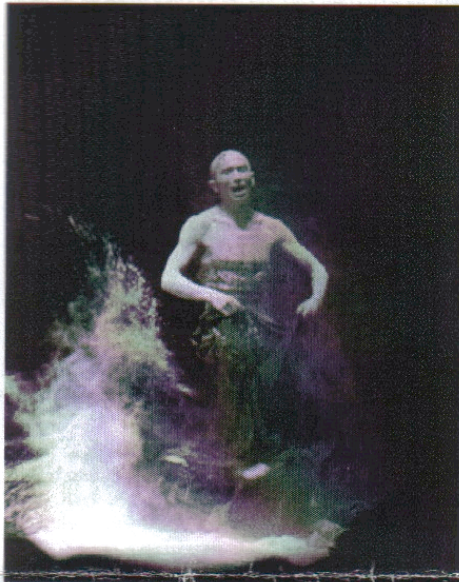


21-11-00

PERFORMANCE COMPOSITION

Sankai Juku (1980 -)



Japanese Butoh group lead by Ushio Amagatsu (1949 - )

**Ankoku Butoh** (late 1950s onwards)

x Butoh theatre (Ankoku Butoh - the words indicating both the state of being grounded and drawn to the skies), founded by Tatsumi Hijikata, is a form of contemporary Japanese performance that crosses boundaries between traditional Japanese and Western Performance as well as Dance. It is a reaction to the post-war situation in Japan as far as national identity in the (avant- garde) arts is concerned.

x It heads in the opposite direction than the one taken by more optimistic western performers building a new future, focusing on dark subjects such as nuclear holocaust and is more expressive of the condition of guilt and confusion in Japan at the time, confronting its past links with 'the wrong side' in WWII. In this approach, it has a lot in common with the then contemporary movements of Absurdism and Surrealism, a conflict of the self and the world.

- **Is it Dance?**

x Sankai Juku performed in London in January 1999 at Sadler's Wells. This immediately tells us to understand this as a type of dance ~~we're not used to~~ - something 'exotic' and exciting. But the group is a very well travelled one, with representation centred in Paris and the US. They are well read in Western dance and Drama. But why should take Sankai Juku as the new spice of the month? To analyse the group in only from a Japanese frame work would be limiting. If Sankai Juku are Dance, what kind of dance are they exactly?

Although being a 'text-less' act, i.e. without any substantial dialogue, and being fully and accurately choreographed, Sankai Juku move very little. It'd make sense to link them to a term like 'contemporary dance', but how useful is this term? The group moves, in, instead, in the space between Dance and Performance - including traditional Japanese theatrical conventions such as The Noh Theatre, exposing its rigid form to the ambiguity of Butoh. (see plan of Noh stage)

x explain the Noh stage  
explain the Shijima  
see the stage  
+ backing it.



Noh theatre is already 'economic' in its approach, what Butoh does is distort and rewrite its spirit and traditions. After the bombs, the Noh stories of royal courts seemed a luxury. In all this misery facing the new theme of irreplaceable loss, a spark of twisted optimism and regeneration is rooted in Butoh: "[In Butoh], we can find, touch a hidden reality. Something can be born, can appear, living and dying at the same moment" (Hijikata)

*In doing so,* Sankai are setting a dialogue between structures on the stage, past and present, western and eastern, so as to convey an indirect narrative on the twentieth century. More interestingly, like Butoh in general, Sankai is a hybrid form that claims to achieve more than what dance usually, though not always, sets out to offer. In a sense, like contemporary performance, it aims to deconstruct its very own - theatrical - foundations, only to construct it anew.

"[Butoh] could be seen as the antithesis of the liberation sought during the same period by contemporary Western dancers. In both its themes - cruelty, death, darkness, sexual perversion - and its concomitant attitude towards the body as 'fundamentally chaotic' it is a dance of denial." (p. 198 Hijikata, quoted in C20th Performance Reader). Here is where Sankai Juku has its entrance into the framework of post-modern performance; reflecting and creating a world with a split consciousness that can be read in a multitude of ways.

#### - Is it only Performance, then?

The performances by Sankai Juku certainly have strong visual and performative qualities. So, because it is such a stylised enterprise, focusing strongly on movement, it's hard *not* to see it as some kind of dance.

But, if one of the most important qualities of contemporary Occidental performance is inter/textuality, going back to the sources and speaker of a text, then possibly rewriting this material; how does this work for a wordless Oriental piece? In several ways, Sankai Juku does what performance artists do when they re-appropriate the Classics in contrasting ways. But with Sankai Juku, the texts are not necessarily literary, but from the flesh and collective memory.

Sankai Juku are about the body and the limitations of the body, instead of an illusion of the body with limitless capabilities. They are about a disintegration of a human spirit which turns out to be a constructed fiction - in this way it can read as a critique of standardised 'Japanese' behaviour, the like of which we've all seen portrayed in western films. Instead of using the body as a vehicle to make a narrative of relations between performers on the stage or between scenes, they place the body itself as a text - the body; the one thing all can relate to, more or less. The references by Sankai Juku draw from history and the world we live in, rather than literary texts.

#### Or human puppet theatre ?

As Butoh is definitely a strong performative style for commentary on events in C20th, is Sankai Juku revolutionary performance? Situating in the same period of the C20th that saw Japan rising from war torn state to prosperous nation, the rise of the nameless, faceless Japanese businessman, faceless ruling 'majority', is Sankai Juku a comment on our becoming puppets in our own brand-led lives?

Sankai Juku performances use sparse set and avoid flashy lighting gimmicks. In a sense they have the ultimate set of bald puppets in a box - look. Like Petrushka (Russian), Pulcinella (italian commedia dell'arte) and Punch and Judy, perhaps the weird creatures we see suffering on stage are our selves in future tense, struggling to empower ourselves in a world without road signs?

**SANKAI JUKU** - coming to a theatre near you soon

Not to be confused with : those baldies with talcum powder and skirts.

#### Internet links

[www.danza-Butoh.com.ar](http://www.danza-Butoh.com.ar)

[http://delahaye.pays-de-born.com/amagatsu/amagatsu\\_sommaire.htm](http://delahaye.pays-de-born.com/amagatsu/amagatsu_sommaire.htm)

[www.culturekiosque.com/dance](http://www.culturekiosque.com/dance)

See  
skilura  
page  
underlined.

One last  
question

X  
They're changing the  
classic ways of knowing  
the body into knowing  
through the body.

see



# Shijima

## Scenes

- I From the motif of silence
- II Sakihai – Through a rose of the sand
- III Picture in the cars
- IV Monad of the winds
- V Polarisation
- VI Desire for rebirth –  
towards a rose of the sand
- VII To the motif of silence

Moist sand is ploughed thickly, the surface must be rough not smooth.

The dancer stands on the edge of the sand, contracts the anus, lifts the diaphragm, slopes the shoulders and tightens the chest. The body hardens as if it were a plate of steel or a mould, the internal organs straining in suspense.

The dancer fixes his eyes on one point and concentrates. He lets himself fall backwards, the stiff body is flung onto the ground. Pulling his body away from the ground he allows it to gradually slacken. The figure of the standing body is imprinted onto the sand, leaving a mould.

Through an elaborate procedure the mould is set and the supine impression is silently raised to a standing position and the sand washed down. The dancer's back appears, moulded into the sand.

During the operation the dancer takes the role of a patient whilst the person in charge of the operation is a surgeon who takes the role of an anaesthetist.

Ushio Amagatsu

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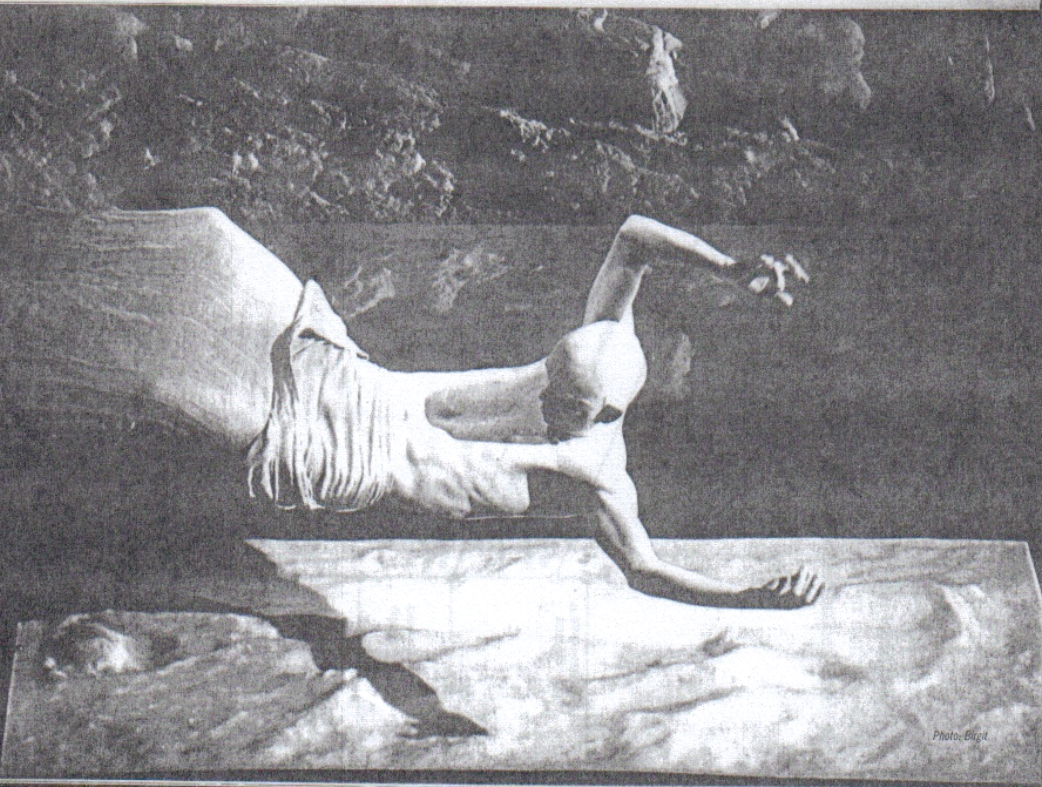


Photo: Eiji

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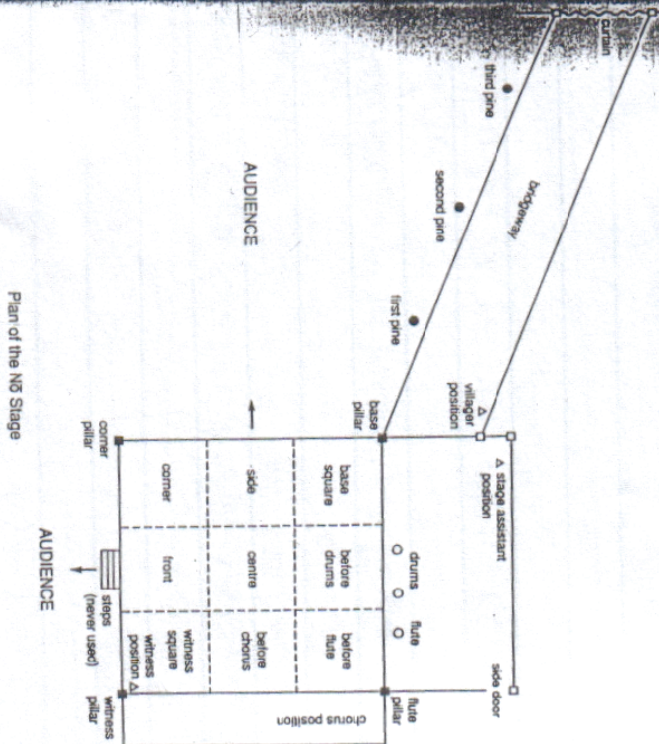
## List of Terms Used in the Stage Directions

### Stage locations and features of the stage

base pillar	<i>shitebushira</i>
base square	<i>yo-a</i>
before chorus	<i>jūtaimae</i>
before drums	<i>daisūmōmae</i>
before flute	<i>fuera</i>
bridge-way	<i>hashigakari</i>
centre	<i>shochū</i>
chorus position	<i>jūtaiga</i>
corner	<i>sumi</i>
corner pillar	<i>metukebushira</i>
curtain	<i>agemaku</i>
first pine, second pine, third pine	(small pine trees placed along the bridge-way, outside the railing)
flute pillar	<i>shuebushira</i>
front	<i>shōmensaki</i>
mirror room	<i>kagami-no-ma</i>
side	<i>wakebōnen</i>
side door	<i>kirido</i>
stage assistant position	<i>kōtenza</i>
witness pillar	<i>wakebushira</i>
villager position	<i>kyōgenza</i>
witness position	<i>wakeza</i> (the spot where the <i>waki</i> normally sits)
witness square	<i>wakeza</i> (the square area around the witness position)

### Actions or gestures

*shira ni iru* (to sit in formal Japanese posture)  
*shiori* (the actor brings his right hand or both hands slowly to a position before his eyes)



Plan of the Nō Stage