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## Contemporary Dance and Butoh

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# A New Perspective on Reality from a Growing Pandemic-Era Dance Scene

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Tsutsumi Hiroshi

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 continued to rage in 2022, with a sixth, seventh, and eighth wave of infections coming during the year. The Omicron variant of the virus, though less potent, proved highly contagious, and the performing arts continued to suffer from cancellations and delays. Amid this turmoil, in February, Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine. In the deeply interconnected ballet world, large numbers of Japanese ballet dancers and students returned from both countries. Refugees were accepted and charity performances held. In the world of contemporary dance, which has fewer such connections, only Condors responded to the global situation in real time.

In June, Condors premiered *Starting Over*, a work inspired by the John Lennon song of the same name. The work begins with troupe leader Kondo Ryohei standing before a crucifix playing peacefully with birds and a dog, but this is followed by a scene of invading soldiers. The work relativized the situation in the US and Japan to the realities of the Ukraine invasion and awakened its audience anew to the peace they shared, resonating with many. Having accepted a post as artistic director of the Saitama Arts Theater, Kondo also brought a breath of fresh air by staging two of his own productions there, *Born on a Planet with Dance 2022* (*Dansu no aru hoshi ni umarete 2022*) and *Genre Cross* (*Janru kurosu*).

### Major Works Reexamining Today's World

Notwithstanding the paucity of works directly depicting the pandemic or war, there were many major works that sought to reexamine the current situation that

artists face.

It has been around half a century since Kasai Akira opened his dance studio, Tenshi-kan (“House of Angels”), and the history of Kasai’s company can be divided into two periods, separated by the time he spent in Germany. This year, Kasai premiered a joint production featuring both members from the first period (including Yamada Setsuko, Omori Masahide, Yamazaki Kota, and Sugita Josaku) and the second period (including Kasai Reiji, Kasai Mitsutake, Asami Yuko, Uemura Naoka, Sakurai Ikuya, Noguchi Izumi, Kujirai Kentaro, and Sadakata Makoto), titled *What Cagliostro Dreamed in the Castel Sant’Angelo (Rogoku Tenshi-jo de Kariosutoro ga mita yume)*. The work is built around the idea that eighteenth-century swindler Cagliostro, when imprisoned on suspicion of political crimes, dreamed not of social or political revolution but rather a revolution to create a new relationship between humanity and the natural world—dance. The work also references Peter Weiss’s play *Marat/Sade*, and no doubt Kasai also saw an overlap between Weiss’s work and his own struggle for “the ideals of human rights.” Kasai poured his heart and soul into the performance, dancing like a man possessed and astonishing audiences.

Dairakudakan, led by Maro Akaji, also celebrated fifty years since its founding in 1972 with two new works presented in rapid succession: *End (Owari)* and *Beginning (Hajimari)*. These connected works portray the universe as a place where destruction and birth repeat in cycles, and Butoh performers appeared in the guise of such cosmic mysteries as dark matter, phantom energy, and white and black holes. *End* depicted a contracting universe being drawn into a black hole, while *Beginning* reversed this story, showing matter being ejected from a white hole and expanding to create new galaxies. The sheer audacity of anthropomorphizing the hidden mysteries of the universe and seeking to express such vast motifs with the body richly stimulated the audience’s imagination, creating a spectacle that gave full expression to the magnetism and humor of Butoh.

However, Maro’s imagination had more to offer. At the end of both productions, the entire cast donned light blue suits and performed a dance routine while

singing *La la la Sapiens (Ra ra ra sapiens)*, an original pop song in the style of Imawano Kiyoshiro. Against a repeated refrain of “La, la la, la la, Sapiens,” performers interjected lines like “Where are you going?” “What are you doing?” “Dancing,” and “Until the end of time.” The lyrics were by Maro himself and closed the work with the intimation that humanity would not last until the universe’s end.

Teshigawara Saburo saw his rare genius recognized anew by the world. He was selected to direct the New National Theatre’s new production of Gluck’s baroque opera *Orpheus and Eurydice (Orfeo ed Euridice)*, and his limpid, profound aesthetic was visible in everything from choreography and sets to costumes and lighting, drawing rapturous applause. The production wove together Suzuki Masato’s conducting; the casting of Laurence Zazzo as Orfeo, Valda Wilson as Euridice, and Miyake Rie as Amore, goddess of love; and an ensemble of dancers (Sato Rihoko, Alexandre Riabko, Takahashi Joe, Sato Shizuka) symbolically expressing the characters’ inner worlds. Sato’s dance, which toyed with space and light like the very spirit of Euridice, intertwined organically with the orchestration and singing, sometimes leading the on-stage action as if to amplify the music.

The round stage, which floated in darkness like a great white dish, and the white lily set design made a strong impression. The lighting changed as the story progressed, differentiating between overworld and underworld, and the tale of love transcending even death was depicted simply, with smooth abstraction.

Also this year, Teshigawara began his new “Drawing/Dance” series, in which he dances with projections of his own drawings, with the premiere of *In Search of Lost Lines (Ushinawareta sen o motomete)*. The “Update Dance” series featured Sato’s premiere of her new solo dance *Forest of Confession (Kokuhaku no mori)*, in which she used a kind of poetry of the body to evoke a phantasmagorical world accompanied by a text she wrote herself.

Teshigawara also received the Golden Lion for Dance at this year’s Biennale di Venezia, becoming the first Japanese artist to win this honor. He was also recognized by the Japanese government as a Person of Cultural Merit.

Kanamori Jo's Noism ("Noism Company Niigata," the Niigata City Performing Arts Center Ryutopia in-house dance company) delved into the history and culture of Niigata, premiering a double feature themed around *oni* (a kind of Japanese ogre or demon) in their first full collaboration with Kodo, the taiko performing arts ensemble based on Sado Island.

The first of the two works, *Les Noces de Madame Chrysanthème* (*Okiku no kekkon*), combined Stravinsky's ballet piece *Les Noces* with Kanamori's unique interpretation and direction. Based on Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème*, also an influence on Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly*, the work depicted the "local marriage" of Pierre (Geoffroy Poplawski), a French naval officer visiting Japan in the early Meiji period, and Okiku or "Madame Chrysanthème" (Iseki Sawako), a prostitute from Nagasaki's licensed quarters. Okiku and the other Japanese characters dance like dolls, critically addressing Western orientalism. At the same time, the work also portrayed the inner *oni* nature driving the Japanese to banish and kill foreigners, and the pigtailed Iseki transfixed with a performance that concealed a steel core within apparent sweetness.

The second work, *Oni*, was a new piece commissioned from contemporary composer Harada Keiko on the theme of Niigata and performed with Kodo. The story follows a group of three mountain ascetics led by En no Gyoja (Yamada Yuki) who cross to Sado Island and encounter the prostitutes that live there. It transpires that a nun named Seion has opened a licensed quarter on the island. Harada's music was reserved but exquisite. It experimented with organic reverberations, putting various aural sensations to use with instrumentation that included not just large and small taiko drums but also a hanging gong, a chanchiki handgong, and even the breathing of the performers. This was new territory for the members of Kodo, who rose to the challenge as performers. For Noism, too, these were works that took the culture and history of Niigata as their theme as they explored and embodied the *oni* that lurk within us all.

Hirahara Shintaro unveiled a new production of Philip Glass's opera *Einstein on the Beach* for the 50th anniversary of Kanagawa Kenmin Hall. This work, which premiered with the 1976 production directed by Robert Wilson, has been called

the world's first example of a "theatre of images," being made up of multiple fragmentary motifs relating to the life of gifted astrophysicist Albert Einstein. Fear of nuclear war was high at the time of its composition, and the title was inspired by Nevil Shute's science fiction novel *On the Beach*, which depicted the aftermath of a nuclear war. Hirahara reflexively illuminates these historical circumstances from a contemporary perspective, establishing as characters historical figures who lived life in their own way, such as Michel Foucault and Frieda Kahlo, and shackling the Statue of Liberty's ankles. A giant vinyl sheet is used to evoke the 3/11 tsunami, the Fukushima nuclear accident, and pollution of the ocean by radioactive materials. The result was a powerful piece of theatre that hinted, nearly half a century after the work's debut, that the world is once again in a nuclear and human rights crisis.

### **Doubting Dance and Viewing Reality with Critical Eyes**

Work by female artists from the relatively young Millennial generation also attracted attention this year. What these artists have in common is doubts about dance as it currently exists and the determination to achieve a new understanding of reality on their own terms.

Kedagoro, led by Shimojima Reisa, premiered the new work 세월 ("Sewol" in Hangul). The choice not to include a Japanese pronunciation or translation of the title suggests intent to problematize. This ambitious work deals directly with the capsizing and sinking of the eponymous passenger ferry off Korea in 2014, depicting the extreme circumstances of the passengers caught up in the disaster. However, it does not recreate the incident itself in detail. Orange platforms are piled on the stage; when the dancers descend from them, the set collapses, while the order "가만히 있어" (*Gamanhi iss-eo*, "Don't move") issues intermittently from loudspeakers overhead. Then a bizarre dance in unison takes place as the song 짜라빠빠 (Jja-ra-bba-bba), famous in Korea, is repeatedly played. The song "Dokdo Is Our Territory," known from territorial disputes with Japan, is also used. Some scenes include movements like fitness drills, including push-ups, pair handstands, and breath-holding.

Shimojima has employed a creative method that places near-cruel burdens on the bodies of performers to release a series of works. Based on the idea that “dance’ is one method of interpreting the world,” she runs repeated experiments with the human body as apparatus, blithely uninfluenced by existing dance aesthetics. Instead of providing dances for audiences to watch, she uses dance as a tool to draw audiences in and think about society together. By critically addressing social incidents that she could not have known directly and ensuring that those audiences bear witness to the circumstances as well, she creates opportunities to recognize and consider truth.

Shimojima’s past work includes *Monkey in a Diaper* (*Omutsu o haita saru*, 2017), about Asahara Shoko of the Aum Shinrikyo cult, and *Sky* (2018), about the violent purge within the United Red Army. This year also saw a new tour of her work *Because Kazcause* (*Bikozu Kazukozu*, 2021), a work about Fukuda Kazuko, who murdered a hostess in Matsuyama and then underwent plastic surgery to evade detection.

Nakagawa Ayane’s troupe Suichu-megane∞ premiered *Good Cow-ken*. Right from the beginning, all seventeen members use the full theatre space as a venue for fierce behavior set to punkish, frenzied rock music. Eventually performers begin to leap from the mezzanine or threateningly grip kitchen knives in concert as the work transitions to a performance that evokes ideas of harming oneself and others, suicide by jumping, and suffocation. The motifs are simple movements, but the sense of irritation and frustration comes through painfully clearly. With a focus on “the physicality of humans moved to suicide,” the work depicts humans imprisoned by death.

Nakagawa began learning ballet and classical Japanese dance in early childhood and strives to fuse the two styles into a hybrid creation amid the dilemma of being torn between them. At the same time, Nakagawa also turns a critical eye toward contemporary society. At least 20,000 people kill themselves each year in Japan, and recent years have seen an increase in murder-suicides and incidents of indiscriminate murder. Life is hard, filled with irritations and frustrations; how do we tame our unstable selves, which threaten to explode at any time? A

contemporary critical awareness and sensibility made a forthright appearance in this performance.

Kurata Midori premiered a new work titled *I Can/Can't See You From Here Now* (*Ima koko kara, anata no koto ga mieru/mienai*) (organized by Daimaruyu SDGs ACT5 Executive Committee and bench Co.). For this initiative, she sought participants from among those working in Otemachi, Marunouchi, and Yurakucho in the heart of Tokyo, and turned an entire floor of an office building in Yurakucho into a venue for performance. At first glance, the composition may resemble a docudrama, but it is in fact more like post-drama theatre. One by one, the participants speak, as if introducing themselves. All kinds of people are present, and the social realities arising from diversity manifest themselves. Individual standpoints thought to be non-individual are presented in close-up. Why do people live? Why do they work? This work increased the resolution with which we cognize the world.

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Kurata has a history of creating works based on coming face-to-face with people as they really are, including patients at drug addiction rehabilitation clinics and aging residents in regional areas. She has successfully completed many projects by pursuing the possibilities of dance expressing the matters that arise in such encounters as fiction.

### **Dance Ecosystems Gradually Expanding Amid the Pandemic**

Even as the pandemic wreaked havoc on live theatrical performances, more residencies to support artists and opportunities to restage pieces were seen.

At the Toyohashi Arts Theatre PLAT (Toyohashi, Aichi Prefecture), a dance residency program open to applications from the public has run continuously since 2017, and has become a space for many artists to create and present their work.

After its opening was postponed due to the pandemic, Dance Base Yokohama (DaBY), changed its initial plans to offer expanded support for artists, including a residency program. In 2022, the resulting repertoire was repackaged as a “performing arts selection” for a seven-city national tour.

The Yokohama Dance Collection’s competition established two new prizes

after the pandemic to support artists with residency programs at the Kinosaki International Arts Center (KIAC) and Architanz.

Yokohama Red Brick Warehouse No. 1 started its new choreographer system in 2022, with Umeda Hiroaki appointed for a two-year term.

Competitions and festivals in various locations remained valuable opportunities for young artists in particular to receive evaluations and achievements and to have their works restaged. Each restaging is an opportunity to polish the work further.

In this context, the activities of actor and dancer Moriyama Mirai attracted particular attention. Moriyama, a native of Kobe, was invited to the creative program at the Kiito Design and Creative Center Kobe, where he collaborated with neuroscientist and cognitive scientist Nakano Nobuko on the experimental work *Formula*. Probing into the topic more deeply, they brought in choreographer Ella Rothschild and embarked on a national tour. Moriyama expanded the project further and devised ways to share the work more deeply, such as by curating works from top creators in multiple fields to turn the entire venue, including the lobby, into a kind of exhibition space.

A suggestion from Moriyama also resulted in the establishment of the Artist in Residence Kobe (AiRK) program. Because there were no accommodation facilities at Kiito, the program sourced operational funds through crowdfunding in order to provide free accommodation so that its artists could concentrate on creative activities. In the future, the goal is to use AiRK as a starting point for collaborations with the city's art and culture institutions that will enrich the system and further facilitate creativity. The City of Kobe has appointed Moriyama main curator of the Kobe Re:Public Art Project, which aims to attract tourists to the city using public art.

One final headline from this year: Ito Kaori was selected as director of TJP, the National Dramatic Center of Strasbourg-Grand-Est. For a Japanese artist to become director of a public theatre in France is an outstanding achievement. One can only wait eagerly to see what kinds of collaborations with Japan will be possible.



**Tsutsumi, Hiroshi**

Born in 1966 in Kawasaki. Graduated in theatre studies at the Department of Literature at Bunka Gakuin. Worked as an editor for art, entertainment, theatre, and dance magazines before going freelance. Has covered a wide range of performing art genres, including small theatre, *shingeki*-style (modern realism) theatre, underground (Angura) theatre, commercial theatre, traditional theatre, and dance scenes. Has served as a selection committee member for the Toyota Choreography Award and on the juries of the Guardian Garden Theatre Festival and the SAI International Dance Festival. Edited *The Flying Dangoro Party in the Sky: "Rebirth of Acharaka"* (*Sora tobu kumo no ue Dangoro ichiza: "Acharaka saitanjo"*), *Performing Arts in Germany Today*, and Peter Brook's *The Road to "Battlefield,"* among other works.

(Translation: Matt Treyvaud)