

***Tradition and Innovation: Dance Hakushu 2005. August twelfth through twenty-first, Body Weather Farm, Yamanashi, Japan.***

Zack Fuller

For the past seventeen years the town of Hakushu (recently re-named Hokuto-shi), a small farming village two hours west of Tokyo, has hosted a festival of avant-garde and traditional performing arts. The Dance Hakushu festival is based at Body Weather Farm, a working organic farm founded by dancer/choreographer Tanaka Min in 1985, and now run by some of the members of his group Tokason. This year's festival featured traditional performance from India, Bali and Japan, as well as original group work by Tokason and Gekidan Kaitaisha (Theatre of Deconstruction). One of the most unusual aspects of the festival is the program of site-specific solo performances that take place each day under any weather conditions. Here, dancers are encouraged to challenge themselves through encounters with a variety of natural and constructed environments. Other festival activities this year included workshops in farming, architecture, film, 'body,' gamelan, kutyatam, and washi papermaking. There is also a children's camp. Ticket prices are kept low (¥ 8,000 for a through pass for the entire period), a fact made possible by the presence of an incredibly hardworking volunteer staff who provide technical support, food preparation, and take on the various odd jobs that arise during the course of the festival.



Tanaka Min in front of Body Weather Farm house. (All photos by Zack Fuller).



Tanaka Min in front of Body Weather Farm house.

The various activities that constitute Dance Hakushu intersect with and influence each other in a variety of ways. The stage that the Natana Kairaili kutyatam troupe from South India performed their excerpt from Kalidasa's Sanskrit play Sakuntala on was built by members of last summer's architecture workshop (an additional floor section was added this summer). This stage, called Nakayama Maido Stage in honour of the local carpenter who directed its construction, is an original design using traditional techniques of joined carpentry and pounded red clay. The relation of tradition and invention and the mutual influence of traditional and avant-garde activity is a central concern of the festival's curators, Kobata Kazue, Tanaka Min, and Tomo Saito:

Vibrant, not frozen, traditions of art for ancestors, the divine, and communal rapport from India, Bali and Esashi come here and join the mountains, rivers, plants and humans of Hakushu this summer. Memories of different places will meet. Arts and expressions with no names as yet will join their timeless art. We want to live together even a fleeting moment longer with a dancing spirit of making, acting, and being genuine. (Dance Hakushu 2005 program)

The traditional arts represented at Dance Hakushu are not those that are most frequently exported to Europe and the United States. The traditional Japanese forms of the shi shi odori (deer dance) and the taishu engeki (a vaudeville type entertainment) that closed the festival are rarely seen outside of Japan.



*Shi shi odori* on the Red Earth Stage (designed by Suzuki Keishi)

The emphasis on the traditional arts represented here as being 'vibrant, not frozen,' recalls Hijikata Tatsumi's rejection of the traditional performing arts of noh and kabuki in their fixed, institutionalised forms, while taking inspiration from elements of premodern Japanese culture.



Left: Kunie Toru at Koma Shrine. Right: Sugita Josaku in front of the chicken house.

The desire to resist the fixing or commodification of traditional forms is shared by several of the traditional artists who presented their work at Dance Hakushu this year. Dewa Putu Berata, director of the Cudamani gamelan group said in a speech before their performance that he was unhappy with the way that tourism in Bali had effected traditional arts, and that his use of the semara dana gamelan was in part a reaction to this. This type of gamelan uses seven tones, allowing the group to play in modes derived from older styles than the more usual five-tone gamelan. Gopal Venu, director of the Natana Kairaili Kutyatam troupe, emphasised that while kutyatam is the oldest form of Indian theatre, their performance did include some modern elements (though for someone not familiar with kutyatam, it would be very difficult to say what those modern elements were).



Left: Earth House (permanent installation by Higuchi Hiroyasu). Right: Uemura Naoko in the Earth House

Though the evening performances often attract larger audiences, the core of the festival continues to be the site-specific work that takes place at various found and constructed spaces during the day. It was these dances that were analysed in the morning 'dance talks,' where each day a different critic or scholar discussed the previous day's performances. A wide variety of non-traditional Japanese dancers showed their work, from veterans of the Japanese avant-garde such as Takeuchi Yasuhiko, and Sugita Josaku, to emerging artists like Kunie Toru and Sanari Tetsuo. Dancers from the Netherlands, Former Soviet Union, Java, Czech Republic and the United States performed as well. Each day of the festival three solo dances took place at the same location. The nature of the spaces varied widely: an open field, a bamboo grove, a chicken coop, a pool of water. Most of these pieces were more or less improvised and lasted between half an hour and forty-five minutes. Most of the dancers chose not to use music. The non-structured or semi-structured nature of the work presented here is necessitated to some degree by the nature of the spaces themselves: from my own experience I can attest that not much rehearsal is possible if one is dancing in the entranceway of a working farmhouse. Rather than being a liability, the lack of rehearsal time can help to create a useful tension. The necessity for improvisation encourages a dynamic relationship between the space and dancer's body. If fixed choreography, other dancers, and music are eliminated; the space is the only partner one has left.

In some of the more mutable locations, space functioned as a very active partner. A large piece of bamboo collapsed under the weight of Nakao Ikemiya as he apparently tried to climb to its top. When Sugita Josaku began dancing with a large bamboo pole at the chicken house, the chickens demonstrated a strong vocal and physical reaction, as they did at various points

during each of the performances that day. Shirai Tsuyoshi's dance in front of Koma Shrine combined simple, repetitive actions with an acrobatic virtuosity. Kunie Toru's dance at the same space showed a deeply restrained body focus. In Uemura Naoko's performance in the Earth House (a permanent art installation by Higuchi Hiroyasu) her classical dance training was evident at times, but her quiet presence never seemed to dominate the small space, which is essentially a square hole in the earth. Anastasia Smirnitskaya began crawling down a forest slope like some feral creature, and ended by draping her self elegantly in a large plastic net used to protect young crops from insects. Yasumoto Masako wore bunny ears and a blue plastic raincoat, which she gradually stripped off during her quirky dance at the Water Stage (a permanent art installation by Haraguchi Noriyuki).



Left: Nakao Ikemiya in the bamboo forest. Right: Anastasia Smirnitskaya in forest.

Tamai Yasunari's performance around and inside a rice field was consistently surprising. Wearing rubber rain gear and brandishing a kuwa (a farming tool similar to a hoe), his dance displayed a range of unpredictable variations of rhythm and body position, subtle variations of pedestrian movement, shifting our consciousness in surprising ways. Tamai is one of the original members of Body Weather Farm, a Tokason member, and has been a farmer for twenty years.



Tamai Yasunari in rice field.

In Tanaka Min's dance at the Body Weather Farm House, he appeared as a tragic-comic figure dressed in an old-fashioned Japanese carpenter's outfit. His face distorted by band-aids and his neck painted red as if his throat had been cut, he approached the audience shyly at first; then confronted them directly with his grotesque presence. Tanaka has performed literally thousands of improvised solo dances, and his approaches to dance and life are strong influences on many of the dancers who appear at the festival.

The evening performances took place on one of three permanent stages: Forest Stage, Nakayama Maido Stage, and the new Red Earth Stage. These spaces have the capacity to use sound and lighting equipment, yet are still open to their surroundings. Both Nakayama Maido and the Red Earth Stage are original architectural designs constructed using traditional Japanese techniques. The presence of the trees at Forest Stage is very strong. Gekidan Kaitaisha appeared to ignore this completely. In their theatre piece *Fushi no Virus* (The Virus of <Deathlessness>) the staging, lighting and sound were clearly better suited to an indoor theatre. The group's didactic political statements were presumably another cause of the audience's very cool reception of this performance. One audience member remarked after the show 'everybody knows these things.'



Red Earth Stage with Nakayama Maido Stage in Background.



Water Stage (permanent installation by Haraguchi Noriyuki).

One of the highlights of the festival was certainly Tokason's Juryoku to Yukai (Gravity and Gaiety), directed by Tanaka Min. The style of the piece was very restrained, and the dancers seemed to stretch the atmosphere between them. The costumes were a mixture of military

gear and rather old fashioned Western-style clothing, evoking a setting of family life in the years following World War Two. Within that setting, the use of intensely focused, ambivalent actions worked to provoke the imagination without attempting to dictate what it was that the observer should be imagining.



Left: Tokason performance: Ishihara Shiho and Kikushima Nobuyaki in *Juryoku to Yukai* (*Gravity and Gaiety*). Right: Tanaka Min and Hidekazu Natsui.

A man in a military hat walked slowly around and around a pole, a young woman dropped a large fish onto the earth, two men faced each other, slowly changing their height. There were several very playful sections, and at the end the dancers played a game of jump rope. Watching this piece, one could imagine many different stories, many different images, especially in its most static moments.



Left & Right: Yasumoto Masako on Water Stage.

Members of Tokason are responsible for most of the lighting and set construction for the

evening performances. During the festival, after working all day, they would begin rehearsal at 11 p.m., and then get up at 5:30 the next morning to do farming work. While the festival continues yearly at Body Weather Farm, Tanaka now bases most of his activities in Homura, a small village in the mountains. Projects there include tea farming, charcoal making, and the building of a video library focusing on dance and folk culture from around the world. Tokason members engage in daily farming work, which constitutes their primary training for dance. They perform throughout the year in various parts of Japan. This rigorous lifestyle clearly effects the dancer's bodies and their consciousnesses and by extension their practice of dance. It also allows them access to a wealth of space and material impossible in an urban environment. This space and these materials are shared with the performers, staff, and audience of Dance Hakushu.

Zack Fuller is in the doctoral program in theatre at CUNY Graduate Center. His academic interests include cross-cultural east/west performance and medieval European theatre.