

For:  
The Admissions Tutor  
*MA in Theatre Directing*  
**Rose Bruford College**  
Applicant: Dmitry Tolonen

**Critical Analysis:**  
“Hibiki” (Resonance from Far Away) by Sankai Juku  
(at Sadler’s Wells Theatre, 30 March, 2001)

It is a rare privilege to see Sankai Juku, as indeed it is to see Butoh in London, at all. The current theatrical climate seems to need a major dance institution to identify with and nurture such rarities as in the West the performative arts are more specialised into ‘dance’ or ‘drama’ than in Asian culture.

This year, with “Japan 2001”, one hopes that more forms of Japanese theatre will come to London and influence performance groups, thus proving not to be merely a fad. Sankai Juku was last in London in 1999 with its masterly “Shijima” (The Darkness calms down in Space). Whereas “Shijima” was more in contact with the first important theme of Butoh, - shamanism and pre-history - the imagery the group presents with “Hibiki” launches a more direct critical attack on Japan at the point of Butoh’s birth: 1950s post-Hiroshima Japan.

My feelings about the present production are ambiguous. First, it is really important for a cross-pollination to exist among art forms, here between the Orient and the Occident. I feel there is a lot to learn from the incredible talent, accuracy and fresh treatment of subject matter in the group’s work.

I feel that too often the reviewers’ comments came from reading through Western eyes. The Sunday Telegraph suggested that if one were to take away the costume, set and lighting design, there would be nothing left. Surely this is missing the point and surely this displays a lack of proficiency in reading movement and context in such performances: we’d treat as ridiculous such comments on the canon of Western dramatic texts.

The parts that I saw as inadequate or too ‘easy’ were more confidently expressed in the Times, who described the performance as “designer Butoh, packaged for the West”. I tend to agree, in part, with this sentiment. There were such elements already in “Shijima”, in moments where the soundtrack moved into musical score and jeopardised the flow of the main spatial milieu of the work.

In “Hibiki”, the score progressed over a theme of Jazz improvisation (on contrabass and piano) providing an aural landscape of the avant-garde art world of the 1950s in Japan. This otherwise interesting historic device struck an odd chord, though, as its tonality didn’t complement or keep up with the experimentation of the performers’ bodies.

The music was far too conventionally narrative so as to become almost facile. In my view, it is the diegetic sound that works best with Sankai Juku’s work as the world it depicts can only be related to allegorically and viscerally (visually). In so doing, the sounds envelop us into our own minds.

On the whole, the group’s work utilises a cyclic narrative pattern, which is a much-needed supplement to theatre productions in the West and it, along with Sankai’s physicality is why I want to hold back from calling this dance in the traditional Western sense.

Instrumental music and ‘pure’ dance are difficult areas to specify topics in. In contrast, Butoh comes from a very specific context in the history of Japanese-Western relations, therefore to glamorise it as aesthetic dance is to do it a disservice.

The set, which consists of a clay/ sand-laid stage and large dishes filled with water (one to be filled with ‘blood’) – is rather busy. When compared with “Shijima” - which boasted a back wall of body-imprints and a broad walk – the functionality and aesthetics of “Hibiki” as a set could have been tighter.

As with the soundtrack, the sparse sets of Sankai Juku are elemental to the articulation of the messages in the piece. Here, it seemed that the proportionality of the design worked against the performers because of the sheer outnumbering and imbalance of set to performer.

It is important for this work to be seen as part of a progressing oeuvre, though, and looking at notes from both of the performances one can see how structures by the leading choreographer and director Ushio Amagatsu envelop different ‘stories’ about contemporaneity. He is creating different performative strategies, albeit not in the sense of conventional plot, to narrate and illustrate these stories.

Whether the stories are about our pre-history (for the Westerners to be read as: pre-enlightenment), or our contemporary historical concerns: post WWII Japan in economic boom and after, these stories are very relevant today in our post-industrial and dehumanised, post-national, globalised world.

