

## REVIEW

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DANZA December-November 2006

**“Clarity is Only a Point before the Eyes.”**  
**Running Along the “Edge” of Expression**

**Rumika Nishida (Dance Critic)**

Ohashi’s current work sparks profound emotions on a couple of levels – the first, from an ongoing view on Japanese contemporary dance; the second, from the perspective of Ohashi’s repertoire.

We live in a present that appears to have exhausted its various avenues of expression, an era in which it has become difficult to locate the “edge” of expression and figure just what it might be. As the domain of the taboo shrinks, deciphering what might be forbidden becomes ever more difficult. And claims that taboos are now out in the open would seem to judge the task one of little value nowadays.

Ohashi is one of the few auteurs who continues to experiment with the search for the “edge.” A lingering sense of suffocation and of impotence has plagued Japanese society throughout the lengthy economic recession that has followed a boom now decades gone. While a plethora of pop and kitsch art seems to signal a flight from this reality, Ohashi elects to burrow into the sense of stagnation, rooting around to locate the origins of our malaise and why we must dwell in it.

While there is continuity between the current work and earlier ones, it also has the makings of a shift to a new phase. Through its strength of expression, which projects a fluctuation along the border of reality and the imaginary; through its strength in composition, which ties together a variety of scenes; even more unambiguously than in its precedents, each and every expression works as though to generate a magnetic field that bonds together the whole and strengthens its impact. Furthermore, a world is molded in the admixture of two groupings (of dancers) to reveal a symmetrical dance between calm and motion. One grouping pairs the unquenched desire – tempestuous, raw – of Yukari Kakiuchi and Megumi Kamimura with Natsuko Furutachi’s serene dance, which is replete with an inner fortitude. An impulse first revealed in the delicate movements of Yukari Kakiuchi’s finger comes to convulse morbidly, until in an agony of self-immolation the urge pops during a mad dash through the theater. Live video images from a camera trained on the pair are projected in real-time; against this backdrop comes the placid dance of Natsuko Furutachi, ticking the moments as precisely as the turning of a clock’s hands. The second grouping is made up of Miu Miu and Masazumi Minaki Both embrace an introverted violence, neurotic; but where Masazumi Minaki suppresses its expression, imploding, Miu Miu release it outward.

Implicit in Ohashi’s endeavors to find the “edge” is a gaze fixed upon Japanese society’s roar and ruin. Deep within its eyes is an anger and sadness that knows not where to train the gaze. It looks not merely to find an expression of the “edge.” The strength of this work is born of the gaze it rivets upon (human) weakness. Might irony be at work here?

Observation date: August 27, 2006

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### “Journey Beyond the Clarity” The Dance of the Child-Body

*Katachi wo Koete (Beyond Form)*  
*Japanese Contemporary Dance in the Heart of Bologna*  
*Piazza Maggiore, Bologna*  
*7 September, 2006*

**Bruce Michelson**

Whether or not the dance of the child-body is really a unified movement, or may become one in the future, is an open question. But something certainly is cooking in Japanese contemporary dance.

*Katachi wo Koete (Beyond Form)* is the title of a programme of new works by five contemporary Japanese choreographers, brought to Italy by dance curator Massimo Carosi and his Bologna-based Danza Urbana team, together with 4th Skin Arts Network, Tokyo. Introducing different strands of Japanese new-wave dance culture, including proponents of the child-body, the performance opened a six-city tour in the heart of central Bologna, at the historic fountain of Neptune in Piazza Maggiore.

According to dance writer and composer Keisuke Sakurai, the child-body movement was hatched in 2000, offspring of a theoretical debate about what constitutes essential movement. While it echoes one of the central questions posed by the Judson church movement in the 1960's – what is dance? – the dance of the child-body proposes some quite different answers. Much of dance in general has become highly conscientious – so the argument goes. We are governed, and also limited, by the perceptions of the adult body. But the adult body has fears, principally the loss of control and falling. For the adult, falling is perceived as an accident that should not happen. Even for the trained dancer, falling is usually done quite carefully, thus never completely free of fear. Choreography implies a certain control over body, but the inability to distance ourselves from the adult body and its fears results in a curtailment movement freedom and spontaneity. For the child, however, falling is not connected to fear, and the concept of control is only just developing. So the dance of the child-body uses the condition of childhood to address these limitations. One of its aims is to abandon the idea of perfect control over the (adult) body. It is often characterised by strange, isolated movements which indicate a loss of conscious control - “the use of ordinary movements in inappropriate ways”, according to Sakurai - and above all, by plenty of falling.

Kakuya Ohashi – Opposing Instincts & The Contemporary Conundrum

Kakuya Ohashi immediately exposes a dilemma of opposing instincts in his newly commissioned duet, *Journey Beyond Clarity*, which explores “the impossibility of communication”. It begins with the unleashing of an earth-shattering, full body scream by a girl, Kiyomi Sakazume. Her contemporary distress is uncontrollable and convoluted – almost painful to watch. But it is also, strangely, quite beautiful. We are invited to examine the contradictory aesthetics of vulnerability, to acknowledge both the horror and sensuality encapsulated within this woman's personal despair. Her partner Masazumi Minaki doesn't seem to notice any of this, or doesn't care enough to react, as he paces through the faceless crowds. He too seeks release from conformity and isolation, but his torment is much too stifled to escape. Body parts are pulled taut, fingers bite into highly tense flesh; society's paradoxes are disturbing and

overwhelming. The desire for release leads them both into a sort of Friday night delirium. But even together, they remain disturbingly separate. All that they share is estrangement...

In order to better understand the context in which contemporary Japanese arts culture plays out, we have to acknowledge one particularly complex duality - the often opposing social factors of conformity and alienation, and their lost sisters, estrangement and isolation. The forces that drive conformity to societal norms are extremely compelling in Japan, and the resulting counter-reactions have become forceful motives, particularly relevant in an artistic context.

These can take several forms. First, there is general alienation, a reactionary position characterised by a will to detach from tradition and its associated restraints, and by a feeling of social isolation within a world full of social formalities and groupthink mentality. But without the cultural and social tools to give back-up support for the ensuing internal battles, these can easily end up in another, even deeper form of alienation - a very personal estrangement from both self and others. The desire for escape - as a reaction against conformity and alienation - combined with an inability to do so can lead (also in the West) to compulsive cultural phenomenas, like the ecstasy of rave culture or the loss of self within a cyber-world of high technology. It can even lead to violent, even self-destructive tendencies. And it can also give birth to an artistic confrontation with the paradoxical nature of society.

Interestingly, after all this drama and trauma, Ohashi does propose a way out of the contemporary conundrum. It is a return to innocence, to the instinctive joys of childhood and the cultivation of a more innocent self. Is this the dance of the child-body? Ohashi's contrary, or oppositional, proposal may indeed represent a solution of macro proportions. The body-mind is no longer dictated by the (lesser) duality of conformity and alienation. It has found a way out.

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The New York Times January 20, 2006

“Wish You Were Here”

### The Enigmas, the Oddities: What to Make of Dance From Japan

John Rockwell

Modern dance from Japan is much among us these days, ubiquitous and mysterious. One can try to understand it historically: how various more or less Western, more or less tradition-based dancers first made their marks in Europe in the 1920's; how German modern dance (for various not entirely savory reasons) was a big influence in the 20's and 30's; how Butoh, so clearly reflecting postwar and postnuclear trauma, has permeated the world; how American modern and postmodern dance have been the biggest outside influences in recent decades; and how the Japan Society in particular has served as an invaluable showcase for new Japanese dance in New York.

Or one can tiptoe into cultural stereotypes. The Japanese have always had an extraordinary ability to adapt foreign ideas and make them their own. They began with China 1,000 years ago and continued with the West after 1853. But through it all, something specifically Japanese remained.

For me, Japan is the most seductively alien of all foreign high cultures. There is something about its mixture of samurai masculinity and geisha docility, about the Ginza and punks and neon lights, about the controlled violence of Yukio Mishima's novels and the controlled Impressionism of Toru Takemitsu's music.

But that's a dangerous path to tread. Images of the German character propagated in holdovers from World War II propaganda argued that something buried deep in the German soul led inexorably to Nazism. Never mind that this was a classic case of working backward along the causational chain, and that maybe Hitler was not the only possible destiny of German history and culture.

Similar stereotypes abounded in anti-Japanese propaganda: the "Chrysanthemum and the Sword" syndrome, one might call it, to cite a book by Ruth Benedict (1946) that argued for an inherent tension between aesthetics and bellicosity in the Japanese character. In San Francisco in the late 1940's, there were still lingering fears of Japanese attacks and lingering hostilities based on cartoon Japanese distortions.

But maybe the best way to approach Japanese dance is neither historically nor stereotypically, but experientially. There are plenty of opportunities to see new Japanese dance now and to come to one's own conclusions as to what it all means.

Tonight and tomorrow, for instance, the Japan Society is presenting its ninth annual Japanese Contemporary Dance Showcase, with three United States debuts and two premieres. Not having yet seen these particular dancers, I can't speak to their quality. But I can recall and describe the varied Japanese dance I encountered last year. Almost all of it was engrossing.

Perhaps the two examples most striking in their Japaneseness were the Project Fukurow, seen last summer at Jacob's Pillow, and Kakuya Ohashi and Dancers at the Kitchen in September. Project Fukurow was notable for its diabolical puppets and machines, especially three miniature radio-controlled robots with monster jaws, tanklike bodies and wriggling, scythelike centipede legs. Designed by Fukurow Ishikawa, the company's director, these were ostensibly benign - or "not evil," as he called them. They looked evil to me, and the whole scenario of a protagonist helplessly under siege from the dark side of his own subconscious was pretty scary.

Mr. Ohashi's "dancers" consisted of himself and a bedraggled young woman named MiuMiu; live electric guitar sounds were provided by a young man named Skank. Supposedly reflecting the alienation of Tokyo today, their piece evoked anomie, isolation, the humiliation of women, the fixations of men. It was strange, off-putting and compelling.

Mr. Ohashi appeared on a double bill with the American choreographer Beth Gill; the program was organized by Yasuko Yokoshi, who seems a prime example of the lure of postmodernism and New York for Japanese choreographers today. Ms. Yokoshi will have her own program March 23 to 26 at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church.

(snip)

By now there are Japanese ballet dancers and Japanese tap dancers and Japanese ballroom dancers (see the original and superior 1996 Japanese version of the film "Shall We Dance?"). Perhaps there soon won't be, or there already isn't, a viable category of "Japanese dance" that can be described and categorized; perhaps all that will be left will be globalized individuals.

But as long as Japan retains its unique character, its potent blend of tradition and cutting-edge modernity, its natural beauty and urban flash, its isolation and guarded openness to the world, its computer games and manga and anime and woodcuts and meditational rock gardens, there will always be something recognizable as Japanese dance. And we'll all be better for it.

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The Brooklyn Rail November, 2005

### “Wish You Were Here” Dance and the Urban Experience

Emily LaRocque

Surface differences aside, Brooklyn-based Beth Gill’s “wounded giant” and Tokyo-based Kakuya Ohashi’s “Wish You Were Here,” presented together recently at the Kitchen, have more in common than a spare aesthetic and a detached air. Even though, as curator Yasuko Yokoshi remarked, “Kakuya’s approach is more psychological and Beth’s is more about physical space,” both dances respond to the perils and nature of urban existence.

(snip)

“The two dances use such dramatically different frames,” Gill remarked after watching them both together. “They had such a different relationship to the space. I found it really beautiful as a viewer to be able to watch the space transform like that in one evening.”

Though “Wish You Were Here” is also a minimalist dance dealing with, as Ohashi says “the alienation of urban life,” it looks quite different from “wounded giant,” which uses the entire space and even has dancers pressed up against the back wall. Excepting entrances and exits, “Wish You Were Here” is restricted to a small rectangle in the center of the space. Skank, a Tokyo-based DJ, directs the sound from a corner with the help of a lot of equipment and an electric guitar.

Relentlessly, intentionally unpleasant, “Wish You Were Here” is a dark, dramatic dance in which two people operate independently but within close range. As Ohashi explained of his own performance and that of Miu Miu, the female dancer in the piece, “He experiences things from the outside in. His face reacts to external happenings. She experiences things from the inside out, expressing her feeling through her body.”

City life involves rapid alternation between viewing and an awareness of being viewed. Sometimes a single moment can be ambiguous. All the writhing and individual struggle in “Wish You Were Here” also suggests the discomfort of living in close proximity to people involved in very different narratives.

The dance is ripe with implied violence. The range of expressions on Ohashi’s face, his position seated and facing us, his suit and the grinding sound design imply a subway setting. Ohashi may intend to reference the 1995 sarin gas attack in the Tokyo subway system; regardless, there is an impression of something very bad happening beneath the work’s surface of recognizable activity. When Ohashi drops onto the floor and crawls under his seat as if hiding from something, then runs in place with the chair stuck around his torso (first fearfully and then triumphantly), one wonders what he is escaping from. Miu Miu is left bent over and sobbing at the end. “I am not interested in abuse specifically,” Ohashi remarked, “but in violence generally.”

For Yokoshi, “Wish You Were Here” captures the “essence of Tokyo.”

“Both dances are minimal, dramatic and sensitive,” the curator remarked. “Though I don’t think they consciously try to be urban, for me there is an intense presence of isolation and communication, which I somehow associate with the urban.”

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The New York Times October 1, 2005

### “Wish You Were Here” Japanese and American Impressions of Isolation

John Rockwell

The two short halves - 20 minutes and 25 minutes - of the dance program Thursday night at the Kitchen, repeated last night, made for a curiously harmonious pairing. Despite the cultural gulf between the Butoh-inspired Japanese duo before the intermission and the workaday natural movement of the American septet afterwards, they conveyed a similar mood of Minimalist isolation and anomie.

Put together, or "curated," by the choreographer Yasuko Yokoshi, the evening offered Kakuya Ohashi and Dancers in the first half and a piece "constructed and directed by Beth Gill in collaboration with the performers" in the second.

"And dancers" meant, in this case, Mr. Ohashi and a woman named MiuMiu. His "Wish You Were Here" was a study in parallel detachment. She trudged on in her underpants and a T-shirt, stared at the back black-brick wall for a while, drank some water and ate a rice cake wrapped in seaweed, spat out the mess onto the floor and then spent the rest of the time contorted in splayed positions. At the end she cried/laughed and then trudged off.

Mr. Ohashi came on shortly after her entrance in stylish black pants and a black shirt and sat impassively in a folding chair, staring straight ahead. Gradually he began grimacing, then slid off the chair, then stood up with the now-folded chair over his shoulder, then ran in place, grimly smiling and mouthing words.

After she walked off, so did he. Neither acknowledged the other's presence at any time. All this supposedly reflected the aura of contemporary Tokyo, Ms. Yokoshi wrote in the program, and was accompanied by live electronic sound by a musician who calls himself Skank.

Ms. Gill's "wounded giant," in which she herself did not dance, offered seven men and women walking about glumly. The first one out, a woman toting an electric fan, proceeded to a side brick wall and stared at it for a while. The stage was gradually divided into sections by blue and white extension cords. Dancers walked about, slumped on the floor, lay there. Once a man lifted a woman, but the movement looked utilitarian, and everything else was floor-bound. There was soft steady-state sound from Chris Peck.

Mr. Ohashi's piece had a little more incident, more overt contrast between the two dancers. But Ms. Gill's purposeful blankness was at least conceptually intriguing, too, implying tension without really conveying it. Neither the Japanese nor the Americans appeared for a curtain call, and the audience filed



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DANCE MAGAZINE October 2004

### “Wish You Were Here” in Toyota Choreography Award 2004 : NEXTAGE What is Choreography?

Kazuko Kuniyoshi

Participants:

Jul/3/2004 Masako Yasumoto, Miwako Takano ( Audience Prize), Mikuni Yanaihara, Yuko Kaseki

Jul/4/2004 Kakuya Ohahi, Mika Arashiki/Mari Fukutome, Yashushi Jyoraku (Audience Prize),

Shoko Higashino (NEXTAGE Prize)

Venue: Theatre Tram, Tokyo

It is three years after this award was established for NEXTAGE, choreographers for next generation. This year 191 applied from home and abroad, and tickets were completely sold out. It means this award has become completely recognized as one of every summer topic of contemporary dance scene. A million yen as a prize and a million yen for overseas performance fund are awarded the winner.

As usual, 8 nominees who passed the first screening entered the second final. Same as last year, judges were Ushio Amagatsu (the chairman), Kuniyoshi, Val Bourne (Dance Umbrella, UK) and David Shinegold (DTW:Dance Theater Workshop, US).

Through 8 performances, I came to realize one simple question: “what is choreography?” My standard of judgement was to find new talent who overrules stereotype of accomplished choreography. Therefore I did not value technically sophisticated compositions, ability to compose the theme harmoniously and choreography which depict image by movement. After unexpectedly long discussions, Shoko Higashino’s “ALARM!” won the award of this year.

This result was totally different from my valuation basis. However, let me write about some choreographers I highly thought of as a critic, not as a producer.

In the first day, Mikuni Yanaihara was remarkably striking. Then next day, Kakuya Ohashi’s “Wish You Were Here” could drive the audience out of their senses. Powerful noise (by Skank) and strobe flashes emphasized the convulsive body of the woman performer. Under the furious circumstances, Ohashi’s dauntless quiet body shockingly appeared from the inside of himself. Furthermore, Ohashi showed two simple and clear movement in such insane situation. It was so powerful that it could burn into my eyes, and absolutely unforgettable piece. Being totally astonished by Ohashi’s innovative choreography, I reached one conclusion; choreography is to show the way of understanding human body, and to notify the process or composition accurately. In my opinion, Ohashi deserved the choreography prize the most of all. Trough the 2 days, both Yanaihara and Ohashi were the lowest in rank, however. What did the audience see there? Japanese contemporary dance has been striving to encourage dancers, nevertheless, audience do not seem to have been fostered.

We should stop making a map which enables us to overlook the current contemporary dance scene lining up varied choreographers any more in the first screening. From now on, we ought to select several teams from the highest level.

The first screening must provide the front for the choreographers to elect talent in the future. And we also reconsider a measure in case choreography has to be changed because of the contents of videotapes and restriction of theater do not fit (like Kaseki’s piece). Thus, in this year’s Award, some problems came up.

If it is the step for productive discussion, the purpose of this Award will be achieved.

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THEATERARTS Summer 2004

### “Wish You Were Here” What Asymmetry of Gender Creates

Tatsuro Ishii

Because sex has been treated as obscurity, various taboo issued between concealment and exposure in our culture. Meanwhile, diverse eroticism also had been expanded. However, such taboo and eroticism had completely collapsed in 1970's ~ 1980's. There were many icons involving. Punk movement started by Iggy Pop became a cultural phenomenon by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood. Robert Mapplethorpe dealt with S&M, bondage and Gay hardcore sex. The magazine "Skin Two" introduced fetishism as a fashion. Cindy Sherman's photo works showed images of rape and abuse. A scandalous superstar Madonna collapsed sexual taboo through media. In late 80's, AIDS spread on a world scale, as if it were permeating the whole cultural event. In 1990's, the circumstances changed. The super-real delightful sex of Jeff Koons and Cicciolina seemed to have some kind of heterosexual "anti-AIDS" desire. However, they succeeded in voiding pornography, the big privilege in the dark-side by extending closet sexuality to life size.

Sex is no longer to be concealed and dirty matter. Love is sex itself. In this age, the progress of IT supplied simulation-sex. On the other hand, reproduction technology also thrived, such as genetic control, in-vitro fertilization, surrogate mothers, and sperm bank. In Japan, the first sex change operation was performed in the late 90's. Thus, even information, bodies, sex and reproduction was getting to be sold by pieces in fully-matured consumption society.

Under such circumstances, now, what do people want for dance? Although the answer must be in dance itself, the only one thing can be clear; what people want for dance is not drama or literature, but the expression only the dance as media can make. "Dance as media", it is the intensity existing in silent living body.

I came to see such intensity in Kakuya Ohashi's "Wish You Were Here"(Yokohama ST Spot, Jan 18 2004), a short performance for less than 20 minutes. Accidentally, I had just seen a performance of same title 6 days ago in Sphere Mex in Tokyo. This Sphere Mex version was partly characterized by its forming which was suggestive of "Nuhi-Kun" of Tenjo-Sajiki. However it seemed to have failed using the huge space and resulted in desultory.

ST Spot version was performed in less space. The dancers were only Ohashi and MiuMiu, and sound producer Skank constantly operated amplifiers at the left stage. Skank concentrated the sound machines. Ohashi and MiuMiu never exchanged looks, and had no body contact, as if they were different dimensions. That is, these three were totally disconnected at this performance.

MiuMiu appeared in indecorous lingerie, soon started cramming a rice ball and drinking some beverage. Ohashi wearing black impeccably looking forward just like MIUMIU was not there. Then, suddenly MiuMiu spewed up. It was the only "accidental moment" in this whole performance. After that, MiuMiu tensed and distorted her body, and then she started convulsing her bust violently. On the contrary Ohashi shows masturbative narcissism caressing himself on a chair. MiuMiu shivered harder, and she finally started thrashing about. Ohashi inserted his body under the chair, then he kept running movement with his arms opened. Eventually he exited, and MuMiu gave impressive guffaw.

Sadism and masochism, or a violater and a violatee. Thus, their relationship can be interpreted in many ways. Physical asymmetry of men and women has been treated in ballet and modern dance so far. However what Ohashi obsessed was the “gap” in such asymmetry. It arouses insecurity or shivers, and eternal darkness and eros live there. Skank’s noise sound greatly contributed the performance.