

“Japanese Versus Western Influence: A Thought on Evocative Darkness”

by Naoko Maeshiba

Junichiro Tanizaki’s book *In Praise of Shadows* compares the Japanese and the Western aesthetics in terms of darkness and light. He points out that if the light is scarce, Westerners search for a brighter light while Japanese immerse themselves in the darkness and find beauty in it. The Japanese fundamental sense of subtle and subdued beauty lies in the appreciation of this shadowy darkness. Originally from Japan, I have been living in the U.S. for the past 18 years. I have often seen this difference between the cultures and the aesthetics of the two countries. Although I’m influenced by Western culture, I have always found myself seeking for shadow in light. Darkness implies ambiguity. Ambiguity implies mystery. What is not seen clearly evokes imagination. For instance, the traditional multiple layers of kimono draw curiosity about what is hidden inside. The absence of the sight makes what is unseen more precious. This evocative darkness is at the core of my work.

Two Japanese performance art forms influenced my aesthetics and principle for performance: Noh and Butoh. Noh is a 600 year-old Japanese dance drama originally performed for aristocrats. It regards elegance and subtlety as the most supreme kind of beauty. The movements in Noh are minimalistic and essential and contain symbolic meaning. Butoh is a contemporary dance/theatre form born in late 1950s when the western influence was overflowing into the post-war Japan. It was a revolt against the pre-existing dance forms including the western dance and the traditional Japanese dance. This originally underground performance art embraces intense, grotesque, and primal beauty with its base principle as the transformation of the body. These two forms share a sense of darkness despite the difference in their embodiment. Noh’s subtlety and elegance is combined with Butoh’s intensity and grotesquerie in my work, bringing out the exquisite darkness and vibrant festivity.

In my approach to choreography and performance, I seek to create the evocative body and movement. I try to strip off the unnecessary, creating an empty vessel. This vessel continuously transforms, reflecting human and non-human elements. The boundary between the body and the environment becomes blurry. I also focus on nurturing the body’s sensitivity. When every cell is activated and sensitized maximally, one transcends the daily consciousness and reaches the higher place.

Two Japanese artists influenced my approach to choreography and performance. One

of them is a Japanese contemporary theatre director/playwright Ohta Shogo. When I assisted him on his silent play, *Water Station III* in 1998, I witnessed the effect of silence on the body. In this play, the characters crossed the stage very slowly, stopped at the broken faucet placed at the center of the stage from which water kept dripping, lived through their individual ephemeral moments at this water station before leaving there to continue their journeys. During their journeys, they had continuous monologues going on inside which were never spoken. As I watched the play, I realized that the most primal, purest condition of the body started emerging in the absence of speech. The constraints put on the body released its hidden expression. The body carried the weight of history and memory from the far away past. This existence of the body, in turn, evoked vivid visceral experience in the audience. The 'essence' appeared in the 'absence'.

Min Tanaka is the other. I have witnessed the evocative body in this Japanese dancer/farmer. I worked with him as a performer on his *Body Weather Farm* in the 1990s. When I saw him dance, I was struck by the captivating power in his body. With precision and sensitivity, his body transformed continuously. Devoid of any specific technique or form, every step he took was deliberate and unpredictable, creating poetry. Every move awakened certain sensation in my body. I saw a landscape emerging in his dance. Both Ohta Shogo and Min Tanaka influenced me deeply in my stance towards the body and my approach towards choreography and performance.

In 2005, I created a full-evening length piece called *Remains of Shadow*. The piece was loosely based on the real story of the friendship doll exchange that happened during WWI between Japan and America. The blue-eyed dolls were thrown into a different culture and were burned and buried when the two countries went into WWII. Two dancers transformed into four characters including the doll, transcending the time and place. A sense of loss these characters carried in their bodies led to fragile beauty and fierce violence. Visceral poetic expression was born out of certain images and abstract narrative given to the bodies. The video projections and the loosely connected episodic, non-linear structure were used to create the distance and the space for the audience to imagine their own stories based on their experiences. Having touched the dark place, there has been a range of emotional responses to the performance.

Tanizaki's *In Praise of Shadows* was first published 1933. Since then, Japan has been increasingly westernized and a lot has been brought into light. In this light, the form of darkness seems to be changing. I'm curious how and if my darkness will start transforming as time goes by while I continue living in this country.