

**Kazuo Ohno's Dance Training and Pedagogical Methods  
at Soshin Girls' School, Yokohama**

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Preface

This monograph sets out to investigate how Kazuo Ohno, (1906-2010) the then world's eldest butoh performer, conducted dance education during his 38 year long tenure as gymnastics teacher and subsequently caretaker at the Soshin Baptist Girls' School in Yokohama. Essentially focusing on Ohno's training methods in dance class and the manner in which he directed the annual Christmas Nativity play, this research also explores the bearing his lifelong educational activities had upon the creation of his world-renowned butoh performances. In addition to collecting and examining relevant documents and photographs at the Kazuo Ohno Archives, the Soshin School and from other sources, research also entailed conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with current and former members of the school's staff along with a chosen group of past pupils. Ohno's creative output and pedagogic methodology are examined from the following perspectives: chronologically - as seen in the tables relating to education and his butoh works; and pedagogically - as described in the sections on dance instruction, the group choreography for *Beauty and Strength*; the annual Christmas Nativity pageant and playing Santa Claus for the children. The findings reveal that Ohno's unconventional approach - for he did not emphasise form - positively encouraged students to confront and express themselves freely and in the process draw out their inner selves. As an educator and a performer Ohno was invariably humble and thoroughly dedicated to his art and chosen profession, and yet compassionate in his dealings with others. Notwithstanding his international fame his teaching

methods never changed; he constantly harnessed his pupils' full human potential while embracing the universal themes of life and death. Manifest in every sphere of his life, Kazuo Ohno's way of teaching offers a bountiful source for future instructors of dance and practitioners alike.

Key Terms: Dance Education; Free Expression; Improvisation; Facing One's Inner Self

## 1. Introduction

Kazuo Ohno, the world's then eldest butoh dancer, passed away in June 2010, at the age of 103. In addition to the numerous memorial events held in his honour worldwide, many articles dedicated to his life and times were published in the wake of his death. Kazuo Ohno, (hereinafter referred to as Ohno) continued in his role as a physical education teacher at the Soshin Baptist Girl's School in Yokohama (hereinafter referred to as Soshin) while performing before the Japanese public as a dancer. In 1977, he grasped at the opportunity to make a comeback and stage the première of his solo *Admiring La Argentina*. In 1980 Ohno accepted the invitation to appear at the 1980 Nancy International Theatre Festival. He had actually retired as a Soshin staff member before the ensuing increase in international engagements following his successful appearance in France. Thereafter Ohno's creative output proliferated, producing a new performance piece every two years, based around the themes of life, spirit and the universe, constituting as such the basis for a series of performances, hereinafter referred to as his repertoire, that he could time and again present to the public. Notable among those works are: *An Invitation from Jesus* (1980), *Ozen or the Embryo's Dream* (1980), *My Mother* (1981), *The Dead Sea: Viennese Waltz and the Ghosts* (1985), *Water Lilies* (1987), *Mushi-biraki* (1988), *Flowers-Birds-Wind-Moon* (1990) and *White Lotus Bloom* (1992).

Ohno has been the subject of a wide variety of research, published in the form of press articles, books or audio-visual materials (Mizohata; 2011). Of particular note are those by Akira Kasai - who participated in Ohno's workshops for more than half a century and considered a rival by Tatsumi Hijikata. Kasai's documented impressions outlined Ohno's teaching and training methods and the four duets they performed together. (Kasai; 2004, 2010). The dance critic, Miyabi Ichikawa, chronicled Ohno's European tours, as well as his magnum opus *Admiring La Argentina* (1983, 1990, 2000, 2007). Kazuko Kuniyoshi, a butoh dance researcher, focussed on the period prior to and subsequent to Ohno's transformation from a modern to a butoh dancer (2008). While Terumi Nozaki analysed Ohno's career from a chronological standpoint and the creation of *Flower-Birds-Wind-Moon* (1993), Mariko Miyagawa thoroughly researched the significance and transition involved in Ohno appearing onstage in female clothing from his modern dance period until his comeback solo performance *Admiring La Argentina*. In his essays on Ohno's body, the contemporary artist Koichi Watanabe relates in depth their collaborative efforts, which had begun with the *katadori* or plaster cast he moulded of Ohno's hands, feet and body as well as paintings (Watanabe; 2010). Moreover, many reviews appeared in the overseas press, penned by the likes of French theatre critic Colette Godard (1980). Notwithstanding the vast array of written commentary, one could argue there was little or no substantial research on Ohno's approach to dance education.

This particular research has for its focus Ohno's creative output and events related to staging the yearly Christmas Nativity play during his 38 year tenure at Yokohama's Soshin Girl's School, while at the same time taking into account his approach to dance education and the specific manner in which he developed dance activities. I will also investigate the kind of dance he taught, with the intention of offering guidance for the forthcoming dance

curriculum, to be implemented in all Japanese Middle Schools as of April 2012.

## 2 Research Methods

### 2.1 Data Collection and Methodology

Data collection for this research by the Kazuo Ohno Archives and the author entailed questioning both current and past staff members as well as past pupils of the Soshin Girl's School in a semi-structured interview process in which each interviewee was questioned for about 30 minutes on the following topics:

- a): Ohno's Dance Instruction: themes and substance
- b): The annual Nativity Play
- c): Ohno's butoh performances and anecdotal episodes

The interviews were conducted by the author, or by Toshio Mizohata, current administrator of the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio. Table 1 lists the individual respondents, their age, their status as well as their relation to Soshin and to Kazuo Ohno. In order to verify the evidence collected I undertook a series of fact finding missions between November 2010 and February 2011, consulting with Ohno's youngest son and butoh dancer, Yoshito Ohno (1938-), along with those closely associated with the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio, staff and personnel at the Soshin Girl's School and the modern dancer, Chizu Shoda (1930-) hereinafter referred to as Shoda.

### 2.2 Methods of Analysis

#### 2.2.1 Analysis of Material

After recording the interviews on DVD, I transcribed them verbatim. The organisational analysis of material collected by means of a semi-structured interview technique entailed it being separated into 2 distinct phases: The

first phase, covering responses from interviewees 1 to 9, begins with Ohno becoming a member of the Soshin teaching staff and finishes at his retirement from the school, while the second, covering responses by interviewees 10 to 13, corresponds to the phase subsequent to his retirement.

Table 1: List of Interviewees

|   | Age <sup>1</sup> | Relation to the School   | Period and nature of association with Ohno       |
|---|------------------|--|--|
| 1 | 87               | Middle School Student<br>Originally Music Instructor               | Period 2;<br>in pre-WW 2 class                   |
| 2 | 84 <sup>2</sup>  | Appointed Instructor in 1948                                       | Period 3; Colleague                              |
| 3 | 78               | Middle and High School Pupil<br>Board Member of Alumni Association | Period 3;<br>Post-war class                      |
| 4 | 78               | Middle and High School Pupil                                       | Period 3<br>Post-war class                       |
| 5 | 68               | Middle and High School Pupil<br>Currently Head Teacher             | Period 4<br>National Athletic Meet               |
| 6 | 62               | Kindergarten, Primary, Middle and High School Pupil                | Period 4<br>Participated in Ohno's final classes |
| 7 | 62               | Middle and High School Pupil<br>Currently Japanese Language        | Period 4<br>Participated in                      |

<sup>1</sup> Age of the interviewees at the time of interview

<sup>2</sup> Interviewees 2 and 12 were male.

|    |    |   |   |
|----|----|---|---|
|    |    | Teacher   | Ohno's final classes                                |
| 8  | 62 | Middle and High School Pupil<br>Currently Social Studies<br>Teacher | Period 4<br>Participated in<br>Ohno's final classes |
| 9  | 61 | Middle and High School Pupil<br>Currently PT Teacher                | Period 4<br>Participated in<br>Ohno's final classes |
| 10 | 52 | Elementary, Middle and High<br>School Pupil                         | Period 4<br>Interpreter                             |
| 11 | 50 | Elementary, Middle and High<br>School Pupil<br>Librarian            | Period 4<br>Santa Claus<br>Nativity play            |
| 12 | 46 | Kindergarten and Elementary<br>School Pupil                         | Period 5<br>Ohno's grandson<br>was a classmate      |
| 13 | 40 | Middle and High School Pupil<br>Nativity play                       | Period 5<br>Role of Angel                           |

To ensure in-depth analysis of the impact Ohno had on the interviewees, I employed what in Japan is referred to as the KJ method, based on an analysis of natural relationships, developed by Jiro Kawakita, in conjunction with a modified ground theory approach (2003), as developed by Yasuhito Kinoshita, to categorise their respective replies. I focused on analysing similarities and differences in responses from the various interviewees, irrespective of their age group.

### 2-2-2 Six Distinct Periods

The material were classified under the following 3 headings:

- (1) Historical
- (2) Teaching dance at Soshin, and/or for the 10th National Athletic Meet in 1955, for which Ohno choreographed *Beauty and Strength*.
- (3) The annual Christmas Pantomime and the Nativity Play to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Ohno moreover played Santa Claus at the Soshin's Kindergarten and Elementary School as well as in his neighbourhood at Kamihoshikawa Nursery School.

In table 2, Ohno's chronological chart has been sub-divided into six specific periods (2010a: 153). In terms of Ohno's career and evolution, these six distinct periods correspond with pivotal turnings points in his life.

Given that Ohno's function at Soshin changed over time, the periods corresponding with 2-2, 3 and 4 specifically refer to when Ohno was a member of the teaching staff at Soshin Girls' School. The initial phase of the second period, 2-1 to be precise, covers the occasion Ohno saw La Argentina perform onstage in Tokyo in 1929, at which time he was a staff member of the Kanto Gakuin Middle School. The years between Ohno's taking up a teaching position at the Soshin Girls' School in 1934 through to his decommissioning from the Japanese armed forces and re-joining the staff of Soshin in 1946 correspond to period 2-2. Period 4 is likewise divided into two distinct phases: the earlier corresponds with the eight year period between 1959-67, namely from Ohno's appearance in the re-worked version of *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours) in 1959 until his retirement as a full-time member of the teaching staff in 1967, while the latter, namely from 1967 to 1979 when he retired as caretaker at Soshin Girl's School.

Table 2: Ohno's life in Six Periods

Period 1: 1906-1929 From his Birth in 1906

Period 2: 1929 -1945 Seeing La Argentina onstage in 1929

2-1: 1929-33 Staff member at Kanto Gakuin Middle School

2-2: 1934-45 Staff member at the Soshin Baptist Girls' School

Period 3: 1946- 1958 From his demobilisation after the war, re-taking up his position at the Soshin Girls' School and producing solo performances.

Period 4: (1959 - 1979) Performed in the reworked version of *Kinjiki* in 1959.

4-1: 1959-67 Active both as teacher and in dance performance.

4-2: 1967-79 Remained on the school staff in the position of a caretaker.

Period 5: 1980- 1999 Permanently retires from Soshin Girls' School and embarks upon his first overseas tour in 1980.

Period 6: 1999-2010 His declining years

### 3 Conclusions and Discussion

#### 3-1 The relation between education and dance in Kazuo Ohno's career.

After consulting various hitherto published chronologies and interviews with Ohno, I redrafted Kazuo Ohno's chronology, concentrating on the educational and dance aspects, while also taking into consideration his origins and the pivotal moments of his stage career. Table 3 encapsulates Ohno's life-course in the form of an edited chronology. The six subdivisions in table 2 are based on those benchmarks. This paper will concentrate on significant events in Ohno's life, with particular focus on his dance activities at the Soshin Girls' School from periods 2 to 4.

##### 3-1-1 Phase 1 (1906-1928) Origins and Education

Kazuo Ohno was born in Hakodate, Hokkaido in 1906, the eldest son in a well-to-do family involved in large-scale fishing. At an early age he had to move to his mother's home-place in Akita prefecture in northern Honshu due to the drastic fall in fish catch. He attended the Odate Middle School (currently known as the Odate Homei High School), where he excelled in track sports, running a 100m in 11.5 seconds, and 400m in 57 seconds, as noted in the new prefectural records. He also earned himself a reputation as a



Table 3. Chronology of Kazuo Ohno's Educational and Dance-related Activities

Period 1

- 1906 Born in October 27<sup>th</sup> in Hakodate, Hokkaido.
- 1920 Admitted to the Akita Prefecture Odate Middle School. Ran 400 meters in 57 seconds, which became the prefecture record.
- 1926 Enrolled in the Japan Athletic College currently known as Nippon Sport Science University.
- 1928 Studied Danish gymnastics and Rudolf Bode Expression Exercises.

Period 2

- 1929 Saw the Spanish dancer "La Argentina" Antonia Mercé in Tokyo. Began working as a physical education teacher at Kanto Gakuin in Yokohama.
- 1930 Baptized as a Christian.
- 1933 Married Chie Nakagawa. Attended Baku Ishii's Dance School for one year.
- 1934 Transferred to the Soshin Baptist Girls' School as a physical education teacher, and worked there for 38 years.
- 1936 Joined the Takaya Eguchi and Misako Miya Dance Institute, and studied there for 6 years.
- 1938 His youngest son Yoshito was born. Participated in Eguchi and Miya's dance performance *Barley and the Soldier*. Called up for military service and was in active service for 9 years.

Period 3

- 1946 General demobilization. Reinstated as a teacher at the Soshin School. Started working on Soshin's annual Nativity Play and continued over the following 60 years. Became a surrogate teacher for Eguchi.
- 1947 Publication of *Guidelines for Physical Education in Elementary, Junior High and High Schools*.
- 1949 Founded the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio. Produced his debut solo and group dance recital.
- 1951 Publication of *Guidelines for Physical Education in Junior High and High Schools*.
- 1955 Choreographed *Beauty and Strength* for the opening ceremonies of the 10<sup>th</sup> National Athletic Meet in which 10,532 students participated.
- 1956 Publication of *Guidelines for Physical Education in High Schools*.

Period 4

- 1959 Performed *The Old Man and the Sea* and participated in a reworked version of *Forbidden Colours* with Tatsumi Hijikata.
- 1960 Publication of *Guidelines for Physical Education in High Schools*.
- 1961 Built a rehearsal studio in his back garden from discarded materials from the Soshin School.
- 1965 Performed in *A Rose Coloured Dance*, a duet with Tatsumi Hijikata.
- 1967 Retired from his teaching position at the Soshin School and began working part-time as the caretaker.
- 1969 Made dance film *Portrait of Mr.O*, shot in the boiler room at the Soshin School and other outdoor locations.

1971 Made 2nd dance film *Mandala of Mr.O.*  
 1976 Completed the dance film trilogy with *Mr. O's Book of the Dead.*  
 1977 Premiered *Admiring La Argentina*, directed by Tatsumi Hijikata and continued performing this tribute piece for 17 years.

Period 5

1980 Retired from Soshin School. Invited to the 14<sup>th</sup> Nancy International Theatre Festival.  
 1981 Premiered *My Mother*, directed by Tatsumi Hijikata, and continued performing this repertory piece for the following 17 years.  
 1985 Premiered *The Dead Sea; Viennese Waltzes and Ghosts* directed Tatsumi Hjikata.  
 1986 Death of Tatsumi Hijikata.  
 1987 Premiered *Water Lilies*. Yoshito Ohno directed and co-performed.  
 1990 Premiered *Flowers-Bird-Wind-Moon*. Yoshito Ohno directed and co-performed.  
 1992 Premiered *White Lotus Bloom*. Yoshito Ohno directed and co-performed.  
 1997 His wife Chie passed away at the age of 90.

Period 6

1999 Symptoms of Alzheimer's disease diagnosed. Underwent separate operations for cataracts and a detached retina. Fulfilled his final overseas performance.  
 2001 Presented his last solo piece *Flower*. Started having difficulties to stand by himself.  
 2003 Danced at the Christmas celebrations at the Soshin Baptist Church as well as at the Soshin Baptist School Class Reunion in his wheelchair.  
 2005 Made a guest appearance in Yoshito Ohno's performance *Isshin*.  
 2006 Attended the Christmas celebration at the Soshin Baptist School Class Reunion. Played Santa Claus at Kamihoshikawa Nursery School, which he had done so for 50 years.  
 2010 Passed away on June 1<sup>st</sup> at the age of 103.



Photo 1: Kazuo Ohno in his earlier years.



Photo 2: Kazuo Ohno playing the snare-drum.



Photo 3: Kazuo Ohno playing the Virgin Mary, holding yatsude in his arms.



Photo 4: Ohno exercising with his pupils in the bomb damaged fields at Soshin Girl's School.



Photo 5: Inauguration of the Dance Research Group with Ohno kneeling on far right.

power hitter first baseman in baseball, where flexibility and quick reflexes are a must. After graduation, he worked as a substitute teacher for a year. Longing, however, to continue his studies, Ohno enrolled at the Japan Athletic College (currently known as Nippon Sport Science University) in 1926, at which time it was possible to gain admission without sitting an entrance examination. In the same year, he undertook his military service for one year and four months. Following his discharge in 1928 he returned to the Athletic College. Initially, he moved about between Hokkaido, Akita prefecture and Tokyo, rapidly adapting to changing environments in a period in which he excelled himself at sports.

### 3-1-2 Phase 2. (1929-1945) Watershed Moment

Speaking of his time at Athletic College, Ohno commented "I wasn't at all interested in classes on dance education," (2010b: 145) until one evening in 1929 Ohno at the age of 23 was to watch someone perform onstage who subsequently had an "enormous impact on his future as a dancer" (2010b: 146). Encouraged by Yoshio Monden, the young manager of the students' canteen, Ohno decided to join him and go along and see a Spanish dancer, La Argentina, (Antonia Mercé 1890-1936) perform at Tokyo's Imperial Theatre during her Far East Tour. Ohno later recalled: " Words could never describe the forceful impression she made, or the excitement I felt as I watched her spellbound, enchanted by her presence" (2010b: 146). Some 48 years later in 1977 Ohno was to make his solo butoh debut with *Admiring La Argentina*. The art critic, Eiryō Ashihara, who also happened to see La Argentina perform at the Imperial Theatre at the same time remarked: "Her dance was beyond reproach. With a rapturous air second to none, she dazzled critics wherever she performed, immersing them in ecstasy with her languorous dance, intoxicating them exquisitely" (Ashihara; 1986). By all accounts, La Argentina was truly a captivating dancer.

In 1929, Ohno became a physical education instructor at the Kanto Gakuin, a private Christian high school in Yokohama affiliated with the Baptist Mission School. His focus of attention for the next 5 years was on athletics and swimming. Under the guidance of the school principal, Tasuku Sakata - who also happened to be principal at the Soshin Baptist Girls' School - Ohno was baptised in 1930. Sakata had revised his outlook on life following his wartime experiences while serving as a professional soldier in the Russo-Japanese conflict of 1904-05. Upon completing his studies at Tokyo University he converted to Christianity, deeply longing to spread 'Jesus's message of the truth and the life. '

On Sakata's advice, the 27 year-old Ohno married Chie Nakagawa (1907-97), a teacher at the kindergarten belonging to Soshin. As part of his preparation for his teaching assignment at Soshin Girls' School, Ohno enrolled in Baku Ishii's (1886-1962) dance school for a year. In 1934, at the age of 30, Ohno transferred to the affiliated Soshin Baptist Girls' School. Ohno later spoke about his feelings at that time: "Given it was a girl's school, dance was obviously part of the curriculum ... This was the first time that I learned to dance, so I had no qualms about knocking on Ishii-*sensei's* door, given that he had been a pioneer figure in establishing a creative dance studio in Japan. As for my impression of Ishii's dance, it oddly reminded me of somebody snoring, or could I put it this way: while not a particularly pleasant feeling, I nonetheless felt Ishii's unconscious or primal vibrations. It became clear to me once I started giving gymnastics instruction and rhythm gymnastics at school, to which I added my own take on dance, that if I was to teach anything, it was ultimately how to discover oneself. If dance is an art form, then art is not something that can be taught" (2010b: 146-147).

After leaving Baku Ishii's school in 1934, Ohno later joined the Takaya Eguchi (1900-77) and Misako Miya (1906-2009) Dance Institute in 1936. Eguchi had returned to Japan in 1933 after studying *Ausdruckstanz* or

expressionistic dance under Mary Wigman (1886-1973) at the Mary Wigman-Schule in Dresden. Ohno commented: "On seeing a photo of their *Study No. 1: Operating Room* in a newspaper, I was captivated by its abstract quality" (Miyagawa; 2010: 4). In July of 1938, his youngest son Yoshito was born. "Notwithstanding the chaotic pre-war conditions, Ohno would go to dance practice every evening after work. In his own words: ' This was the period in which I thoroughly studied movement in its every aspect' "(Nozaki; 1993: 11).

In October Ohno performed along with Eguchi and Miya in their first ever dance performance *Barley and the Soldier*. The fact that Ohno appeared onstage in public within 2 years of beginning to study at their Dance Institute vouches in itself for his calibre as a performer. He was called up for military service in the same year, and garrisoned in Henan in western China in 1939. In a letter written at that time addressed to the Soshin Girls' School, Ohno recalls his happy memories of school life:

" I read all of your letters over and again, and talk with my comrades here about the happy memories of my time at Soshin. The cherry blossoms, the belfry, the school playground, music during the midday break, doing exercises during the midday break, I often used to dance while listening to music in the garden. I reminisce about dancing in my room. My passion for dance has not waned. In the end I was to dance in front of His Excellency, and dance I did. The other day I listened to music for the first time in ages; to Cortot's rendition of Schumann's *Carnaval*, and I cried my eyes out in gratitude " (Ohno; 1940).

In 1945, Ohno tasted defeat in Solon in New Guinea, and was to become a prisoner of war for a year.

As described above, the second phase of Ohno's life was one in which he experienced many life changing events: conversion and baptism, marriage,

teaching at Soshin Baptist Girls' School, beginning modern dance, his 'chance meeting' with the Spanish dancer La Argentina, and the Pacific War to cite but some of the more significant episodes.

### 3-1-3 Phase 3 (1946 - 1958) Ohno commits himself entirely to Dance

1946 was the year in which Ohno turned 40 and also marked his return to civilian life. After being re-instated at Soshin, he set about teaching rhythm gymnastics and dance; it was from this period onwards that he started working on Soshin's annual Nativity play, producing the pageant for nearly the next 60 years. He also returned to the Eguchi and Miya Dance Institute. According to Rina Atsumi, a dancer acquainted with him at that time, the reunion with his family in Chiba following discharge on his repatriation from the New Guinea also meant "that within days Ohno was back at the rehearsal studio" implying that his tremendous passion and enthusiasm for dance had not in the least waned (2010: 11). Not only did he clean the rehearsal space and dig a vegetable plot, he went so far as to reconstruct the storage space in the dance studio so that there was enough room for him to overnight there. He also became a surrogate teacher. In relation to Eguchi's teaching methods, Ohno once commented in an interview:

"I learned technique. In the main related to how one moved. When walking, for instance, how one should incorporate moving ones arms and neck, or how, for example, to concentrate on the various ways in which one could 'turn.' Eguchi created a dance through combining those umpteen movements. He would instruct us: 'raise your arms in this way to evoke sadness, or to do such and such to express happiness.' In the beginning was form. That is what I learnt to study" (Miyagawa; 2010: 4).

Ohno himself was of the belief that teaching and studying technique in itself would hardly produce beneficial results. Seeing that Ohno was teaching the substitute class in his own particular way, Eguchi reportedly instructed him:

"Don't dwell on it too much; please teach the same way as I do" (2010: 148). On another occasion round that time, Fumie Kanai, a dancer who attended Ohno's substitute class, claims that Ohno had told her: "Eguchi-*sensei* asked me: 'please teach the students more basic exercises' " (Kanai; 2010). Their fundamental differences in approach eventually gave rise to Ohno quitting the Eguchi studio some 2 years later. At a later date, word has it that Misako Miya remarked to Ohno: "It was a big mistake to let you go" (Ohno; 2010b: 148). Notwithstanding the fact that, for Ohno, Misako Miya and Baku Ishii's dance represented sheer vitality, he didn't take to the way in which Eguchi's training placed so much emphasis on technique.

The dancer and dance critic, Roku Hasegawa also alluded to "the utter boredom of Eguchi's and Miya's formal and systematic approach in their German *Ausdruckstanz* " (Hasegawa; 2004).

Following his departure from the Eguchi Dance Institute, Ohno launched out on his own and in 1949 was to produce his debut solo and group dance recital at the Kanda Kyoritsu Kodo Hall in Tokyo, attracting nearly 2000 spectators. Among the pieces featured on the programme were: *The Devil's Cry*; *Tango*; *the Yellow Hat*; *Rilke's The First Bloom of the Linden Tree*. Ohno later spoke about these works: "Unfortunately I don't recall the title of that particular tango, but on hearing it initially I went out of my way to get my hands on the score, and listened to it intently. A music teacher from Soshin accompanied me on the piano when I performed it onstage. That dance was something like a flower about to burst into bloom inside a yellow hat. Despite barely rehearsing the piece, I danced it from the very beginning as though it were already fully worked out, and it felt just great. I was moved on hearing Rilke's poem about the first bloom of the linden tree read aloud. The piece took form thanks to the inspiration I derived from reading it. What I long for is that those emotions do not exist merely while I'm onstage, but that the spectators carry them within, and not just discard them as soon as

they leave the theatre afterwards. I want that my dance lingers on in some form in their daily lives, that it assumes a living dimension" (2010b: 148).

Henceforth Ohno's dance became more closely entwined with his various artistic experiences of music, poetry and painting, and was constantly created round those feelings embedded in his daily life. This has been a constant in his butoh performances over the years. The war years aside, Ohno thoroughly devoted himself to studying dance at the Eguchi Dance Institute for six years in all. One can just imagine the impression Ohno made when employing all the expressionistic techniques he acquired during his modern dance training. Shoda - who herself attended Ohno's dance training sessions at Soshin gym - recalls her impressions of watching Ohno's first public performance some 60 years beforehand:

"He brought to mind a mollusc or some other such invertebrate creature. The shock on seeing him was so overwhelming that I completely forgot about whether I was looking at a man, a woman or even a human being. To this very day that image is etched in the depths of my mind" (Shoda; 2010).

Takaya Eguchi - who likewise happened to be a former teacher of Shoda - wrote in his felicitous programme notes for the then independent Ohno:

"Kazuo Ohno studied at our Institute from the eleventh year of the Showa era (1926). He was an active member of our dance troupe, and some years ago assumed the position of a substitute instructor at our studio. This year he has opened the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio in Yokohama. Thanks to Kazuo Ohno's unique qualities, a fresh flower will burst forth in the world of modern dance" (Eguchi; 1949).

As for the performance itself, Ohno noted: "It was a huge success.

Every 100-yen entrance ticket sold was subject to a 150-yen entertainment tax, meaning that the more spectators who attended, the more tax I had to pay to the fiscal authorities. There was little else I could do except ask to



Soshin school principal to allow me make up the difference by borrowing from the savings, which had been set aside in my pension fund. He lent me the money and it was to take me seven years before I repaid in full the borrowed sum. And yet, that did not discourage me in the slightest from self-producing five performances until 1959" (Ohno; 2010b: 148).

Reflecting back on that period, his son Yoshito Ohno added: "That was really some accomplishment, as most people simply couldn't do that. When I think about it, my mother genuinely never received a thing from my father's wage packet. They were really hard times. But now I ask myself what fired Kazuo's enthusiasm; what bolstered his determination? I'm of the belief that two things were crucial in his development: The first was his experience of the war. The other was that his mother's primordial presence throughout his life. In returning to his origins, he came to understand that it was his mother who had offered him life, by sacrificing part of her own. Thanks to a mother's sacrifice, children are conceived and brought up. I believe that this was his fundamental conviction about life" (1999: 147-151).

In 1955, Ohno was involved with choreographing *Beauty and Strength* for the opening ceremony of the 10th National Athletic Meet held in Kanagawa prefecture, an athletic field day featuring rock-climbing, artistic sports competitions, mass games and calisthenics.

In 1958, Ohno participated in a joint performance featuring the Ningenza Theatre Troupe, alongside Tatsumi Hijikata (1928-1986) and Mamako Yoneyama (1935- ). With Japan well on the road to recovery in the 1950s, the Soshin school buildings were also reconstructed. Parallel with his day job as a PE instructor at Soshin, Ohno continued self-producing a series of modern dance programmes, meaning in effect that there were always many students who attended his performances. With the exception of the war years, Ohno worked in all 46 years at the Soshin Girl's School: he was deeply attached to the school and its pupils alike, and indeed earned the respect of

his students thanks to his guidance and support as a PE teacher (Ohno; 2007: 60-73). During the period between his first and fourth self-produced performances (1949-1953), he gradually began to discard the modern dance techniques he had picked up from Eguchi, and launched into what could be described as a phase in which he strove for a more individual form of expression that transcended mere gesture (Kuniyoshi; 2008a: 26). In a letter to one of his student's Naoe Yamaguchi in 1952 after his third performance in 1951, he relates his anguish about the creative process: " With heart and soul I'm throwing myself fully into the creation of the work I so want to make ... I've reached a point with this solo I'm currently working on that I feel I'm putting my life on the line. It is so demanding that I'm completely at my wit's end. While you might think that with the necessary expressive techniques one can create anything, grasping what one is trying to express is crucial. And knowing that there's nothing whatsoever to be extracted from my head, I'm searching elsewhere: reading various poems, looking at paintings, newspapers and such. At this stage, poetry and painting are my teachers" (Ohno; 2007: 65-67).

In his review of *Random Thoughts*, a solo dance performed in 1953 at the fourth in the series of self-produced performances, the Tokyo Shinbun dance critic Hiroshi Eguchi caught glimpse of Ohno's inner turmoil:

"Notwithstanding his somewhat eccentric inclination, this fine piece exhibits Ohno's characteristic flair. As its title suggests, *Random Thoughts* is marked by the simplicity of his unravelling ideas. I could only look on with admiration at how Ohno strove to shed off all hitherto formal techniques, creating a 'unique' dance in the process."

To sum up the third phase of Ohno's life, it could be considered as the one in which he became totally committed to dance, in light of the fact that it was during this period that he gave dance lessons at Soshin Girls' School, organised the yearly Nativity Play, choreographed the opening ceremonies

for the National Athletic Meet, studied modern dance techniques at the Eguchi Dance Institute, and self-produced a series of modern dance performances.

#### 3-1-4 Phase 4 (1959-1979) Beginnings as a Butoh Performer

1959 was a pivotal year for Ohno in many respects. Firstly, he presented the fifth and final in his series of self-produced modern dance performances in April of that year. After much effort, he staged a 50 minute-long performance based on Ernest Hemingway's (1899-1961) *The Old Man and the Sea*. Tatsumi Hijikata was deeply involved in directing this realistic adaptation featuring Ohno playing the Old Man, his eldest son Yukito as the tuna fish, and his youngest son Yoshito in the role of the young man. In relation to this reworking, Ohno recalls: "If *The Old Man and the Sea* was to signal the conclusion of my modern dance period, then *Admiring La Argentina* in 1977 represented the beginning of my butoh phase, in which I dance as life itself, beyond form and technique, as though conferred by the universe" (2010b: 148). As though presaging Ohno's future butoh performances, Natsuya Mitsuyoshi's 1959 newspaper review reveals that Ohno's dance is more concerned with the heart than technique: Unlike in conventional dance, "Kazuo Ohno's expressiveness consists more of movement within the heart" (San Shashin Shinbun, April 30.1959). "A dance permeated with poetic qualities and evoking images of his inner-life, at times to such excess that one is unable to organise one's impressions, and at other times so abstract as to be soothing" (Mainichi Shinbun, April 28.1959).

At the post event critic's meeting - a customary event in the post-war years - Ohno's 5th performance became the subject of severe criticism. In his own words, Ohno confessed: "While one might imagine that the six year hiatus between the forth and fifth performance in the series should have been

sufficient to produce a fulfilling performance, the new work exposed my limitations (Mizohata; 2010: 156)." Moreover, he added:

"I had reached the limits of technique. Naturally, technique has its place in our everyday lives, but all the technique in the world will not imbue a work with spirit" (Ohno; 1992: 28).

Ohno's modern dance trajectory covered in all more than a quarter of a century from his initial contact with Baku Ishii, to consolidating his training at the Takaya Eguchi and Misako Miya Dance Institute to eventually self-producing a series of modern dance performances. On closely examining his career, Toshio Mizohata remarked, "Ohno could be considered as one the mainstream dance practitioners heralding the arrival of the Japanese modern dance world" (2010: 156).

After the fifth performance in the series in 1959, Ohno distanced himself from modern dance, and over the subsequent years concentrated on directing and teaching his students at his workshops, making an occasional guest appearance, and on making a trilogy of *butoh* films. In the intervening 18 years until his comeback solo in *Admiring La Argentina* in 1977, Ohno did not work on creating dance pieces. In May 1959, the 21 year-old Yoshito, in the role of the young man, performed with Tatsumi Hijikata's in *Kinjiki* (Asbestos-kan; 1987: 12). In the following September, Ohno appeared in a re-worked version of the piece, in which he performed the male prostitute Divine, dressed in female clothing. Kazuo and Yoshito Ohnos' participation in this historical performance of *Kinjiki* is universally regarded as the first *butoh* performance, and their ever-deepening ties with Tatsumi Hijikata wielded enormous influence on their subsequent careers. Ohno stated: " The doors of a new world were to open"(2010b: 149). In 1960, Ohno began preparing the role of Divine, the aging male prostitute and protagonist of Jean Genet's (1910-1986) novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*; this could be regarded as his initial exploration of an androgynous image (Ichikawa; 2007:

230). While continuing with his day job at Soshin, Ohno " had absolutely committed himself to Tatsumi Hijikata's extremely avant-garde artistic movement - so much so that he was dancing the male prostitute Divine, wearing an orange negligée" (Ohno; 2007: 13). Given he continued with his day job as a PE instructor throughout this period, we can assume that he did so with the full trust and understanding of the school's authorities. Divine was again to appear in opening section of *Admiring La Argentina*, in a segment known as *Death and Rebirth*, in which La Argentina is reborn in the guise of Divine. This goes to show how engrossed Ohno was with this theme: it became a recurrent motif in his performances from his 1959 version of *Divinariane* in the remake of *Kinjiki* right up until 1996 when he danced *Excerpts from Divinariane*. The fact that Ohno performed Divine in female clothing signals that he had realised the limitations of modern dance. Embarking on these intense explorations of the Butoh universe in conjunction with Hijikata could be regarded as yet another significant watershed in his career. This is how Ohno describes how it transpired: "Out of the blue one day Hijikata asked me if I would perform Genet's male prostitute. After reading Genet's depiction of the character and his *The Thief's Journal* I completely changed my approach to Butoh; the combined impact of both these works was to deeply touch something inside of me. So I decided to give it a try. And while on a conscious level I really didn't understand why, subconsciously the resolve to do so arose as a consequence of every moment that life had offered me ... and the life in darkness shone brilliantly (Ohno; 1998: 208).

"On the day of the première of *Divinariane* as I sat in the auditorium ... and though lured up on to the stage, once I got up there I became bewildered, not knowing what to do. Like the footsteps of the departed the grips of madness, it was as though my arms and legs were wrestling to free themselves. And

just as a foetus is conceived in the depths of the womb, so, too, does my dance emerge from the heart of darkness (Ohno; 1988).

In Ohno's unusual stage entrance from the house side, "he was to create a universe imbued with fact and fiction, where life and death co-exist with Divine's supposedly fictive presence, represented by Ohno seated in the real world of the audience (Miyagawa: 13). Up until that juncture Ohno's dance had faced more towards life, but in this particular segment he was to touch upon the darker world of death.

In 1961, Ohno built a rehearsal space with discarded wood from the Soshin Girls School in the back garden of his home in Kamihoshikawa in the Hodogaya suburb of Yokohama. Up until then he had availed of the school's auditorium or gym but henceforth he could dance to his heart's content in his private rehearsal studio, which over time was to turn into a meeting ground where the likes of Tatsumi Hijikata and the theatre critic Masakatsu Gunji, along with the many artists and overseas research students, would congregate. In 1965, clad in a body length gown Ohno performed in *A Rose Coloured Dance* an erotic duet with Hijikata, who appeared as a bearded monk-soldier. He retired from the teaching staff of the Soshin Girls' School in 1967, but was to continue working there for the next 13 years as a part-time caretaker in charge of repairs and maintenance. After seeing Hijikata's solo performance *Tatsumi Hijikata and the Japanese: Rebellion of the Body* in 1968, Ohno avowed: "I was so overcome by shock that I didn't know what I should do" (1992: 78). He even deliberated whether to abandon performing outright. He subsequently teamed up with the filmmaker, Chiaki Nagano, immersing himself totally into the making of a trilogy of butoh films - at considerable expense to himself. The idea of producing these films emerged while reading many titles in the Iwanami paperbacks series in the school's boiler room (Yoshimasu; 2010: 13). According to Yoshito Ohno: "This

was a hiatus during which he couldn't create a performance, or even dance for that matter" (Ohno, Yoshimasu, Higuchi; 2010: 16).

In 1976, some time after completing the film trilogy, Ohno recalled. "It was like act of divine intervention. I spotted an abstract painting at Natsuyuki Nakanishi's one-man show at a Tokyo gallery whose effect on me was such that I witnessed La Argentina come to life before my very eyes. After nearly 48 years, here we were to meet again. In front of that painting I heard her voice call out, as though enticing me, 'I am going to dance, so why don't you join along with me' " (2010b; 150).

In 1977 at the age of 71, Ohno was to premiere *Admiring La Argentina* his homage in her honour. Under Tatsumi Hijikata's direction, they jointly brought to fruition a ninety-minute solo dance, although in rehearsal they had worked on a group scene in which "Kazuo Ohno was carried off like a wave" (Takahashi; 2011: 9). Up until that point, Ohno's performances were once-off affairs, but with this tribute piece, "my work was for the first time striving towards a model of performance that could be presented in public over and again" (Ohno; 1999: 217).

Between 1977 and 1994, Ohno was to perform this seminal work 119 times all around the world (Mizohata; 2010: p158).

In his review, the dance critic Miyabi Ichikawa observed: "In a dance evoking the creation of heaven, Ohno's spontaneous energy confronts us with the true nature of Butoh" (1983: 142). This work established Ohno as a butoh dancer. The work is divided in six sections:

- 1 Diviniarane: Death and Rebirth
- 2: Daily Bread
- 3: The Marriage of Heaven and Earth
- 4: Tango: Flower - Bird- Bandoneon's Lament
- 5: Memories of La Argentina

## 6: Epilogue- with Gratitude

"At times in a dress-suit, sometimes clad in female attire and at other times almost naked, Ohno transforms with each successive scene in *Admiring La Argentina*" (Ichikawa; 2000: 233). At the beginning he emerges onstage from the auditorium as the ageing male transvestite Divine, only to transform into a young girl. La Argentina is reincarnated in Ohno. In the next sequence, *Daily Bread*, Ohno in a formal black-suit spellbinds the audience with his awesome floor technique. Standing completely motionless in *The Marriage of Heaven and Earth*, Ohno appears in plain black underpants and whitened torso, his outstretched arms evoking the image of being crucified. In a scene in which the mortal Ohno and the immortal La Argentina wed, he waits for his muse to descend from the heavens and enter his body. In *Tango*, Ohno dressed in flowing robes, transforms himself into the Flamenco dancer La Argentina, before changing back again to dance in male clothing. Enraptured he dances with La Argentina. It was reported that as Miyabi Ichikawa watched the premiere, he couldn't resist shedding tears: "Through the power of love, Ohno embodied the possibility of rebirth" (2007: 230).

In an ageing body, grounded in the modern dance idiom, Ohno personifies in *Admiring La Argentina* the predominant themes of his butoh works, namely, life and death, illusion and reality, masculinity and femininity, the profane and the sacred.

One of the distinguishing features of Ohno's approach to dance is that it is not worked out beforehand. Rather than rely on choreographed movements and a rough stage plan he prepares in advance or even particular movements he might have in mind, he simply improvises on the spot. As the *kanji* or the Chinese ideogram for 'improvise' implies, one rises to the moment: what we witness in Ohno's improvisations are his feelings and thoughts surging forth, fusing with movement in the 'here and now'. Whenever Ohno is immersed in creating a performance he invariably has several coloured markers and sheets



of B4 to hand on which he jots down notes his work notes. Writing is a form of movement, just as is moving a form of writing. Serving as a form of image training, this process of written movements is the basis upon which the work comes into being. He continues jotting down his ideas and feelings right up until the performance, yet once he steps out onstage he completely forgets the lot and just extemporizes on the spot. "Ohno's butoh improvisations represent a rebuttal of dance techniques, so much so that one could call them an act of faith. By way of contrast, Tatsumi Hijikata was more concerned with form ... Hijikata's butoh style was more an experiment in developing style "(Fumiaki Nakamura; 1993: 20-21).

The dance critic Tatsuro Ishii, who appreciated the clear distinction between Ohno and Hijikata's approaches, remarked:

"Hijikata's approach was one whereby he would call attention to the wide range of possibilities in human movement: from facial expression, to the neck, the elbows, the hips, the entire body, even the soles of the feet and in the process transform them into a form of poetic expression. Ohno, likewise, had his own particular vision of what Butoh should be: It was uniquely personal, and couldn't be reduced to movements ordained by others. After staging *Admiring La Argentina*, Ohno was to part ways from Hijikata, and clearly began to tread his own path. Rather than being guided by his immediate thoughts, he danced as though caressing the inspiration evoked by his emotions ... dance technique was relegated to the stage wings. It felt like he was flying towards wilder regions well beyond dance technique. Indeed for Ohno, his encounter with Hijikata was like coming across an 'elixir' that acted as a catalyst, penetrating his every cell, helping him, in effect, to realise his full potential. Afterwards, it was merely a matter of dancing as though manipulated by the gods" (2010: 101).

The fourth phase of this period was one in which Tatsumi Hijikata features prominently. His role in *Kinjiki* and their collaboration on *Admiring La*

*Argentina*, which, in turn engendered Ohno's return to public performance, and the subsequent pursuit of his own improvised form of expression.

### 3-1-5 phase 5: (1980-1998) International Tours

Following his retirement from Soshin, Ohno's international engagements increased. His first overseas appearance took place at the 14th Nancy International Theatre Festival in 1980 to which he had been invited. His performances of *Admiring La Argentina*, *Ozen or the Embryo's Dream*, and *An Invitation from Jesus* won widespread critical acclaim. Dedicating his performance to Judas, Ohno as a believer in Christ, danced *An Invitation from Jesus* at Nancy's Eglise Saint Fiacre, in front of a statue of Christ. An emotional Ohno stated at the time: "As a butoh dancer, I have been granted a place to testify my faith ... (For me) believing is in effect to dance. Butoh is nothing other than unwavering faith. As far as I am concerned, dance and faith are one and the same" (1998: 113).

In 1981, Ohno staged the premiere of *My Mother* under Tatsumi Hijikata's direction. He was to perform a renewed version of this tribute to his mother in 1995, this time directed by Yoshito Ohno. His final presentation of this repertoire work in February 1998 "signalled his last performance with a clearly fixed structure" (Mizohata; 2010: 158). The low red table used as a stage prop symbolised his mother's womb.

" Ohno reminisces about that utopia-like existence, dreaming of the happiness experienced being at one with his mother in her womb. That is why he tries his utmost to express his love for the departed, incorporating the dead into his dance; overjoyed, he jokes and plays with them" (Ichikawa; 2000: 234). Over the years this notion of motherhood became a recurrent theme in Ohno's canon of works.

In 1985, Ohno premiered *The Dead Sea and the Viennese Waltz*, again under Hijikata's direction, though this was to be their final collaboration. The piece

was originally inspired by a profound experience Ohno had in the mountains overlooking the Dead Sea during his visit to Israel, in which he encountered small-creatures who flourished despite the harsh terrain. He observed:

"Along with creation itself, I could somehow sense my mother's presence, so devoted to giving birth to a new life, while at the same time talking a step closer to her own demise" (1998: 145). Here again the predominant themes were death and rebirth along with symbiosis through love. For the finale of the *Viennese Waltz and the Ghosts*, Ohno danced to Johann Strauss II's *An Artist's Life* introducing those marvellous waltzes with which he had practiced throughout the years, ever since his modern dance period (Mizohata; 2010: 159). Another noteworthy feature was how this work constituted his first duo onstage with his son, Yoshito. Taking the 79 year-old Ohno's physical strength into account, Toshio Mizohata commented, "it seemed the time had come to reconsider how to structure his works and not restrict them to solo performances" (Mizohata; 158). "Won't you dance as well" was his invitation to Yoshito, who himself had not graced the stage for 16 years. In his appraisal of three scenes that Hijikata choreographed for him in *The Dead Sea*, Yoshito later spoke about his memories of that time (Takahashi; 2011: 9):

" Notwithstanding that he had previously claimed that the beauty of Butoh lay in the fact that it would die out, Hijikata said to me: 'Seeing that Chopin's music lives on even though he is long dead, Yoshito-san, your mission is to make Butoh eternal.' "

In the wake of Hijikata's untimely death in 1986, Yoshito was henceforth to direct all of Kazuo Ohno's works. When Ohno first performed *Water Lilies* in 1987, Masakatsu Gunji described Ohno's characteristic style in the programme notes as: "Dancing frantically the limits of non-sense:"

"As I watched Kazuo Ohno's butoh performance, I couldn't help but feeling that Jesus was dancing. Though human behaviour is

'non-sensical', human beings don't deem it as such. That is their lot. As for Ohno's non-sensical dance ... it's nothing more than him 'going beyond the limits.' The sole way for human beings to change their destiny (karma) is by surpassing their limitations. The reason Kazuo Ohno's butoh performances exude such a boundless sense of repose is because he embodies pure spirit" (Gunji; 1987: programme notes).

In 1988 he danced *Mushi-biraki*, a memorial performance for Tatsumi Hijikata. Two years later in 1990, at the request of the Teatro Ponchielli in Cremona, Italy, he created *Flowers-Birds-Wind-Moon*, premiering it in situ. In a work imbued with a Japanese perspective on the natural elements, the Ohnos integrated music and, remarkably, many stage props for the very first time into one of their creations. In 1992, he first performed *White Lotus Bloom*. After 64 years of married life together, his wife Chie died in 1997. The fifth phase of this period could be summed as the one where he finally retired from Soshin's Girls School, and where he began consolidating his repertoire, initially with *Admiring La Argentina* right up until his staging of *White Lotus Blossom* in the early 90s. Over the course of the intervening years, he was fully active on the international circuit.

### 3-1-6 phase 6 (1999-2010) Even in Death I will Dance

In 1999, at the age of 93, Ohno underwent separate operations for cataracts and a detached retina. This was the year in which he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and also suffered an injury after a fall onstage. In December of that year he fulfilled his last overseas engagement, when he staged *Requiem for the 20th Century* in New York. From 2001 onwards he was increasingly having difficulties to stand, and presented his last solo piece *Flower*, in which he danced solely with his hands. As of 2002 he received nursing care on an around-the-clock basis. Notwithstanding his frail condition, he was invited to perform throughout Japan in 2003, performing in

his wheelchair. He also danced, as was his custom, at the annual Nativity play at Soshin Girls School. Though he did personally attend the celebrations in subsequent years, this was the last occasion he actually performed at the pageant. He made a guest appearance in Yoshito Ohno's performance *Isshin* in 2005. The following year (2006) was his last time to play Santa Claus at his neighbourhood Kamihoshikawa Nursery School. He also made his final appearance at the Nativity Play at the class reunion at Soshin Girls' School. In January 2007, he turned up for the curtain call at the Gala performance *Hyakka Ryoran* to celebrate his centenary birthday and also made a guest appearance onstage in his wheelchair at Carolyn Carlson's performance - in what was to be his last occasion to grace the stage. As of 2007 he was increasingly confined to bed, sustained by a liquid diet. From 2009 onwards he increasingly required hospital care, and was finally to pass away on June 1st, 2010 after being rushed to the hospital from his home in Kamihoshikawa. Before being summoned to the next life, Ohno passed his final moments in the company of his family and close relatives. A pastor offered prayers at his deathbed. In Ohno's own words: "When my body can no longer move I will dance with my arms; when I'm finally confined to bed I will dance with my fingers. Even in death, I will continue to dance" (Takahashi 2011: 9). And Ohno did just as he said he would. He continued dancing right until his ultimate breath. Moreover, his faith was such that despite both being mentally and physically constrained, he remained devoted and continued attending the Christmas celebrations at the Soshin Girl's School and neighbourhood nursery school.

This sixth phase was one in which Ohno increasingly experienced difficulties in standing, and needed to be physically supported by Yoshito when dancing. Here again, Ohno broke new ground with his approach: he would dance seated in a wheelchair employing nothing more than his unique and enormous hands. Notwithstanding all his tribulations, Ohno continued to

disguise himself as Santa at the Christmas celebrations for the children at the school. One could safely say that his dance and faith became increasingly indistinguishable during this period.

### 3-1-7 Conclusions

Up until now I have principally viewed Ohno's 103 years through the optic of his modern dance opus and his career as a butoh practitioner. Having been enlisted for military service in 1938, he spent the subsequent war years in active service on the front. On his return to civilian life after the war at the age of 40, he taught dance at Soshin Girls' School for almost two decades. After his retirement from the teaching staff, he remained involved with the school he loved so much until his 100th year, whether in his position as a part-time employee, caretaker, giving directions for the Nativity play - and not overlooking how he played Santa Claus for the kindergarten pupils.

Ohno's dancing life fed on numerous factors: his first-hand experience of the war, his work as a physical education teacher, his Christian faith, modern dance, along with his involvement with Butoh ... and through all of these with age he naturally established a style that strove to integrate what the noh master Zeami referred to as a 'flower' in its every aspect, be it in full bloom or a withering petal (Ishii; 2010: 101). Eikoh Hosoe, who continually photographed Ohno for more than half a century, observed: "In sheer exasperation, the devout Christian Ohno would at times scold his students, and like the Holy Mother admonish them in an attempt to spur them on. I wonder why he went to such lengths to perform a dance filled with the message of the Gospels."

To recapitulate, along with being a dedicated teacher, Kazuo Ohno was a pioneering figure whose entire life was continuously dedicated to his art. Thematically, his dances revolved around life and death, drawing from the well of his lifetime's experiences, his close links with his own mother and his

wartime experiences. As for his dance technique, he developed his characteristic flair, epitomised in his superb sense of movement, after long years of training with modern dance methods. When working out a piece's structure, he would draw inspiration from poetry, painting, music and costumes, taking into consideration various artistic factors. As soon, however, as it came to performing onstage, 'the here and now' took precedence, whereby he would dance as he felt at that very moment, improvising as it were on the spot. As an integral part of his daily life, Kazuo Ohno's dance manifestly offered boundless love to all living creatures, sublimating this love into faith by fusing all these elements - and in the process he makes no distinction between male and female, oriental and occidental - so as to create something truly personal.

### 3-2 Kazuo Ohno's Dance Instruction

Now to tackle the central question of Kazuo Ohno's dance education, I will consider Ohno's teaching profile and philosophy, based on the answers given by the interviewees from Soshin Girls' School, along with the help of various documents that will enlighten us concerning the particulars of Ohno's pedagogic methods. The findings of the collected material, drawn from verbatim transcripts of recordings of the 13 interviewees, were analysed in terms of identical semantic content. We obtained 259 individual answers, which were then divided into 5 broad categories, outlined in table 4.

While all the respondents were in the forty to eighty year old age bracket, most of the replies - irrespective of the respondent's age - dealt with the Nativity Play and creative dance, thus leading us to recognise that they had all been deeply marked by Ohno's presence in their lives. The next step was to actually classify the semantic contents of these broad categories in terms of chronological divisions, grouping each of them into sub-categories and

drawing up a schema for the transcriptions. Moreover, I scrutinised their tendency to employ certain key phrases or words in their responses in the sub-categories. Tables 5 and 6 encapsulate the interviewees' diverse responses along with the keywords and phrases used. The subject under investigation was dance instruction in the physical education curriculum from the time Ohno returned to civilian life in 1946 until his retirement in 1967, namely from the beginning of period 3 until the close of 4-1. Although nearly 50 years had passed since most of the respondents had taken dance lessons with Ohno, I was of the belief that they should concentrate on those particular topics, which had made a lasting impression. When transcribing the respondent's answers or sections thereof into the manuscript, I appended their corresponding number in table 1.

Table 4. Classification of the Interviews' Semantic Contents

| <u>Broad categories:</u>  | <u>Number of mentions</u> |
|---|---------------------------|
| Christmas Nativity Pageant - Christianity:                      | 88 mentions               |
| Creative dance basic exercises - Improvised expression:         | 59 mentions               |
| Butoh - Performances- The Other World- Christian faith:         | 46 mentions               |
| Personality Traits- Humble- Calm- Devoted:                      | 37 mentions               |
| School Education- Instructor- Handy-man- Graduation Ceremonies: | 29 mentions               |

3-2-1 Dance Instruction on the Physical Education Curriculum

3-2-1-1 Characteristics of Dance Instruction in the immediate post war era.

See table 5.

I will investigate the characteristics of Ohno's post-war dance education based on an analysis of, as well as the contents of the interviews. In 1946, as



the then 40-year-old Ohno returned to civilian life, he made an all-out-effort to attend modern dance rehearsals, while at the same time working to reconstruct the Girls' School which had suffered war damage as a result of fires broking out following air raids on Yokohama.



Photo 6: Teaching Staff at Soshin 1948. Ohno is third from the left in the top row.  
(Courtesy of Soshin Girl's School.)

In those post war years physical education also consisted of cleaning the school grounds, maintaining the school buildings. Past pupils invariably remember how committed Ohno was both to the school and his extra-curricular activities in the immediate aftermath of the war. Among their comments:

"The school still lay in ruins. So our physical education class often ended up with us helping out in the reconstruction work. *Sensei* (teacher) would take the initiative in clearing things up. While the pupils would also do their best to help out, whenever *sensei* had a few moments to spare he was constantly pulling weeds and cleaning the schoolyard. And in the midst of all this destruction, *sensei* had already set his sights on improving his dance. Even while picking weeds he was thinking about dance. I believe he accumulated a lot of different experiences"(3). "Ever energetic and agile, *sensei* would always put great effort into getting things accomplished, whether it was picking weeds in the overgrown garden or carrying them to the air-raid shelter. We even gave him a hand to build the tennis court"(4). Ohno's

dedication was palpable. Describing the circumstances of his dance class in the scorched field, a male colleague commented: "Before the gymnasium was built, we used to practice in the grounds. The students could thus observe what Ohno-*sensei* was doing by watching him, and then assumed the same forms and poses he struck; it was as though they were all dancing. (See photo 4 - Ohno; 2007: 73.) Indeed one couldn't be struck by how dashing Ohno-*sensei* was. From about that time he started using a snare drum during practice. (See photo 2: Ohno; 2007: 98.) As he gave a roll on the drum everyone's face and body seemed to be infused by the rhythm. Ohno was equally as demanding of himself as of his pupils. What exactly he wanted wasn't always quite clear, and yet he deeply thought about whether he was getting across to the pupils that he, too, was also searching" (2).

Table 5 Phase 3: 1946-1958 Defining Traits of Ohno's Dance Lessons

| <u>Small Category</u>        | <u>Key Words or Phrases</u>  |
|------------------------------|--|
| 1. Teacher Image:            | Agility; Gallant; Rigorous   |
| 2. Upkeep of the Schoolyard: | Clearing up the Ruins; Weed Picking                                |
| 3. New Exercises:            | Astonishing series of events; Fashionable;<br>Schoolyard Exercises |
| 4. Dance:                    | Basic Exercises; Small Drum; Freedom                               |
| 5. Dance Research Group:     | Middle School Students' Volunteer Group;<br>Practice Gear          |
| 6. Stage:                    | Turning into somebody else;<br>Another world; One of a kind        |

The pupils danced in their school uniforms because they lacked practice wear, copying their high-spirited instructor's movements whose physique had been

strengthened by modern dance. One of them was astonished at how "very enjoyable and up-to-date our physical education lesson was"(4). And at the same time, if one can infer from his colleagues' comment that " he was also searching for that something in himself. " one supposes that Ohno was not only distancing himself from the modern dance techniques he had previously learnt, but also was questioning himself about his instruction methods in class, as though he were in search of his individual form of expression and a theme for his creative work. For all we know, he might well have solved these problems while reflecting upon how he would go about practicing with his pupils at class. After the gym was built, he would line the pupils up from end of the room to the other, and develop a series of poses. "We would dance to his drum rhythms, in waltz and four/four time, having a great time dancing with friends"(4). "Moving forward in a row to the beat of the drum was a basic exercise for first year students in Middle School"(3). "It wasn't a matter of everybody in the row doing exactly the same thing, he would instruct us to express ourselves freely at a particular point"(4). "He would give instruction as to how to strike a pose. For instance, he would ask us to become a 'reed'. He would then divide us up into groups, asking one of us to strike a pose as a reed, then another would pose as a fallen reed, someone else as a swaying one and so on. Through these visualisations, we would then as a group create a setting of reeds by the water. He gave us many different themes to work on. He also taught us to come up with our own individual themes, as such enabling us to develop our awareness"(3).

Given "it was a girl's school"(3) and that the young girls responded to this kind of dance class "influenced by post-war liberal education" (4) Ohno could be considered as having gone to great lengths to implement training methods that would elicit freer forms of expression, while at the same time aiding his pupils to nurture their awareness. In terms of what lessons consisted of in concrete terms, basic dance exercises and corporal expression

were the predominant components, broadly corresponding as such with the guidelines issued at that time by the Japanese Ministry of Education, from which one could infer that Ohno's methodology encompassed the essential qualities of creative dance.

That being the case, one asks what it was that substantially distinguished Ohno's dance instruction? In all likelihood Ohno had been influenced by Takaya Eguchi and Misako Miya, given that he actually lived in the storage room at their dance studio in 1946, while enduring the commute day in day out on the Toyoko-line between Soshin School and their Institute. Besides, in 1947, Eguchi published *Dance Education in Schools* in which he attached great importance to 'basic exercises', 'movements involving release and contraction' and the 'formation of the body.'

Misako Miya, on the other hand, designated 'walking, jumping and turning' as the fundamental building blocks (Miya; 1997). Rina Atsumi, who studied under Eguchi and Miya from 1939 to 1945, recalls practice during that period as "ranging from basic exercises using the hips to those involving the entire body, and depending on the day the movement patterns varied."

Ohno, who himself was an understudy at the Eguchi and Miya Institute - apart from the war years - between 1936 and 1948, commented: "Creating a movement 'phrase.' Their way of teaching involved initially working with simple improvised movements to an ad lib piano accompaniment until eventually creating a piece of determined length." Eguchi himself noted that as far as non-structured modern dance went, he did teach of the necessity to create a body ideally capable of responding to any form of movement, yet when it actually came to rehearsing the work, traces of improvised expression were visible (Mitsuyoshi; 2011).

Taking all these factors into consideration, we can infer that though Ohno worked out his own individual form of expression during period 3 when

giving dance instruction at the Soshin School, he did also integrate components of Eguchi's teaching methods and improvised expression. Furthermore he began getting involved in extra-curricular activities such as the Dance Research group in after school hours. See photo 5: Dance Research Group. Ohno; 2010a: 52. One of its founding members spoke of enviously watching Ohno both rehearsing and dancing onstage: "Soon after the end of the war, some Middle School student volunteers joined the group, and they started rehearsing seriously during lunch-break and in the after-school hours. This group evolved, forming the Ohno Dance Group. "Seeing that we were just beginning, we were very happy ... for practice clothing I made a skirt using material from one of my mother's kimono. Those kinds of skirts that would blow out into the shape of a doughnut were then a rare sight. I was so happy with my doughnut-shaped skirt while whirling around that I became dizzy " (3).

"Hearing that *sensei* was due to appear in Eguchi's performance, I went all the way to Tokyo to watch him onstage. This was the first time seeing him perform in public, and I was to return to Yokohama in such a state of rapture after having witnessed his dazzling performance. I was so proud of his triumph onstage when the following day, the newspaper hailed him as 'a star pupil.' Every time I boarded the Toyoko-line I caught sight of a poster for the Eguchi Dance Company, and that in itself made me so happy"(3). The Ohno that the students were accustomed to seeing around the school "was not at all full of himself, but a rather quiet and unassuming figure, who never seemed to want to hog the limelight"(2). "I never heard him once raise his voice" (2 and 3). In stark contrast to his everyday demeanour, "the Ohno I saw onstage was a completely different person. The world *sensei* inhabits is altogether another one,"(2) were but some of the comments made, as staff and pupils alike were astonished by his outright transformation onstage. The

dancer Shoda recalls seeing him perform in 1949: "His stage presence was 'unique' and one-of-a-kind" (Shoda; 2010).

### 3-2-1-2 Dance lessons with Kazuo Ohno the Butoh Dancer

Corresponding with the period 4-1, namely 1959 to 1967, table 6 encapsulates the key words and phrases of the respondents' answers in relation to their impression of instruction with Kazuo Ohno the butoh dancer.

In 1959, at the age of 53, and after having completed the fifth and last in a series of self-produced performances as well as staging *The Old Man and the Sea*, a notable sea change occurred. He embarked upon his voyage into the Butoh universe, appearing in the reworked version of *Kinjiki*. His butoh activities became more invigorated following the transition from rehearsing at the Soshin gymnasium to his private studio in his back garden - which he had recently constructed with his own hands. The question naturally arises as to what impact being a butoh performer and a staff member had on his dance teaching at Soshin? At school he was regarded as "self-effacing and single-minded in his approach"(6). "He was so deeply engrossed in his own thoughts, along with his insights into nature and life, that he assumed a modest way of living"(5). At the same time, both the Japanese language teacher and the Social Studies teacher interviewed drew attention to another aspect of Ohno's character that manifested itself while instructing his pupils. "Thinking back about him, I see this warm-hearted teacher, with a nice manner. No matter how trivial the matter was at school, he would run about the place taking care of everything, always doing his utmost"(7). "Even when giving instructions we didn't feel in any way thwarted but rather an all-embracing sense of relief. What I learned from Ohno-*sensei* was that the role of an instructor consisted not of drilling things into their pupils but rather of drawing out what already was inside them. Though born in the

Meiji-era (1868-1912), he was anything but the stereotype of an educator from that time; he was rather quite an unconventional Japanese"(8).

Table 6 Phase 4-1 (1959-1967) Characteristics of Ohno's Dance Instruction

| <u>Small Category:</u>              | <u>Key Words and Phrases</u>  |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Teacher Image:                   | Extract; Dandy; Determined  |
| 2. Gymnastics:                      | The world we yearned for;<br>Inimitable creative Dance                  |
| 3. Drums:                           | Body memory;<br>Rolling the Drum while striking Poses                   |
| 4. Basic Exercises:                 | Beautiful Model;<br>Swaying group Movements                             |
| 5. Improvisations:                  | Flowers; Butterflies; Birds; Flypaper;<br>The Self; Embryo              |
| 6. Experiments:                     | Everybody's Dance is unique;<br>Solo Experiments; Down to the Fingertip |
| 7. With those not given to dancing: | Yes, yes, give it a go;<br>He never denied them a Chance                |
| 8. Athletic Games:                  | Group performance; Never repeat;<br>Lost in Thought                     |
| 9. Stage:                           | Themes; World; Love; Life;<br>Mother; Nostalgia                         |
| 10. Personality Traits:             | Nickname - Smoked Monkey; Modest  |

Given their customary strong physiques and loud voices along with their good leadership abilities, PE teachers were often delegated to instruct the pupils. However, Ohno was never authoritarian in manner nor raised his voice. Rather his modus operandi was to encourage his pupils to express themselves freely, striving to harness their individual potential. This, in turn, attracted his pupils to him. One can infer from the evidence on offer that his

dance lessons were meant to nurture this process of 'bringing their inner lives to the fore.'

With regard to their dance lessons, past pupils made the following comments: "Though I was useless at PE, whenever that nice, slim and dandy teacher appeared in the gymnasium holding a small drum, our lesson was like a long-awaited journey into another world," (7) or that it was "ground-breaking creative dance"(6). Many of his past pupils also remarked on the impact his basic training and approach to examinations were to have: "He would never count out one-two-three-four, but instead tap out the rhythm on the snare-drum. He would line us up and then launch into a tan-tan-tan-ta, tan-ta-ta rhythm, right to left, left to right, forwards, backwards and so on. The different variations *sensei* indicated were lovely. Though he was in his fifties at that stage, we never once felt that his technical skills were in decline"(8). Whenever we were to strike a pose, he would clearly mark time, the ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta on the drum, resonating with his pleasant voice. To this day I clearly recall what happened a half a century ago. Tapping a simple rhythm on the drum, he would inspire us to move our bodies, to draw forth our feelings, thus enabling us to express our inner world, and become one with ourselves in the process "(6).

" When he gave an examination we had to dance individually. As the others were observing me I wanted to finish as quickly as possible. Once it got underway, however, it was so enjoyable just jumping in the air, and I thought that everybody's way of dancing was different"(8). As a form of test, I had to dance by myself in the spacious gymnasium. I moved to the three-four-time rhythm he marked out on the snare drum. To this day being told to express myself right down to the tips of my fingers is etched in my memory"(7).

After completing basic training exercises, he started working on various themes based on free expression. At times the theme might be 'the self',



during which the students would have to walk from one end of the hall to the other. As one student recalled, Ohno would then ask those students whom considered up to the task: "to do the walk again, whereupon they would walk up and down in front of the entire class. Seeing that they had become self-conscious the second time round, he would promptly comment 'it's different this time.' But he was never negative in his approach. It was thanks to such intense experimentation that I came to grasp the necessity when dancing to 'tune into and express our inner worlds' - something in effect he constantly sought after and realised. And, this experience, in turn, was to have considerable impact upon how I myself taught as a PE instructor afterwards" (9). After graduating from Soshin, this particular interviewee continued her studies at the Tokyo Women's College of Physical Education, from which she graduated to later become a PE teacher at the Soshin School where she currently (2012) occupies that post. Taking a leaf out of his father's book, Yoshito Ohno also regularly works with this essential theme of the 'self', of expressing one's inner world - which he regards as indispensable for butoh and creative dance alike (Takahashi; 2011: 10).

In relation to how Ohno would have his students improvise on any given theme, like for instance the way to walk to the end of the hall, we should bear in mind that his former teacher Takaya Eguchi also used similar training methods. In an interview with the author Shoda vividly recalls taking a workshop with Eguchi when she was only 16. "Members of the class would each walk in their own particular way as Eguchi recited that Carl Hermann Busse poem: 'If you wander over the mountains, people say that you will find where happiness dwells,' to an improvisation on the piano. To those who didn't know what to do, Eguchi would call out: 'if you feel like moving, please do so.' " Deeply motivated by such experiences and longing to study dance, Shoda subsequently travelled up to Tokyo, where she feasted on her lessons with Eguchi and Ohno. With the help of a piano accompaniment in

an unconstrained atmosphere, Eguchi would encourage his students to improvise. We shouldn't ignore the fact that Ohno, through his use of drum rhythms and verbal encouragements to his pupils, was likewise stimulating improvisatory expression, and as such could be considered as further developing teaching methods similar to those executed by his former teacher Takaya Eguchi. Flowers, butterflies, birds, the embryo, the wind, a fly trying to escape from fly paper were among the predominant themes Ohno brought into play at Soshin. One of them recalls his improvisations:

"*Sensei* would tell us: 'you are observing a flower. Flowers are blooming here in front of us, and also over there. You have to imagine how that flower is.' He would encourage us to become flowers. Flowers were a regular theme in class"(9).

"He instructed us to walk as though a bird were perched on our shoulder. Listening to the drumbeat, I walked over to the wall on the other side; conscious of the bird that I couldn't see perched on my shoulder. Such freedom of expression was nowhere to be found; he would accept whatever we did, and I felt that through his lessons he was attempting to work on our awareness"(6).

"He would have us imagine: 'You are now in your mother's womb, floating like an embryo, so dance as though you were that embryo, feel what it is like to be that embryo.' At that particular time, it was taboo to talk about such things as life and birth, sperm and ova, the womb and such: I was extremely reluctant to discuss such topics. Moreover, it was difficult for me to accept, seeing I myself was going through my rebellious phase. The affect upon me was such that whenever I began thinking about my strict mother in reality, I couldn't move. And yet, *Ohno-sensei* would in all seriousness ask us to 'toddle about on a vast plain. Far away in the distance your mother is waiting with her arms wide open. Please walk towards her.' Beguiled by his words, my body naturally moved without any mental resistance whatsoever. He

related how these words came to him as his own children came into this world. Those words had an impact upon us; we could sense that he wanted to make us understand the depth of those bonds. In the process, he transformed what previously had been a detestable gymnastics class into a much longed for world, and even now that 'number one' favourite class continues to live on within me. Back then it struck me as unusual that an adult could be so attached to his mother, yet on becoming a parent myself, I now realise that the 'life's' message he imparted was one that helped me. If one considers the time, his age and the language he used, what *sensei* taught us was truly astounding"(7).

Ohno liked to potter about in the flowerbeds in the schoolyard. He grasped that fact that precious life dwells in even in the smallest flower or insect. Seen in this context, the themes Ohno proposed to his students, in particular those touching on life and motherhood, had as their wellspring his personal insights and approach to life, and were later to evolve in the starting point for his butoh performances. As can be deduced from the above, the essential features of his dance instruction during period 4 remained similar to those in period 3, revolving as such around basic exercises and developing expression, with little or no change in their content or configuration. In terms of their expression, one can infer that Ohno's original and improvised themes, spurred on by his profuse encouragements, were enhanced all the more. In 1965, 180 third-year pupils from the Soshin High School participated in the Gymnastics Meeting at Yokohama's Mitsuzawa stadium in the group performance section. Here one could observe another facet of Ohno's teaching, which wasn't evident at his regular classes. "*Sensei* would stand in front of all the students and firmly instruct them to specifically 'do this' and 'do that.' After having danced in the way he instructed us, he would then give a different command. At each rehearsal we attempted diverse variations. If things didn't run too smoothly, *sensei* would sit down and jot down a few

notes, and after some deliberation would bid us to 'do it this way this time round.' This happened over and again. In the performance there was a scene in which we all lay down on the grass, 'feeling good with the expanding sky above, astounded by a sense of liberation, by the beauty of it all and to respond individually.' Even a plain student like me could relish the experience"(8).

In this particular context, whereby he was preparing a large-scale performance for the general public, one detects a different approach to that which he took during dance class: Here, the artist in him revealed himself through his ambition and motivation 'to get every last detail right.' The purpose behind his 'note-taking' at this time, and subsequently when immersed in the process of creating of butoh performances, was to clarify and expand the imagery, movements and structure. This working process dates from that period.

Ohno's teaching methods were a source of relief for those students not given to the competitive nature of gymnastics. "In a clear voice he would urge on those students poor at dance with such encouraging comments as 'go on give it a try, yes, that's it' " (6).

He would introduce themes over which he himself had carefully thought about, and with the help of verbal encouragements and prompting guide the students towards an encounter with themselves and their inner lives, thus inducing them to move. Ohno's dance lessons did not revolve around him instructing the pupils in various patterns of movements or steps, but instead he introduced them to a selection of themes, and in so doing seriously attempted to draw out their individual innate qualities. His method consisted of a skilful use of language that swayed their hearts in such a way that they couldn't help but having to face their inner selves.

Most of those students, who subsequently chose teaching as a career, recall the considerable impact Ohno's approach to physical education and teaching has had upon their teaching methods.

"On later becoming a teacher in a public elementary school, my colleagues were preoccupied about how to teach their pupils to express themselves. I advised them to try as Ohno-*sensei* had done with us. It transpired that the children were overjoyed by this new approach, and were able to express themselves by following the various rhythms. The teacher separated their pupils into several groups, each having their preferred activity, and thus the children were very happy to do as they were bid. Just by telling my colleagues that I had been taught by Ohno-*sensei* earned me their respect" (4).

The fruits of Ohno's unique approach were evident in the manner his student's 'walked' at the annual high-school's graduation ceremony parade.

"As Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March* played, he would have the students put their foot forward and shift their centre of balance to mark the initial beat. Thoroughly majestic in bearing, their march was elegance in itself. Even after his retirement he would come to the lessons, and this elegant march featured as a mainstay at the annual parade until 2009.

Nowadays the high school students are no longer able to march in that way, and with nobody to teach it, a fine tradition has died out" (9).

His students were so fond of Ohno that among themselves they gave him various nicknames, such as 'smoked monkey' or 'mummy' due to his lean physique.

In an interview with the author, however, Yoshito Ohno remarked that his father later told him that he had 'found teaching dance trying.'

Thus far I have principally focused on Ohno's dance instruction within the context of the physical education curriculum. Ohno's teaching methods were unique in the way that he employed the 'basic exercises' and 'expression- or improvised expression' necessary to dance as his principal components, and

how that he never ruled anything out and was always open to suggestions - irrespective of the situation. Another distinguishing feature was his use of language that appealed to the student's sensitivity and was effective in eliciting a physical response. Responding to Ohno's encouraging words, the students were happy to be able to express themselves in their own individual way through movement.

As of 2012, first and second year Middle School students throughout Japan will be compelled to take compulsory dance classes. To the many instructors in doubt as to optimal way to teach the subject, they could perhaps take a hint or two from that self-made 'male instructor' who ever before the 1960s, grappled through highs and lows with the world of expression.

### 3-2-2 Mass Games *Beauty and Strength*

In 1955, the 10th Japanese National Athletic Meet was held in Kanagawa. According to the Japan Sport Association review the 10th National Meet with its slogan *Towards an all-inclusive Meeting* was instigated so as to enhance the general public's well being through physical exercise, with the declared aim of ensuring the widest possible participation among the prefecture's inhabitants. The games were held in public so as to fulfil their mission of being 'games for the masses,' similar as such to any other large-scale sporting occasion.

The opening ceremony took place on October 30th, at Yokohama's Mitsuzawa Sports Stadium, with the mass games lasting some two hours. The programme embraced a wide array of activities: marching bands, a sports parade, volleyball, calisthenics, and a procession of dignitaries, rhythmical movements and such. *Beauty and Strength*, under Ohno's direction and with the participation of 10,532 elementary, middle and high school students, lasted some 40 minutes and was a major attraction during the rhythmical movement segment of the proceedings. This represented a key

experience for Ohno, for in addition to training his own students to physically express themselves, the results of his labour were to be presented to a mass audience. At this point I will quote from documents relating to Ohno's reflections on the preparation and realisation of the National Athletic Meet. According to the implementation guidelines "*Beauty and Strength* is directed from every conceivable angle with forms of expression suitable for (students') developmental condition and presented as a coherent theme, ... in a carefully worked-out plan" (10th National Athletic Meet documents: 210). The day's events consisted of the 5 following sequences:

- 1: Commemoration Parade with 720 participants from Yokohama City's middle schools, alongside high school pupils from Kanagawa prefecture.
- 2: *Beauty and Strength*: 1100 participants from Kanagawa prefecture's high schools.
3. *The Joys of Construction*: 1792 participants from Yokohama city's middle schools.
4. *Let's become good Children*: 2400 participants from Yokohama city's elementary schools.
5. *Admiring Lilies* 4520 participants from Yokohama's elementary and middle schools, along with Kanagawa prefecture's high schools.

Written in his neat hand and in some detail in the stencilled copy of research documents, Ohno outlines his desire to have *Beauty and Strength* act as a source of encouragement for training, while at the same time formulating 'concrete problems relating to movement, namely the basic ideas for choreography, the order in which things are arranged and presented, the various configurations and such (document in Ohno's possession; 1955).

"As to their response in concrete terms to the creation of *Beauty and Strength*, the committee members individually felt hope and joy in their hearts. If I ask myself why, is it not because our mutual hopes are so difficult to realise. I believe that they were touched by the opportunity to feel the joy of creating

something. Or at least, to witness their longing to turn this possibility into a tangible reality accomplished. We hope that these movements won't result in a separation of beauty and strength in human beings but rather unfold in union as a form of beautiful harmony. In so doing, it will gradually touch upon the essence of this concept. As one becomes involved with creation, various problems gradually begin to arise, and though I'm keenly aware of the hurdles, I nonetheless came to grips with them in the same way as with those difficulties accompanying life's quests, all the while feeling the joys of creation. "

The theme's expression amplified Ohno's longing for beauty in basic physical movements. Moreover, the National Athletic Meet can be interpreted as offering him a large stage, where he wanted children and students alike to shine and not just be treated as 'mere cogs' but as 'individuals.' This weighed in with Ohno's thinking regarding his daily routine at class and towards his own creative output, and revealed his desire to see expressive activity considered as an essential part of character training.

### 3-2-3 Nativity Play and Santa Claus

#### 3-2-3-1 Passionate Approach to Nativity Play

At the age of 24 Ohno was baptised, becoming a Christian under the influence of the principal of the Kanto Gakuin, where he was employed as a junior high school gymnastic teacher at that time. In 1934, he moved to the Soshin Baptist School, where as a Christian he began organising the annual Nativity play and with which he was actively engaged for the subsequent 60 years, in conjunction with the kindergarten children, the pupils of the elementary school, students of the girl's school as well as members of the alumni association. (Photo 7: Ohno; 2007: 43. Photos 3 and 8: Courtesy of Soshin School.)



He continued throughout to both direct and perform in the Nativity play. Even when he could no longer perform in public, he faithfully attended the Soshin High School's Nativity Play until his centenary year, joining the ceremony as a member of the audience in his wheelchair. In the Soshin version of the pageant, members of the school's drama club play the Virgin Mary, the angels, shepherds and wise kings. The Naoki-literary-award winning novelist Mitsuyo Kakuta (1967- ) and past Soshin pupil recalls her participation in the pageant: "His dance was unusual with its loose, plant-like movements. Though the movements weren't hard as such, they were exhausting in the long run ... I only realised who he really was after graduating from High School ... Whenever I think of him, I invariably feel like stretching my back. He never let on to us who he was, or the fame he had acquired. Such things were simply insignificant to him. He was just himself. ... Being fortunate enough to meet such a person has been a truly invaluable asset to me (Ohno; 2010a: 50).

While sampling data in the small categories for recurrent keywords or phrases employed by the respondents in relation to the Nativity Play, I also examined the various trends in impressions by members of the alumni association. Table 7 encapsulates the wide variety of answers and impressions provided by the respondents. For the kindergarten pupils and schoolchildren from the elementary, middle and high schools, as well as the alumni, the annual Nativity Play centred round the Christmas mass. On seeing Ohno perform in the Nativity Play those kindergarten and elementary school pupils, who proceeded to the next stage of their education at Soshin High School, reportedly "instantly recognised him as the dancer teacher who played Santa Claus back in elementary school" (10). Even though as children they were unable to understand the language of the gospels or the lyrics in the Christmas carols, they could somehow get a feel for what they were about through their first-hand experience of watching Ohno's unique and

marvellous movements. As they grew older, the audience sympathised more with Ohno, who performed with all his physical and spiritual strength.

Table 7 Characteristics of Kazuo Ohno's Nativity Play

| <u>Smaller Category:</u> | <u>Keywords and Phrases</u>                                   |
|--------------------------|---|
| 1. Church:               | A true believer in God; Congregation member                   |
| 2. Nativity Play:        | Manifestation of faith - Centred on Christmas                 |
| 3. Lifestyle:            | Celebrate his faith in body and spirit                        |
| 4. Interpretation:       | Passionately spoken; Devoted, Resonant                        |
| 5. Feelings:             | The Body naturally adapts itself                              |
| 6. Form:                 | Would not allow Imitation - No two Years alike                |
| 7. Rehearsals:           | End up by merely talking                                      |
| 8. Together on stage:    | Being engrossed by Ohno's Presence                            |
| 9. Teacher:              | Santa Claus; Shepherd; Virgin Mary; God                       |
| 10. Jesus:               | Saviour; <i>Yatsude</i> ; Symbolic                            |
| 11. Angels:              | One feels them in the Heart; Worship; Sublime                 |
| 12. Virgin Mary:         | Confusion; Obedience; Pure Faith                              |
| 13. Saint Joseph:        | Warm-hearted Gesture on welcoming the Virgin Mary             |
| 14. Tradition:           | Ohno was the wellspring; for future Generations               |
| 15. Wheelchair:          | An unbelievable way of standing up                            |
| 16. Song:                | <i>Ave Maria</i> ; Good Taste; Constantly searching for Music |
| 17. Costumes:            | Not pretty; Unique  |
| 18. Make-up:             | Grease paint in the latter Years                              |

"I recall an incident when *sensei* attended the pageant in his wheelchair. As the music began to play, despite being supposedly unable to stand on his own two feet, he raised his body as though being drawn up into the air. It was miraculous. *Sensei's* entire life was encapsulated in that dance, and I'm certain that something moved him to the very depths of his soul. My mission is to convey that which *sensei* so cherished, namely 'an expression from the soul' " (13).

"When playing the role of the Virgin Mary he instructed me to just naturally express my strong faith and obedience and doubts in relation to God, and that my movements should flow smoothly. The shepherds, the angels, Saint Joseph, all those characters are but the personification of those we pay homage to in our hearts. Prayer as such was the embodiment of *sensei's* faith. Some 60 years have passed in the meantime and the Nativity Play has become a tradition at Soshin. We must pass it on to future generations"(3).

This quarter of an hour long Nativity Play was for Ohno just as meaningful an event as any of his butoh performances. Even in terms of the creative process, it could be likened to his butoh creations in the manner in which he searched deeply for the images within himself. He would stress to those high school students acting in the play that they should individually contemplate how Judas - who betrayed Jesus - his apostle Peter, the Virgin Mary, Saint Joseph, the shepherds along with the others characters in the piece felt. One participant recalls Ohno's "passionate way of speaking with them and the fact of how happy we were to come in contact with this believer, who utterly devoted himself to celebrate the birth of Jesus"(5). When explaining the individual roles, Ohno became "completely engrossed in that role"(7). "How strange it was that that despite rehearsals often ending up with his merely talking on the subject, when it came to the actual performance everything passed off smoothly"(1). Respondents recall being told: "There's no predetermined form for worshipping god,"(6) or "if you try to honestly express what you feel, then your body will naturally adapt. I won't have it that you just copy me"(7). What he most sought in a performer was that their movements embodied their 'here and now', and were a spontaneous expression of their inner feelings. This approach is similar to the one he took in his butoh creations. As one of the alumni remarked: "I've attended the

Nativity Play for the last 50 years or so and I've never once seen him repeat himself " (1).

Whenever pupils played the Virgin Mary, the shepherds or the wise kings they were to experience their confusion and fears, hopes and joys as though their own, sharing in the believer Ohno's desire to jointly create a subliminally devout Nativity play. As for the music, costumes and props, Ohno had a singular approach. Below are several comments by the participants bearing witness to his uniqueness:

With regard to the music, "whenever he came on summer camp he brought along a big bag filled with cassette tapes, which he would listen to over and over at night with earphones. He chose to a wide variety, ranging from classical pieces to music the younger generation liked in order to search for suitable accompaniments for the Nativity play"(2). "He used a piece called *I Believe*. I think he chose that piece because it featured those lines from the Gospels, 'I Believe in the Lord' "(5).

As for their outfits, "the costumes for the Christmas play were lovely. *Sensei's* attire was unique though not so pretty. Each year he would bring along a huge cardboard box filled with costumes he used for butoh training"(1).



Photo 7: Cast for the Nativity Play with Ohno, 1940s.



Photo 8: Ohno in the role of the Virgin Mary and a Soshin High School student as an angel 1991.

And for the props: "Though he often used a baby doll he once went out and picked *yatsude* leaves in the schoolyard and used them as a prop. For Ohno, *yatsude*, also known as the Japanese Aralia, symbolized welcoming the infant Jesus. Nobody ever questioned why he used the leaves of this evergreen plant for that particular purpose. Somehow or other the students also naturally understood its significance. In later years, it was replaced by a bouquet of flowers"(1). (Photo 3: Ohno holding *yatsude* leaves in his arms.) Ohno was completely engrossed by the music, costumes and stage props. During class he didn't use any music at all but instead tapped out the rhythm on the snare drum, intermingled with his verbal instructions. When it came to performing onstage or the Nativity Play, he mainly used classical music. I suppose this was an easy device to draw the audience into his world. By looking at the photographs from the period, one supposes that Ohno's approach to movement, costumes and make-up until the 1960s was predominantly in the modern dance vein. Following his butoh solo debut performance in 1977, this tendency changed somewhat, and his movements and make-up owed a lot more to the influence of Butoh. One of the pupils who played the role of an angel in the 1990s commented: "For the Nativity play, *Sensei* used to make up his face with grease paint. One day he suddenly asked me: 'why don't you use some?' Whereupon he kindly offered me some of his"(13). Even after graduation she was chosen by Ohno to play the role of an angel at the annual class reunion and has done so continually ever since( Photo 8: Courtesy of Soshin School.)

"Whenever I asked him how I should move, he would just reply: ' You know it is the *Ave Maria* so all you need to do is to express what you are feeling inside.' We performed without any discussion whatsoever beforehand.

Watching *sensei* perform the Virgin Mary onstage, I felt a joy from his movements and performed the angel in such a fashion that I equally shared his joy with the entire audience. In the scene where I - as an angel - circled

*sensei* playing the Virgin Mary so as impart her joy; his manner of looking was at times so intense that I felt as though I was about to be drawn in. It was truly remarkable the way in which one was completely drawn into his world, and became oblivious to the presence of the audience. And how *sensei* could transmit such things that were invisible to the eye. What I learned above all from him was how to express one's feeling with every fibre of one's being, and not through language"(13).

Soshin School possess a rare audio-visual recording of a performance filmed on December 24th, 1991. Standing motionless, the angel gradually spreads her arms over 10-minutes in a scene of sublime beauty and emotional impact. With her angelic presence I felt as though I were witnessing a real angel. Had Ohno merely concentrated on choreographing the form, he would never have succeeded in creating such an atmosphere. The images in themselves are proof of this. One can only presume that she truly incarnated beauty, love and grace during that brief moment for Ohno - who was performing onstage with her that day- and the audience alike.

What Ohno sought in a performer playing the role of the angel goes well beyond technique. On being asked to define Butoh, Hijikata aptly replied: "Butoh is a dead body risking its life by planting its feet firmly in the ground." Ohno considered it "as beyond the bounds of technique." Saying that "our spirits are marked by the universe, our imagination arose from the cumulative experiences of our ancestors down through the ages,"(Ohno; 1997: 58) suggests if the pupil playing the angel freely uses her imagination then she will transform into an angel. She could, as such, illustrate the following passage from his book *Workshop Words*: "You're driven to the edge of collapse, so let go of yourself completely and surrender to the flow. (In doing so) you'll make it easier for life to reach out to you if those pleading hands and eyes embody your soul's longing. For all you know, as soon as life penetrates that universe embracing your eyes, it might even take

you by the hand and guide you towards the help you need" (Ohno; 1997: 61 / English translation: 221).

### 3-2-3-2 Playing Santa Claus

The children at the Kamihoshikawa Nursery School and Soshin's Kindergarten and Elementary School thoroughly enjoyed the annual Christmas celebrations. They were naturally overjoyed at Ohno's visit in the guise of Santa Claus on this magical occasion (Photo 9: Courtesy of past pupil of Soshin School.)

Many past pupils remember this eccentric 'old man.' The children were only later to learn that their Santa Claus was none other than a world-renowned *butoh* dancer. "*Sensei* would dance with all his heart and soul, and move about the classroom as he distributed the Christmas presents to the children. Some of them were so terrified by his appearance that they started to cry "(12).

"I was 4 years old as Santa came to the kindergarten. I felt as though he were a gift from the gods"(6). "My daughters also met Santa at the kindergarten and came home in a state of amazement"(3). "At the elementary school, *sensei* wore a red costume and a thin mask, and his movements were *butoh*-like"(10). "He didn't put on any *shiro-nuri* (white make-up) but he did improvise"(12). I was astonished, for at times he staggered about"(11).



Photo 9: Ohno in the guise of Santa Claus visiting the Kamihoshikawa Nursery School, 1960s

Though his wife Chie advised him, "you could well play Santa without having to use make-up or wear a mask," Ohno nonetheless stuck to his own devices, and at a later stage when he became wheelchair bound he reportedly would gladly attend the Christmas celebrations at the nursery school close to his home in Kamihoshikawa.

In interviews with the author, the children keenly remarked how "Santa is not well," or " he can't come any longer because his illness has become more serious." In 2010, the year in which Kazuo Ohno passed away, his sons Yoshito and Yukito visited the Kamihoshikawa Nursery School that Christmas, playing the Santa twins. In an interview with the author Yoshito commented: " On playing Santa myself, I realised that all children are equally delightful. That is why my father continued carrying on with this yearly tradition until the very end (Takahashi; 2011: 11).

The Ohno family home in Kamihoshikawa is situated midway up a hill, to which there is no access for a motor vehicle. So whenever Ohno left the house in his wheelchair in his later years he had to be assisted up or down steps. During the seventy years he visited the Soshin Kindergarten, Elementary and Girl's Schools and to the local Kamihoshikawa Nursery School in the role of Santa Claus his assistants were invariably at his side to help him. Collectively, their unflinching love, self-sacrifice and sense of duty made it possible for Ohno to assume this role year in year out.

### 3-2-3-3 Kazuo Ohno: A True Believer

Until this point, the focus has been on Ohno's dance instruction at the school and its annual Christmas Nativity play. I would like now to examine with the help of interviews with staff at Soshin how Kazuo Ohno, the world famous figure so loved by his colleagues and pupils alike, was perceived.

While employed at the school, whether as a member of the teaching staff or as a caretaker, Ohno continued in parallel with his dance activities, during



both his modern dance and butoh phases. The dancer Fumie Kanai recalls: "Given that Ohno no longer would have a rehearsal space, he asked the school principal to keep him on the staff, even as the caretaker" (Kanai; 10). Pointing at a photograph of Ohno in his younger years, the current Social Studies teacher remarked: "The students were utterly taken aback at the sight of someone who they until the previous day had regarded as a member of the teaching staff down on all fours eagerly trying to clean the school yard. From his early years at the school, everybody was accustomed to seeing him running round frantically, eager to get things done. His face, his presence was truly magnificent. He was a pure embodiment of spirit"(8).

In that photograph of Ohno in his younger years she showed me, one does indeed detect a Buddha-like depth of compassion (Photo 1: Ohno in the 1940s, courtesy of Soshin). Another graduate claimed: "I was acquainted with that 70 year-old teacher with strong will power and determination who claimed that 'to sustain my body, as a dancer I never eat my fill' " (7).

It was only after quitting his post as a part-time employee at the school at the age of 74, that Ohno committed himself totally to dance. One graduate, who has been involved with dance for more than 60 years since the formation of the initial dance group recalls: "There was nothing unusual about his butoh dance. I've watched him dance from childhood so I took to it naturally. I'm sure that even while picking weeds in the school yard he was also working out ideas in his head about his dance, and the fruits of what he sought from life are manifest in his performances"(3).

Moved to tears during the interview, a kindergarten teacher remembers seeing Ohno onstage: "As he stood centre stage, I was taken by how he unexpectedly stretched out his arms, by the size of his hands, and the sheer force of his presence. Seeing him there I was almost convinced that god had given him that body so that he could perform butoh, so that he could dance. *Sensei* had powerful stage presence"(6). Over many long years, the graduate

students have closely followed Ohno's life-story and career. Many of them have faithfully attended his modern dance and butoh performances throughout his long career. And as Ohno dances before their eyes, they behold his love and life itself unfolding. One graduate proclaimed: "He is the pride of Soshin" (3). Another commented: "We are grateful to *sensei* for having taught us to observe and listen with our hearts, and how to express ourselves physically and mentally from the depths of our being" (13). Another respondent from Soshin closely connected with Ohno throughout his many long years of service warmly remarked upon how he "thoroughly personified the ideal of service to others with modesty. The essence of Ohno's Butoh consists of the noble embodiment of the profound love arising from faith. This is what has moved the souls of so many people around the world watching Ohno perform. More so than in Japan, international audiences - often steeped in the Christian tradition - embraced him because they intuitively grasped that his butoh performances were imbued with deep faith. Without such an understanding, one would never clearly grasp what *sensei* was about"(3).

A graduate student, who also happened to be a co-parishioner at the church he attended, remembers the unforgettable impression he made: "I joined the church when I was a 3rd year student in Middle School. *Sensei's* customary place at service was two pews in front of me so I could observe how different he was to the figure I saw performing onstage. With rounded shoulders, and head bent, he took in the pastor's homily as though he were listening with his entire body. This was Kazuo Ohno, the true believer, following devotedly in God's footsteps. Thanks to *sensei* I was able to learn the essential attitude towards life"(6).

One respondent was a classmate of one of Ohno's grandchildren throughout their school years, and so together with family members he would often visit and stay overnight at the Ohno homestead. His comments reveal an unknown

facet of Ohno's personality: "At a time when it was almost a taboo for a Japanese man to set foot inside the kitchen, the tomato hamburgers that *sensei* cooked were unforgettable. My tummy was easily upset, so whenever this occurred *sensei* gently rubbed my stomach as though he were writing the hiragana syllable *no* until I would eventually fall asleep. Once when the elementary school was closed for the holidays, I heard the shrieks coming from the hencoop. Hurrying over there, I found *sensei* working on his dance. I've seen *sensei* perform in public many times, but the best of all was when he danced at his grandchild's wedding ceremony, performing for the young couple - who thanks to divine guidance met each other - a dance brimming with hope, conferring his blessing upon the newly weds and their future offspring for a promising future together "(12).

With his humility, overflowing love and true sense of duty to his community Kazuo Ohno - whether as a member of the teaching staff, a dancer or a follower imbued with faith - was from an early age onwards able to connect directly with everyone he encountered: with his students, his pupils, with children and adult audiences alike. And even as he went on to become a world-renowned performer, this sense of devotion did not alter in the slightest: he continued evolving, extracting potential from himself and from children, invariably expressing the universal themes of human destiny, life and death. In July 2010 a small exhibition with photographs and memorabilia in memory of Kazuo Ohno was held at the Soshin Girl's School library. Many students visited it on a daily basis. The librarian in charge of the project remarked: "Though those of us visiting the exhibition will not have another opportunity to meet Ohno in person again, his soul will remain eternally here in this Girl's School built upon the side of the hill. I've the impression that he will live forever in our midst. "

#### 4 Conclusion.

To summarise, it is clear that for more than half a century Kazuo Ohno, whether through his dance lessons or his involvement with the Nativity Play at the Soshin Baptist Girl's School, enabled his pupils to confront themselves by means of his in-depth verbal probing - and not by imposing form - leading the way towards an improvised or free form of expression elicited from their inner lives. For him, it was essential to ponder the images flowing through their minds, allowing them to assume form through movement. In class, he would often personally introduce themes close to his heart such as motherhood, life and death. For Ohno considered the classroom, the stage and life itself as one and the same. In his role as educator or public performer Ohno, thanks to his innate humility throughout his life, his overflowing love and sense of duty towards others, underpinned by his faith, connected directly with most people, with his pupils, his dance students. This attitude did not change in the slightest even when he became a world famous dancer; he continued extracting all that was humanly possible, constantly giving expression to the universal themes of life and death. Whether as a teacher or a performer, Ohno's fundamental stance on life manifests itself in his dance and offers a wellspring for future dance instruction.

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