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## "BODY THEATER BUTOH: A REVIEW OF TATSUMI HIJIKATA AND KAZUO OHNO"

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**Abstrak:** Body theater is a process of physical training with body awareness as the idea or the body itself as the concept for the training process. Body theater offers a new perspective on the body, not merely as a means of expression but as an identity itself. Butoh is a form of theater originating from Japan, created from the creative thoughts of two maestros, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. It was intended as a form of protest against the Japanese government because many young people died senselessly on the battlefield. The concept of Butoh encompasses death and how to see death as beauty. This underpins the researcher's intention to delve deeper. Based on this study, the researcher formulates the problems in the research as follows: (1) The Form of Body Theater in Butoh Performances, (2) Body Theater in the Butoh of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. The aim of this research is to provide a new reference study on Butoh performances, to offer written information to Butoh body theater enthusiasts, and to understand the form of Butoh body theater by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno.

This research uses qualitative methods based on a descriptive approach with data sources from papers (writings). Data collection techniques utilize existing and relevant literature sources. Data reduction and data presentation are used as the basis for data analysis with data validity consisting of source triangulation, technique triangulation, and method triangulation. The results and discussion of this research show that Butoh is a form of Japanese body theater that encompasses various activities, techniques, and motivations for movement. After World War II, Butoh emerged in 1959 through the collaboration between its two main founders, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. The term means 'dance of darkness,' and its form is built on a vocabulary of 'harsh physical movements and rough habits.'

Keywords: Body Theater, Butoh, Kazuo Ohno, Tatsumi Hijikata

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The human body is the totality of the physical structure of a human being, comprising the head, neck, torso, arms, and legs. Each part contains organ systems designed to perform essential life functions, with cells and tissues that are the source of life for humans. When cells and tissues in the body begin to deteriorate, humans experience illness and eventually death. The body is one of the most valuable and precious assets we possess, a gift bestowed by God. Consciously or not, humans spend a significant part of their lives sending and receiving non-verbal signals. Body language forms a part of non-verbal communication. The



human body becomes a philosophical reflection of aesthetic struggles, particularly in the world of performing arts, just as it does in everyday visual environments where the body appears in its complex imagery, both as a primary necessity and within a philosophical framework. Similarly, performing arts have divided the body into various aesthetic forms and colors. In performances, especially theater, movements presented must be optimal. The character implanted in the mind is brought to life through the body, and the body needs to be in its maximum flexibility to achieve the intended or desired movements effectively. Conditioning the body is an activity aimed at making it a ready-to-use raw material. This activity aims to prepare the body organs from a stable or normal state to a flexible (easily movable) condition. It involves training physical endurance, muscle strength, bones, and breath control to maintain an actor's readiness for their performance.

Body theater is a process of physical training with body awareness as the idea, or the body itself as the concept for the training process. Body theater offers a new perspective on the body, not merely as a means of expression but as an identity itself. The body is seen as a phenomenon that stands alone while simultaneously relating to the environment. Thus, body theater is a holistic theatrical process between the actor, body language, and its relationship with society. Unlike drama, which contains verbal language, body theater uses body language that not everyone can understand. Body theater is also not always synonymous with mime, as both body theater and mime are different arts of body movement. Presenting theater in the body is not an easy task; it requires process and diligence. The body is like a stage with boundary walls. It chooses and weighs its presence with numerous narratives, including connections with the soul, mind, spirit, and interactions with everything in front of it, from what is attached to the body to what is stored within it, enabling the body to easily produce language.

Butoh is an experimental movement. Butoh is not a dance, although it was initially influenced by creative dance ideas in the 1950s. The Butoh body is not intended to tell a story of an event. Instead, the body is autonomous and not merely a medium of artistic expression. In Butoh, there is a process of enhancing the possibilities of different body languages, exploring the depths of the body on a transcendental level, reaching the limits of movements typically impossible for humans. Butoh originated from Japan, created from the creative thoughts of two maestros, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, as a form of protest against the Japanese government due to the loss of many young lives, who died senselessly on the battlefield. Butoh began to exist after World War II, with the name BUTOH derived from Chinese, meaning Ritual, officially established in 1959. Butoh has two essences: body and space. The concept of Butoh includes death and how to view death as beauty. According to Hijikata, Butoh does not have a specific philosophy to underpin it because philosophy will emerge after Butoh. The fundamental aspect of Butoh is seeing beauty in even the strangest things.

Butoh movements reject modern standards of beauty, including body idealism. Contrary to elegance and grace, Butoh emphasizes

animalistic aspects, fragility, dying, and the dark side of the body. These can be represented as media to uncover the traces of civilization and the destruction of human relationships, nobility, animalistic greed, and the hope for soaring immortality and the fragility of sentient beings. Generally, humans always cover themselves with various falsehoods, continuously hiding behind masks to conceal their true identity. There are only two situations where humans remove their masks: terrifying conditions and death. Therefore, the role of death in Butoh performances is a profound beauty. This is why Butoh is often associated with rites of darkness and called "The Dance of Darkness," as each performance offers audiences harsh and visually terrifying shows. In Butoh performances, there is darkness, nudity, wild movements, wordless silence, pain, strangeness, forms of sexuality, and the removal of stage aesthetics that are always stable with decoration and staging. This is what underpins the author's interest in studying Butoh more deeply. In Indonesia, there are still very few studies on Butoh, and the author hopes that this writing can become a new reference regarding Butoh. Considering the increasing number of body theater enthusiasts and appreciators in Indonesia, from students, and university students, to the general public, this study aims to fill that gap.

## 2. METODE PENELITIAN

The research titled "Body Theater Butoh: A Review of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno" is designed as qualitative research based on scientific knowledge to meet descriptive needs and relies on literature as a research tool. In qualitative data, the researcher describes or explains with sentences categorized according to the existing problem data to draw conclusions. Qualitative research aims to systematically, factually, and accurately describe or explain the phenomena or relationships being studied. This research method is used for several reasons: 1) qualitative methods are easier to use when dealing with multiple realities; 2) this method directly presents the nature of the relationship between the researcher and the respondent; 3) this method is more sensitive and can adapt to many joint influences on the patterns encountered (Moleong, 2014:9-10). In qualitative research, one can observe directly and in-depth the statements of members/artists and the activities carried out by the group.

The main data sources in qualitative research are words and actions, supplemented by additional data such as existing documents and literature. However, to complete this research, several data sources obtained from various literature, including both primary and secondary data, are needed. The researcher uses secondary data sources, obtaining data through library studies from various sources such as books, performance documentation, journals, articles, newspapers, magazines, and other sources related to the research object. Secondary sources provide data indirectly to the data collector, such as through other people or documents (Sugiyono, 2015: 187). These secondary data sources facilitate the researcher in collecting data and analyzing the results of the research, thereby strengthening the findings and producing research with a high level of validity. The object of research refers to the subject being investigated or the phenomenon

that needs to be understood. It can also be described as a social situation in which the researcher can ascertain what is happening within the research object. The material object used in this research is the Japanese performing art of Butoh, often referred to as the art of darkness. In this formal object, the researcher uses literature sources directly. The subjects of the research include data from articles and journals available on the internet that are relevant to the research object. Information can be requested in accordance with the research problem formulation. The main subjects of this research are Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, derived or studied from literature or other sources related to the chosen research object. The subjects chosen by the researcher are sourced from literature reviews, written sources from several books, and international articles or journals about Butoh.

Data collection techniques are the steps used to obtain valid research data. The data collection technique used in this research relies on existing and relevant literature sources. According to Bogdan and Biklen (as cited in Moleong, 2014:248), qualitative data analysis is an effort made by working with data, organizing it, breaking it down into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important, and deciding what can be shared with others. In this research, the data analysis technique used follows Sugiyono (2012:247-253), which involves reducing data by summarizing, selecting essential points, focusing on crucial aspects, identifying themes and patterns. Thus, the reduced data provides a clearer picture, making it easier for the researcher to perform further data collection and retrieval if needed. Data reduction is carried out continuously during the research process.

Data presentation involves organizing a set of information that allows for the drawing of conclusions and actions. In this research, the technically organized data in the data analysis matrix is presented in the form of narrative text, images, frameworks, and photos. In research with a qualitative descriptive approach, the researcher strives to obtain valid data. To achieve this, data collection involves ensuring data validity to avoid invalid (flawed) results. The method used by the researcher for data validity is triangulation. Triangulation in credibility testing is defined as checking data from various sources using different methods and at different times. The researcher uses two types of triangulation:

1. **Source Triangulation:** This involves validating data by uncovering the truth from other sources of information related to the research. This can be done by comparing different sources, such as written documents, archives, historical documents, and so on. The aim is to cross-check the consistency and accuracy of the data collected from different sources.

2. **Technique Triangulation:** This involves comparing information or data using different methods. In qualitative research, researchers often use interviews and observations to obtain valid information and a comprehensive picture. By comparing the information obtained from these different methods, the researcher can cross-verify the data's accuracy. Additionally, researchers can use different pieces of information to check the truthfulness of the data. By examining various perspectives or views, the research results are expected to be more

valid. In employing triangulation, the researcher seeks to ensure that the data obtained is robust and credible, providing a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the research subject. By examining various perspectives or views, the research results are expected to be more valid. Triangulation ensures that the data obtained is robust and credible, providing a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of the research subject. This multi-faceted approach helps to mitigate biases and validate the findings through corroboration from multiple sources and methods.

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Common Characteristics of Butoh**

Butoh is a form of Japanese body theater that encompasses a variety of activities, techniques, and motivations for movement. After World War II, Butoh emerged in 1959 through the collaboration of its two main founders, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. This performing art is known for "rejecting fixity" and being difficult to define; particularly, founder Tatsumi Hijikata viewed the formalization of Butoh with "difficulty."

Common characteristics of this performing art form include provocative and bizarre imagery, taboo subjects, extreme or nonsensical environments, and traditionally performed in white body makeup with slow, controlled movements. The first Butoh work, "Kinjiki" (Forbidden Colours) by Tatsumi Hijikata, premiered at a festival in 1959. Based on the novel of the same name by Yukio Mishima, the performance explored taboo homosexuality and ended with a live chicken held between the legs of Kazuo Ohno's son, Yoshito Ohno, after which Hijikata chased Yoshito offstage into darkness. Particularly due to the misunderstanding that the chicken died from being strangled, this part angered the audience and led to Hijikata's banning from the festival, making him an iconoclast. Most Butoh exercises utilize imagery at various levels: from razor blades and Ankoku Butoh insects, to Dairakudakan threads and water jets, to Seiryuka branches on the body. There is a general tendency towards the body as "being moved," from internal or external sources, rather than consciously moving parts of the body. Elements of "control vs. uncontrolled" manifest through many exercises. Conventional Butoh exercises sometimes lead to intense pressure or pain, but, as indicated by Kurihara, pain, hunger, and lack of sleep are part of life under the Hijikata method, which may have helped dancers access a space of movement where gesture signals have tremendous power. It should also be noted that Hijikata's gesture signals, in general, are far more profound and complex than anything since. Most exercises from Japan (with the exception of much of Ohno Kazuo's work) have specific body forms or common postures assigned to them, while almost no exercises from Western Butoh dancers have specific forms. This seems to indicate a general trend in the West that Butoh is not seen as specific gesture movements with forms given to them like Ankoku Butoh or Dairakudakan technical work, but Butoh is a certain state of mind or feeling that affects the body directly or indirectly.

##### **3.1.1 Development of Butoh Theater**

Butoh first emerged in Japan post-World War II in 1959, under the collaboration of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, "in the shadow of the avant-garde protector of the 1950s and 1960s." A primary impetus for this form of performing arts was a reaction against the Japanese dance scene of the time, which Hijikata felt was too Western-mimicking and adherent to traditional styles like Noh. Thus, he sought to "turn away from Western dance styles, ballet, and modern," and to create a new aesthetic embracing "squatting, earthy physique, and natural movements of ordinary people." This desire found expression in the early *ankoku butō* (暗黒舞踏), meaning "dance of darkness," its form built upon vocabulary of "rough physical movements and coarse habits, direct attacks on refinement (*miyabi*) and disdain (*shibui*) highly valued in Japanese aesthetics." However, over time, butoh groups formed worldwide, each with their own aspirations and aesthetic intentions.

The earliest butoh performances were called "Dance Experience." In the early 1960s, Hijikata used the term "Ankoku-Buyou" (暗黒舞踊, dance of darkness) to describe his dance. He later changed the word "buyo," filled with associations of classical Japanese dance, to "butoh," an old word for dance that originally meant European ballroom dance. In subsequent works, Hijikata continued to overturn conventional ideas. Inspired by writers such as Yukio Mishima, Lautréamont, Artaud, Genet, and de Sade, he delved into strangeness, darkness, and decay. Simultaneously, Hijikata explored the transmutation of the human body into other forms, such as animals. He also developed a poetic and surreal Body language, butoh-fu (舞踏譜, *fu* meaning "notation" in Japanese), to assist actors in transforming into altered states. The work developed starting in 1960 by Kazuo Ohno with Tatsumi Hijikata was the beginning of what is now considered "butoh." In Nourit Masson-Sékiné and Jean Viala's book, *Shades of Darkness*, Ohno is regarded as the "soul of butoh," while Hijikata is seen as the "architect of butoh." Hijikata and Ohno later developed their own teaching styles. Students of each style then formed different groups such as Sankai Juku, a famous Japanese butoh group for fans in North America. The students of these two artists have been known to highlight the orientation of their lord. While Hijikata was a scary technician from the nervous system that affected the input strategy and artist who worked in the group, Ohno was considered a more natural figure, individual, and caregiver who influenced the solo artist.

### **3.1.2 Forms of Butoh Body Theater**

Butoh, a form of body theater born from a life experience filled with suffering, involves the use of the body as the primary medium in artistic exploration. Butoh movements defy grace and beauty, emphasizing instead the dark side, vulnerability, and mortality of the body. The Butoh body is perceived as a vessel that is decayed and infested, capable of accessing the souls of the audience and leading them into the deepest mysteries of life. Butoh aesthetics are inseparable from Japanese history, particularly the tragedies of wartime, which strongly influence the destruction and chaos of humanity. Through minimalist movements, Butoh aims to present a non-representational performance, bringing forth qualitative phenomena that defy connotative and denotative meanings, and confronting bodily



resistance. In Butoh, the body is considered something to be trusted and respected again, despite having been neglected by progress and development. Butoh shows resistance to the body and ego, revealing the sacred mysteries that follow the body. By observing humans, nature, and other natural elements, Butoh seeks to express and understand the essence of life. The art form of Butoh attempts to help humans understand themselves and the world around them, by eliminating all physical and spiritual imperfections and flaws. Essentially, Butoh is an effort to sense and understand something beyond human existence.

### **3.2 The Formation Process of Butoh: Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno**

Butoh can be traced back to at least three main sources: Hijikata's admonition against mud and wind in his published speech 'Kaze Daruma' delineates his somatic intimacy with nature, casting butoh initially as a kind of unique ecological knowledge performed with agrarian roots. Secondly, the development of Hijikata's Butoh in the East/West atmosphere. Tokyo's modernized post-war environment lent a juxtaposition of political, cross-cultural, and urban elements. Thirdly, Hijikata's butoh linked to traditional Japanese arts, particularly early Edo period Kabuki, where social outcasts were believed to have special access to magic and the world of the dead. He often spoke of his desire to create Tohoku Kabuki, restoring the raw power of early bawdy Kabuki when it was still a reactive art close to the people and not sanitized for the West. The white rice powder painted faces and bodies created ghostly appearances in Butoh aesthetics as evolved in the works of Hijikata's disciples, subliminal reminders of Kabuki and Noh Theater ghosts, though we know Hijikata distanced himself from both traditional and classical theater, Eastern and Western. The white faces and bodies are associated with traditional Japanese aesthetics, but in Butoh, they paradoxically come under the guise of darkness. Perhaps the most famous contemporary Butoh company in this regard is Sankai Juku, polished and popular, spiritually grounded in prehistoric body thievery tapped by choreographer Amagatsu Ushio.

#### **3.2.1 The Development Process of Tatsumi Hijikata's Butoh**

The development of Tatsumi Hijikata's Butoh began when he was eight years old, learning Neue Tanz. Hijikata started from manifesting the pain of his childhood and connecting with his Japanese heritage. His performance form pronounced the darkness, depicting the relationship between Butoh's physiological signatures, shrinking arms and legs, and the physique of people in Japan. Hijikata used characteristics like O-legs and mud-stained legs to demonstrate Butoh's physical contrast to the straight lines of Western dance styles and created improvisational processes like "Bug-Ambulation" and "Mold-Ambulation" stemming from his memories of rural life. The pre-war poverty of Tohoku around Hijikata shaped the early development because he often complained; "What Tohoku Exports is women, horses, soldiers, and rice." Hijikata spoke about feelings and movements of a three-year-old baby being left alone on a farm. What Hijikata learned from the toddlers greatly influenced his body, then he reflected on human symbiosis and place. For nearly a decade, Hijikata developed his project in the form of performances

capable of transforming the human body into intimate death, which he then realized for the first time, calling his work "Ankoku Butoh" from 1960. He longed for the pitch darkness in the northeast winter night sky, highlighting the brilliance of the stars. In Tokyo, the upward light from giant neon lights and the big city illuminated by street lamps countered the darkness he usually experienced, and the stars disappeared from view.

### **3.2.2 Process of Developing Butoh by Kazuo Ohno**

The development of Butoh by Kazuo Ohno began with his declaration to accept only what moved him and to attempt to convey it to the public. His extraordinary physical talent and emotionally expressive face touched the hearts of his audience. Over time, Ohno developed a vision inspired by the flamenco dancer La Argentina, which stayed with him for 50 years in his memory. Ohno was an exceptional dancer and actor, with the ability to evoke emotions through his agile body. On stage, he could be likened to Isadora Duncan for his spirit and ability to move audiences. In the performance "Sui ren" (Water Lily), Ohno moved with the traces of bodily memories, transforming into an old woman and Fred Astaire. Every movement was filled with pain and love. Ohno was a sensitive Christian pacifist who experienced suffering from being forced to participate in war. Ohno's form of body theater can be seen as a modern art outside the framework of existing modern body theater. Ohno lived through the history of contemporary Japanese theater, including the history of Butoh. His body was considered a natural resource never before seen on stage. Ohno embodied the vitality of dance and provided pure gold, not art. Through his life experiences, Ohno developed Butoh by exploring everyday life through pain and darkness.

#### **3.2.2.1 Training Methods of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno's Butoh**

The training methods employed by Hijikata and Ohno primarily relied on observation and exploration, which began from the inception of their work in Body Theater.

**Observation** Hijikata initiated each of his performance projects with observation, such as in the performances "Bug Ambulation" and "Mold Ambulation," which originated from his memories of rural life as a child. The pre-war poverty around Tohoku influenced his early development. There was also a time when he observed the movements of a three-year-old toddler left alone in a farmhouse. Later, in his Ankoku Butoh performance project, Hijikata utilized the reputation of scandal, criminal aura, and sexual deviation. Kazuo Ohno observed daily life that he experienced, beginning from birth, death, and rebirth. Ohno also observed his pain, which originated from his forced participation in war. Kazuo Ohno once said, "My mother is my director. She is what I think about. The motif of my mother's movements comes from what I think I did inside her womb. I am inside her—what did I do there? Then comes the costume—how to wear the costume. I feel that the costume is the cosmos. I must wear the cosmos and move within it. Another motif is



cats. I study their movements and look at their photographs. Even in pictures, you get a certain type of movement."

### **1. Exploration**

Hijikata's exploration naturally continued from the observations he had conducted. One form of his performances expresses darkness, depicting the relationship between Butoh's signature physiology, shrinking arms and legs, and the physique of people in Japan. Hijikata used characteristics like the O-leg and muddy legs to illustrate the contrasting physicality of Butoh. Another project of his performances named "Ankoku Butoh," he manifested when longing for the deep darkness of the winter night sky in northeastern Japan, highlighting the brilliance of the stars. The Ankoku Butoh project fulfilled his focus to support experimental work, even if it completely contradicted his own very specific concepts about Japanese nationhood and forms of militarism and imperialism that he should take. However, Hijikata's performances were almost explicitly taken from Mishima's novel, with cool homosexual relationships and sad heterosexual relationships if any. Hijikata first applied white plaster to his face, not as a permanent decorative element (as he used it in the Muto performance worldwide after his death), but to cause pain to himself because wet plaster is to cover facial muscles, freezing and turning them into a solid form that had never happened before as a process, which in turn inspired further exploration.

Kazuo Ohno's exploration began with his own observations and experiences in daily life. Ohno experienced serious pain that drove him to explore deeply in every performance project he undertook. In one of his projects alongside his son Yoshito, he explored effortlessly. Ohno based his body movements on Monet's paintings with the same name as Yoshito, appearing as a masculine figure tense & blocky in the first scene. Ohno didn't show much emotion regardless of the theme of his performances because every movement was filled with pain and love. From his observations and explorations, Ohno often moved his audience to tears.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Based on the research on Butoh body theater, reviewing the forms of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno reveals several conclusions. Butoh is a Japanese body theater form that encompasses various activities, techniques, and movement motivations from each of its creators. Kazuo Ohno's performances are characterized as subtle, while Tatsumi Hijikata's are described as temperamental. Butoh emerged after World

War II in 1959 through the collaboration of its founders, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. This art form is known for "rejecting fixity" and being difficult to define.

In its development, Butoh first appeared in post-World War II Japan in 1959, under the collaboration of Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno. The term Butoh means "dance of darkness," and its form is built upon vocabulary of "rough physical movements and coarse habits." Sankai Juku is a popular Japanese Butoh group among fans in North America. The Butoh theater form uses the body as the primary medium for exploration and creates an aesthetic form that appears grotesque. It can be understood as a medium that reveals traces of civilization and the destruction of human relationships. The aesthetic idiom structure rooted in Butoh art is also inseparable from its historical aspect.

The process of forming Butoh by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno can be traced back to at least three main sources: Hijikata's warning against mud and wind, the use of white rice powder on the face and body creating ghostly appearances in Butoh aesthetics. For Ohno, the sacred is dynamic and organic, reminiscent of the embryo in the mother's womb, as well as his classes often revolving around spiritual matters. In the development of Butoh theater, Tatsumi Hijikata began when he was eight years old when he studied Neue Tanz. His performances are dark and depict the relationship between typical Butoh physiology, shrinking arms and legs, and the physique of people in Japan. The Dark Dance captures death and devours it within himself. Meanwhile, in the development of Butoh by Kazuo Ohno, he often moves his audience to tears, despite his theatrical camouflage being very skillful. Ohno brought his vision as a flamenco dancer La Argentina for 50 years before dancing in his memory. His theological and spiritual concerns are based on experiences of physical birth, maturation, and death crossing national and cultural boundaries.

## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Penulis 1 is a researcher analyzing Butoh body theater focusing on "Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno" as part of their undergraduate thesis. Penulis 2 is the supervisor who provides guidance, feedback, advice, and alternative perspectives to the researcher in order to produce a good academic paper.

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