Butoh: a bibliography of Japanese avant-garde dance

Shea A. Taylor
Cohen Library, The City College of New York, New York, New York, USA

Abstract
Purpose -- This article’s aim is to provide an annotated bibliographic resource guide for scholars researching butoh and academic and research libraries with collection development areas specializing in modern dance and/or Asian studies. Butoh is a Japanese avant-garde dance form developed in 1959 as a reaction against Western influence in Japanese politics and culture. Butoh’s founders, Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, have created a dance movement that is growing in popularity in the USA, influencing psychology, fashion, music, art and architecture.

Design/methodology/approach -- Searches were performed using a variety of databases, catalogs and online sources in dance and videos were reviewed at the New York Public Library of Performing Arts.

Findings -- Unlike most modern dance forms, butoh does not have a specific technique that can be passed down from teacher to student, yet it has characteristics (e.g. extremely slow movements) that create the butoh "look". Butoh collections are fairly small, which will appeal to organizations with small budgets.

Originality/value -- No other scholarly, annotated bibliography currently exists for those interested in researching or collecting information on butoh.

Keywords Butoh, Dance, Performing arts, Japan, Bibliographies

Paper type Literature review

Introduction
In the past few decades a strange dance movement has been silently spreading across the USA. Butoh, a form of avant-garde dance originating in Japan in 1959, started as a reaction against Western influences in Japanese culture after the Second World War. From major cities to small communities, this dance form has an underground following in the USA that draws disciples from every background. Its influence has permeated many genres including art, architecture, music, and psychology.

Artists are performing in many cities across the USA, including obvious major art centers in New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, and smaller communities like Asheville, North Carolina and River Hills, Wisconsin. Finding a butoh artist nearby is easily done online, many have blogs or websites providing information on their upcoming performances or workshops. The internationally renowned butoh company, Sankai Juku, tours in the USA about every two years. Eiko and Koma, who studied under one of butoh’s founders, live in New York, teach workshops at various US colleges, and perform all over in outdoor locations, theaters, museums, and galleries.

Despite its growing popularity, there are few colleges offering workshops or courses on butoh and no scholarly annotated bibliography exits. This work seeks to provide researchers with an annotated guide to selected articles, videos, books and online resources in English and as an aid to bibliographers wishing to fill in collection gaps in avant-garde dance.

Background
Butoh was founded by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno in late 1950s Japan. Translated from Japanese, “butoh” means “dance step”. Like kabuki and noh, butoh is distinctly Japanese in terms of origin, but it breaks from the more traditional forms by using grotesque imagery and environments to explore taboo topics. Indeed, the first performance (Forbidden Colors) in 1959 caused such an outrage that Tatsumi Hijikata was rumored to have been banned from dancing in future dance festivals. The outrage was caused when he appeared to squeeze a live chicken to death between a young boy’s legs, simulating a pedophilic sex act between an older man and a young boy (Fraleigh, 2006). While the banning of Hijikata may have prevented butoh from becoming well known inside Japan, Hijikata cultivated intense devotees, some of whom migrated to Europe and the USA and then spread interest in the dance form.

Hijikata’s butoh, originally called Ankoku-Butoh, means “dance of darkness”. His subject matter generally focused on Japanese folklore, politics, and cultural taboos in Japanese society such as deformity, disease, and homosexuality. While Hijikata was the first to perform butoh, the collaboration with Kazou Ohno is evident from the beginning – it was Ohno’s own son who was the young boy in Forbidden Colors.

Kazuo Ohno could not have been more different in terms of his outlook on life and expression of butoh movement. Where Hijikata was extremely anti-Western, refusing to perform outside Japan or train foreigners, Ohno embraced the West (Fraleigh, 2006). He was a Christian, taught non-Japanese,
and performed in the USA up until the age of 101. Ohno’s most famous performance, Admiring La Argentina, was an homage to Spanish dancer Antonia Mercé whose performance inspired him to become a dancer, and this piece was directed by Hijikata. The dichotomy between Hijikata and Ohno’s expression of movement (violence/tenderness, group spectacle/private experience) is still reflected in butoh performances today.

At its core, butoh is a highly conceptual. It is generally characterized by white body paint, distorted facial expressions and hyper-controlled or extremely slow movements. Originally the white body paint was used to symbolize the dead, but contemporary performers may use it as a way to mask individuality and encourage the audience to view the body as a blank slate or archetype. It is just as common for dancers to perform semi-nude and/or with shaved heads as it is to see them clothed and with hair. Music, sound, and images may or may not accompany a performance and when they do, often times it seems incongruous with the movements. The use of extremely slow movements and incongruous music is used to focus the audiences’ attention on time and negative space, which is just as important as the movement the dancer is making.

What makes butoh unique from other dance forms, such as modern and ballet, is that there is no formal style or technique that can be codified, which makes defining (and studying) the form difficult. When studying modern dance technique one is taught a technique for moving; for example, Martha Graham’s technique is contract/release, fall and recovery. Jose Limón’s is fall/rebound. With butoh, dancers use imagery to help them guide their movements, but there is no measure as to how the movement should be executed. The imagery cues are as different as the individuals teaching and learning it. Despite what audience members might think, performances are rarely improvised. Butoh dancers learn choreography but they are not required to perform it exactly as another member of the ensemble. Since it defies definition, and its practitioners mix and match qualities to suit their individuality, it is only when the artist or group identifies itself as butoh can an audience really be sure that what it is seeing is butoh.

Approach

As butoh defies definition, it is difficult to create standards from which to judge what is good and what is bad and who is an authoritative source. It is not easy to create a collection based on how one might collect for modern dance standards. There is no “form” or “technique” that can be passed down to students. Amongst practitioners there is disagreement on what it is, and who is good. There are few books in English on the topic, and most of them tend to repeat each other, so it can be time-consuming to determine what is a worthy purchase or resource. It is also tempting for collection developers to buy everything published in English because the collection is so small, but that would be a mistake. Quality videos of founding performers are difficult to come by, and can take up a large part of the budget, but the videos capture movement, which is what the texts lack.

Items in this bibliography will be of interest to academic and research libraries with a performing arts program or Asian studies collection. Butoh collections are fairly small and manageable, making it an advantage for libraries with small budgets or for applying for small grants. Materials for this bibliography were found online through various web search engines (e.g. Google, Yahoo! Directory, Librarian’s Internet Index) and from WorldCat. Those available in print were reviewed at the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection in the New York Public Library for Performing Arts. Many books, articles, and videos in the catalogs and online web resources repeat the same information on the history of butoh. The author has limited the resources to those that offer unique insight and perspectives on the topic.

Monographs

Fraleigh, S.H. (1999), Dancing into Darkness: Butoh, Zen, and Japan, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA
Fraleigh, S.H. (2004), Dancing Identity: Metaphysics in Motion, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA
Fraleigh, S.H. (2006), Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo, Routledge, New York, NY
Fraleigh’s writing tends to be esoteric and is therefore recommended for graduate students or those interested in the philosophy and metaphysics of dance. Her biography of Kazuo Ohno, Tatsumi Hijikata, and butoh, however, is an essential for collections. It is rich with images and material only available from Hijikata and Ohno’s archives in Japan and is more accessible to students and practitioners.

Mostly photographs from butoh’s early history, performances, and important dancers with some text. Images are beautiful and provide access to Kazuo Ohno and Tatsumi Hijikata’s original work.

This comprehensive book on different dance forms has a fine chapter on butoh. In addition to its concise explanation of the major Japanese dance forms, this chapter also explains how to look at and what to look for in a butoh performance.

Viala, J. (1988), Butoh: Shades of Darkness, Tuttle, Tokyo
Mostly photographs tracing the history and development of butoh. Similar to Butoh: Dance of the Dark Soul, but with more text and information.

Articles

Articles were selected based on uniqueness of their contribution to the discussion of butoh, the description of individual style and/or technique by specific soloists or companies that may help researchers, and other relevant information. This list of articles is not exhaustive, merely a starting point for researchers.
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Butoh has a large community in Australia. The MAP Symposium is one of the few organizations that documented critical analysis of butoh in Australia. It does not appear to be in publication any longer, but retaining a copy of this article on reserve is recommended.


Examines cross-dressing male dance performances and the “male gaze”. Provides new perspectives on some of butoh’s most memorable performances.


Part one focuses on the history of butoh, with primary focus on Kazuo Ohno and his work. Part two focuses on the internationally renowned butoh company Sankai Juku.


This two part article considers how Butoh’s potential for altered awareness has been embraced in Western dance.


One of Lizzie Slater’s excellent articles and critiques on butoh.


Part two focuses on Sankai Juku, the best known butoh group in the USA.


Tobi Tobias’s articles are reviews of company and individual butoh performances. “Human interest” is about Kazuo Ohno and his son, Yoshito Ohno. “Mystery stories” is a review of Hakutobo, of which Yoko Ashikawa is the senior member and performer. Ashikawa worked with Hijikata for 20 years. “Strange interludes” is about the company Sankai Juku. These three articles from Tobias were selected because of their description of butoh, performances by influential dancers/choreographers, concepts, stage, props, costume, movement, etc., that will assist researchers in defining butoh and understanding the difference in styles.


This article is of interest for the connections it makes between the Second World War and its influence on dance in Germany and Japan. It also names specific German modern dancers who had direct or indirect influence on butoh’s founding dancers.


Brief article on the history and development of butoh. Liz Waring’s credentials are not on the article; however, she was a student in an honors program at Sweet Briar College when she wrote and posted the article. It gives a nice synopsis of the history and development of butoh.

Audio visual

Butoh: Piercing the Mask (1991), Insight Media, New York, NY (video)

Provides a nice balance between the historical, cultural and artistic influences that helped shape butoh. Includes interviews with professors, dance critics, and artists as well as incorporating still photographs and videos of performances. Essential for libraries with an Asian Studies, Dance or Theatre collection.

Butoh: Body on the Edge of Crisis (2001), Michael Blackwood Productions, New York, NY (DVD)

Describes butoh from the point of view of the most important artists and major dance companies in Japan. Starting with Tatsumi Hijikata, the video follows his influence and how it spread to other dancers who, after training or watching him perform, started their own companies with their own style and interpretation. The video focuses on the philosophy behind butoh from the perspective of the dancers and the differences in style among prominent choreographers and companies. Includes performance video of each company and an interview with Hijikata’s wife. Essential for collections with an emphasis on modern dance.

A Summer Storm (2003), Arai Misao, Kyoto, (DVD)

Combination of still shots, photographs and vintage performance video (1973) of Hijikata and his choreography. After 1973 Hijikata never danced on stage again, and he died in 1986. This video is essential for students and researchers seeking primary sources.

Ai-Amour Carlotta Ikeda and her Butoh (2006), Artworks Video, Madison, WI (DVD)

Carlotta Ikeda is the director of the butoh performance group Compagnie Ariadone, in France. There is a small section in which she talks about technique, which is rarely discussed in butoh, and an explanation of the Japanese dance mind. It opens with a performance clip with a voice-over in Japanese with English subtitles.


The video is divided into chapters that show a different style of dance to express a concept. The chapter on butoh discusses time and space. While butoh is not the primary focus of this video, it helps give the viewer a better understanding of how an abstract dance gets created and the thinking/planning behind it, which would be of interest to performers of a variety of styles. Other chapters include sound, creating the dance, structuring the dance, transforming time and space, etc.
Websites

YouTube (www.youtube.com)
Many solo butoh performers and companies post clips of their work on YouTube. This is a great starting place to get familiar with the genre and to find new artists. There are some clips of butoh's founders Hijikata and Ohno available to view that are not available for purchase in the USA at this time.

Butoh Resources (http://Butohresrouces.weebly.com)
This is a website the article's author created in conjunction with this article to help researchers and librarians. Its goal is to be the central location on the internet for researchers looking for accurate and current information relating to butoh. In addition to the monographs, articles and videos listed in this bibliography, there is a list of butoh performers and companies, recommended organizations and websites, relevant blogs and search tips.

Tatsumi Hijikata Archive (www.art-c.keio.ac.jp/en/archive/hijikata/)
The archive is part of the Research Center for the Arts and Arts Administration, Keio University, Tokyo, Japan. All the items have been digitized and are searchable through the archives various search engines. You must contact the archive at least a week prior to use its materials.

Kazuo Ohno Archive (www.kazuoonodancestudio.com/english/)
The creation of the archive is in progress. The Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio web page only provides contact information in the “about the studio” section for people interested in the archives.

Japan Society (www.japansociety.org/)
There are several Japan Societies throughout the USA. The Japan Society produces events for corporations and the public on Japanese culture and language, including butoh performances and discussion groups. This link takes you to the office in New York City; however, you can do an internet search for an office near you. You can also do a search on butoh on the Japan Foundation’s website.

Butoh UK (www.Butohuk.com/)
Organized by Marie-Gabrielle Rotie, a long time butoh performer, Butoh UK is a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting butoh. Rotie organizes a butoh festival every couple of years, each with a different emphasis and title.

Japan Contemporary Dance Network (http://wikiwiki.jp/jcdnmdfe/?FrontPage)
Search for Japanese butoh artists and companies on this networking website. This is the English version of the site; however, there are some Japanese characters that are not translated. Use the search box on the page to search for butoh-related artists or use the menu on the side bar.

Asia Society (www.asiasociety.org/)
The Asia Society, like the Japan Society, hosts performances from Japanese butoh performers and companies in conjunction with cultural studies programs.

Staying current

Google Alerts (www.google.com/alerts?hl=en)
Creating a Google Alert is one of the easiest ways to keep informed when new events, performances or news articles related to butoh are posted online and to discover new artists in the discipline.

Google Blog Search (http://blogsearch.google.com/)
Allows you to search and find blogs using your search terms.

Conclusion

Though still largely unknown to the average person, butoh is a dance form with a growing interest in the modern/avant-garde dance community whose influence is spreading into fashion, art, psychology, music and other genres. As its mainstream popularity grows, additional books, performance reviews, dissertations, and online resources will need to be collected and analyzed by researchers and collection development staff. Finally, this work serves researchers and bibliographers by providing a scholarly source from which to start exploring butoh.

Reference


About the author

Shea A. Taylor, as Assistant Professor and Chief of Reference at the City College of New York, serves as the subject specialist for the departments of Reference, Psychology, Law and Legal Studies. In that role she works as a bibliographer, outreach liaison, and instructor of information literacy sessions. Shea A. Taylor can be contacted at staylor@ccny.cuny.edu

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