham after seeing the Graham Company perform in Tokyo. As a teacher and choreographer, Kanda has insisted ever since on "knowing your own body": how t o breathe, where the body's center is, how to extract the maximum physical and mental discipline from long hours of kinetic practice (Kanda 1972, 1973, 1980).

Her first important work was a solo rendering of 'The Four Seasons" in October 1969. From the elegant violins of Vivaldi she turned m her next compositions to music for No and Kabuki drama, accordion music, chansons, music for the koto, and more recently to the Chinese fiddle, hu-kung [ku-kung] and Gershwin. Among the most significant of her earlier works was "Ophelia," first presented in October 1972, in which she danced alone against a black backdrop. Much of the time she was wrapped in a loose-fitting piece of cloth, revealing muffled but graphic movements inside it.

Among her forty-eight appearances in 1973, Kanda presented a six-part series called 'Twelve Months of Dancing the Woman" in Jean Jean, a small Underground theater in the Shibuya area of Tokyo (Sakurai 1973; Kanda 1974). She said she was trying to use movement serially across time to show how time and woman interacted, from innocence to awakening, flowering, and eventually decline. In part one she draped herself in cloth, alternately black and white, to show reality and aspiration/ accompanied by the French song "lsabel." The next parts showed the spring of girlhood, then sexual passion, the ripeness of summer, and the twilight of autumn. The last and most interesting section was called "Cart," a retrospecti've danced principally to the Chinese fiddle. First Kanda wore a white hood to portray an old woman. She then removed the hood for a thirty-minute sequence showing the woman's youth, while a small chorus of females danced the vigor of life around her, Finally she put the bonnet on again to show the woman in decline. As in all her works, the music, setting, and costumes were meticulously fitted to the movement.

Kanda agreed that "Cart" was reminiscent of the No plays "Sotoba Komachi" ("Komachi at the Stupa"; a stüpa is a Buddhist monument) and "Sekidera Komachi" ("Komachi at the Seki-dera Temple"). She said she chose the music for its femininity. Like some of her earlier works, this one used long Strands of hair hanging from the stage ceiling and walls to suggest the passage of time: the hair changed color from ash-brown to white.

I didn't want to express the cruelty of old age . . . but rather to dance beautifully the severity and sadness of being old. I thought of it ["Cart"] as linking back up with "Woman Number One," presented in January, in dancing the pathos and the beauty of old age as a regressive phenomenon, trying to reverse the irreversible flow of human life. (Kanda 1974:45)

This was Kanda at her freest, choosing accompaniment, settings, and movement from many times and places to show her woman in rebellion against age. Freedom characterized Kanda's method as well as her content, in that she sometimes chose her music first and at other times worked out the choreography and then picked music to fit it (Kanda 1974:46-43).

A year after this series, Kanda won the top prize in modern dance the first time one was offered at the government cultural agency's annual arts festival Her composition "Concierge" interpreted Marie Antoinette's imagined thoughts as she stood on the guillotine platform, looking back over her brief life: lively dancing parties, the flowers of Paris, the years at Versailles. Then the stage was suddenly transformed, the lights dimmed, a voice thundered a Version of "La Marseillaise," and Kanda danced a twenty-minute solo to mark the final liberation from jail (Hayakawa 1975:6-7). Again her heroine refused to accept the verdict of death without a struggle.

In the arts festival of 1976 Kanda reached back to the Nara period (710-794) to bring out the dash of hope and reality in a work called "Woman of the Man'yoshu." She and the No performer Kanze Hisao showed the conflict between petite Yosami no Otome and her lover Hitomaro. They did this by juxtaposing, but not at all blending, the movement of No with that of modern dance: the one slow, composed, and dignified, the other lighthearted in quick tempo (BUYO NENKAN 119771977:58; Dansu Waku 19:38). The contrast was emphasized by Kanda's typical control of detail. The composition and its successor, "Komachi," which was first presented in 1978 and further refined in a stunning Kyoto performance in October 1980, show Kanda's continuing attempts to portray woman as a persisting and timeless entity (Kandal980).

A contemporary of Kanda's who is even more physical, and much more amusing, is the Osaka choreographer Hanayagi Suzushi, who was born in 1928. After learning classical Japanese dance, Suzushi studied in America from 1961 to 1967 and has since become one of the most versatile and entertaining performers in any genre of dance. Her group created a Sensation with a homecoming concert at the Tokyo OAG House (German Cultural Center) in December 1972 after their successful visit to New York. More recently she has presented a deceptively humorous composition in two parts, "Everyone Plays the Clown," staged in 1975 and 1976 (Goda 1977:76). Even though the action is farcical, "Everyone Plays the Clown" is not particularly intended as an escape from the everyday world. Wearing a judo suit, Suzushi dances in, throws herself down near a wall, and Starts a record of "Swan Lake" on a nearby turntable. Her legs against the wall, she alternately kicks the wall and flexes her ankles. Her sleeves are bound with a white belt, and she wears a plastic Groucho Marx false nose and spectacles. She crawls, äs though getting out of bed; squats, äs though toeing the mark in sumo wrestling; wiggles her toes, turns her face very slowly toward the audience, and begins singing the nineteenth-century tune "Tennen no bi" ("The Beauty of Nature") (Goda 1977:76-77). She looks at a girl standing nearby, then stares at a boy wearing a helmet with a revolving red lamp and a beeping radio time signal, and sticks out her tongue at him.

Suzushi denies that all this activity has any special meaning. Things simply float to the surface and then die out; all that is revealed are certain events at a certain place with particular people. There is nothing permanent or even memorable about what is seen, and yet the dance creates a sense of time's passing and its relation to our own existence. The movement is much less beautiful than Kanda's, but perhaps it is also much more tangible. What endures throughout is the female body across the flow of unimportant everyday occurrences. Like her male counterpart Atsugi Bonjin, Suzushi comes very close to what Kaufmann (1956:42) calls "that creative freedom which finds ultimate expression in being a law unto one's self" (Hori-kiri 1975; Dansu Wäku 16:12-13).

The artist who takes this concentration on the body to its limits is Hijikata Tatsumi, who was so well established among the avant-garde that he was the subject of a showy retrospective in 1972 which ran for twenty-seven nights at a theater in the Shinjuku area of Tokyo. Hijikata is a choreographer at the furthest pole from ballet. Like many modern dancers, he believes that the classical dance theatre developed rigid techniques for remolding the body so that it could move in ways that explored the realm of the unreal. Hijikata instead takes the body as it is, to deal with the world that exists. For two years he worked with his Company at a Tokyo theater, the Asubesutokan, and assembled a production called "Hitogata" ("Puppet"), a dance that drew on themes expressed across his twenty-year career. The premiere was in June 1976. Ashikawa Yoko took the part of an old prostitute and projected her movement through nonverbal role playing. She used very simple movements, "as delicate as a puff of smoke" (Goda 1977: 77-78), to suggest the world weariness of the old courtesan. In composing this dance Hijikata seemed to combine Kanda's concern for the woman fighting against time with Suzushi's concentration on the body. Hijikata regards movement as the most concrete, definite, and central aspect of the body, something that is more acquired than innate, taking many years to develop. Movement for Hijikata may be something of an absolute, found in each individual's body, immune to idealism or human intention or will. It simply exists by itself, beyond Graham's and Kanda's fusion of mental and physical activity, side by side with Suzushi's denial of any purpose beyond movement itself.

Tanegashima Yukiko, who was born in 1938, has approached her choreography in much the same vein, labeled by one critic "situationalism" or "circumstantialism" (jokyoron). Her work "Pianissimo," which she first staged in December 1973, was anything but quiet. Sounds shrieked, motors whirred, air hoses hissed, and the three dancers went through seventy minutes of vigorous, almost driven movement. All that was left, aside from flushed faces and garments soaked with sweat, was the reality of the flesh. Tanegashima exhibits pure movement. She seems to believe that, as in Shinto, things simply are, that there is nothing which should or has to be done. Apart from the dancing, she brings no values or meaning to the circumstances (Sato 1974:32). Although her work resembles the "situational theater" (Jokyo Gekijo) of the well-known Underground playwright Kara luro, Kara denies any direct connection between his art and Tanegashima's (Kara -.1980).

Watanabe Gen, who was born in 1939, very possibly went a step further than all the others in his colorful composition called "Utopia," which was first performed in Tokyo's magnificent metropolitan festival hall in February 1977. Here his focus emphasized freedom for all humanity. Watanabe's utopia was not one of fantasy but of dissonant abandon, in which each of a dozen performers, both male and female, set aside existing conventions of movement and danced entirely in accord with his or her physical capabilities (Dansu Waku 20:43-44). There are probably no ultimates in an art form that changes as quickly as modern dance, but this work seemed to be at the very frontier of individualism, diversity, and particularity through movement.

Tanegashima's emphasis on the Situation or circumstances seems very well tuned to the non-absolute, concrete quality of so much Japanese social thinking after World War Two. Of course there were idealists and utopians in the postwar period who managed to break out of the defined nexus and reach for universalist goals. But the tangible matrix of daily interaction with other people seems to mark out the bounds for many Japanese attitudes toward their surroundings. 1t is very much in this spirit that each of these choreographers uses the modern dance idiom to define the individual in the context of everyday life, dealing with the realities of living in contemporary society.

The modern dancers who stand out most sharply in Japan today are those who react against the formalism of ballet and reject the weight of the past or ideas about destiny. Su-zushi and certainly Hijikata focus on the dancer in this world, amid the variety and instability of daily life. For Kanda's women and Hijikata's prostitute, movement is a way of stating rebellion against time—the ultimate circumstance that their protagonists are finally power-less to overcome. For all these artists, there is a great deal of choice and freedom in the movement that appears on the stage. Watanabe's "Utopia" represents the extreme of this liberation for both males and females, with the performers dancing so completely at random that the viewer has to make the basic choice of which dancer to watch.

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