

“Where the Image meets the Body Symposium”

Centre for Theatre and Performance Studies, Monash University Clayton Campus

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Min Tanaka: Body Dances the Dance

As a self taught actor and later as a teacher, I have been really interested in exploring the primordial ways of bodily learning and the experience of the actor. These embodied ways of learning have often been neglected or marginalized in most of the discourses involved with body mind practices. Most of the pedagogies of actor training emphasize the importance of a particular “psycho-physical training” and favours a psychic aspect over the body.

However, these body technologies knowingly or unknowingly have abandoned the pre-reflective level of our bodily learning and apprenticeship. Instead of being attentive to our own bodies, we have been treating our bodies so badly and trying to codify it according to these body projects. We are not compelled to think that our bodies could “think” for us before we rationally think through our minds.

At this juncture, Min Tanaka appears and demonstrates us how to shed our skin of habituation and touch the preconscious level of our body. Tanaka’s dance act and body images is an apt representation of the actor training system that I have been experimenting with my student actors. These two practices of body work coincidentally share similarities. My work with students is based on heightening awareness of the entire body through sensing the primordial bodily images.

During my teaching at VAPA, students surprisingly started showing emotional catharsis after performing this postural model of body works. I believe that student actors could experience the hidden primordial bodily images which I like to call “histrionic bodily images” while expanding and contracting of postural schemas. Min Tanaka’s dance act thus gives me an encouragement and living example of how this body-images work for actors.

Now I would like to draw your attention to a performance that took place at the front yard of National School of Drama, New Delhi in 2010.

A Winter Night in January 2010

“Min Tanaka, in a pale Kimono robe appears slowly through the dark. His nostrils and the mouth are filled with cotton wool. A water bucket is placed in a corner. He moves towards the water bucket, lifts it up and then pours it over the body. This cold water wets his body and the kimono. He looks frozen but still moves slowly with shaky movements. He almost looks like a dead body now. Then he slowly strolls to another bucket. It’s filled with mud. He begins applying thick mud over his head and the body. Now he is fully covered in thick mud.....”

I met Min Tanaka and his assistant the following day and managed to conduct a short interview. Yet in this presentation, I decided to omit my role as the interviewer and included

a character called Schilder. I did not change what Tanaka said to me in response to my questions. Instead, I allowed Schilder to talk with Tanaka.

Schilder Mr. Tanaka, I saw your performance last night. It triggered several interesting questions on body-image and body-schema that I have been studying. First of all your performance confirmed me the fact that “human being are bound and tied down by their body-images” (Schilder 1970 p.206).

Tanaka Last night’s performance was my first experience; I really did not plan that performance. I did not prepare the movements at all. I just decided a few things first.....I thought I might have a rope, a water bucket ...and It was quite heavy. Apart from a few things, most of them were improvised.

Schilder we have a tendency to alter or dissolve our bodies by doing things and adding objects to our bodies. In this case your water bucket, cotton wool, kimono also play a significant role in extending your body-image. Your “bodily being to the world” is the fundamental structure of your body-schema (Tiemersma 1989 p. 225). Butoh, in my view is such modality that the performer could experience the existential nature of the body-image while performing.

Tanaka Butoh is a name for a kind of activity; not only for dance. It started in late 1960s in Japan. It was started by a person called Mr. Hijikata. He is a modern dancer. It has not got any style or no specific methodology for training dancers. It’s based on the main idea that “body has the dance;” Body has song.”

Schilder Your idea of “body has the dance” provokes me to elaborate the further development of the notion of my “body-image.” As Merleau-Ponty believes, human body as a “subject” possesses bodily knowledge prior to our conscious mind. According to him body mind and the world cannot be separable. They are intertwined.

Tanaka Yes..... my body does that. The mixture of movements are developed and mixed up by the body itself. But I can tell you that..... historically, I can assure that my body has been influenced by our traditional performances.

Schilder Mr. Tanaka, in my research work, the dance or bodily based activities, such as gymnastics play a vital role in constructing or destructing the body-image. I see it as a bit of less violent way of changing the body-image (Schilder 1970 p.206). In line with that, I am going to say that your performance is one way of approaching to dissolve the rigidity of your existing body-image. So I don’t think that you would disagree that Mr. Hijikata also did the same thing.

Tanaka Mr. Hijikata contemplated on the body. When people see the dance they watch it because of the beauty of the body. He wanted to change that idea. That was a difficult task.

- Schilder** Freud discusses about the exhibitionistic nature of human beings. Yet I have a bit different conception about this. I believe that to see someone's body and to be seen by someone is two sides of the same coin (Schilder 1970). It is not only the dancer who possesses the narcissistic nature of the body-image, but the audience. In your case, Hijikata and you also try to blur the "aesthetic, erogenic body" but present a deformed, unpleasant body-image to us.
- Tanaka I don't care about how well the body is trained for dance; the body possesses the dance intrinsically. That is the very basic idea behind this Butoh dancing. But I must say that I do not identify myself as a Butoh dancer. I am not. Butoh now is a very stylized form of expression.
- Schilder** Your performance seems painstaking and rigorous. I really like the way that you have executed a series of postural model of body-images during the performance. It liberates the rigidity of your body-image. Once you start a postural model, that postural model generates the next postural model and the previous one retains as a temporal body memory. So you don't have to think and plan the next postural model; it happens spontaneously.
- Tanaka I believe in the dance. Sometimes, I dance totally naked and almost do nothing..... Moving really slowly.....within one hour I only do a single movement. Sometimes, like in theatre, I create different images for the audience through my performances.
- Schilder** Phenomenologically speaking, body and the world are always correlated. "The new born child has a world; even the embryo has. it is true that on such a primitive level, border line between world and body will not be sharply defined, and it will be easier to see a part of the body in the world and a part of the world in the body" (Schilder 1970 p. 123). Your dance act to me is a way of finding the lost unity of your body and the world it correlates with. Mr. Tanka, have you incorporated others into your dance acts?
- Tanaka I sometimes dance for the children. I have danced with music. Dancing with orchestras or dancing with jazz players, dancing with a huge chorus. I have also danced with painters. When the painter starts painting, I too simultaneously start my dancing. Many different varieties of dancing..... because I believe in dancing. I am not following any specific style. Historically dance could exist between god and people. When I first started dancing, my teacher said that "you have to find your own way of dancing." So I was quite doubtful. I have once worked with an American abstract sculptor. The next year I worked with a concrete painter. Two of them are like enemies. But I love them both. Dancer can do it. It is permitted. I like European orchestra, Beethoven, Mozart. But at the same time I love Japanese, stupid pop music; because, I am a dancer. I don't need to stay fixed to any system.

- Schider** I also think that your dance belongs to the nature; not to any specific tradition. As Merleau-Ponty argued, you are demonstrating the pre-reflective knowledge of your body and its existing nature in the world. “Consciousness, body and world are not separable, but an ambiguous unity.”(Tiemersma 1989 p. 227) In this instance, the integration of a rope, a bucket of water, a kimono, mud and cotton wool give a transformation to your body-image. It is a continual interplay between body and body-image. Tell us about having cotton wool in your nostrils and in the mouth.
- Tanaka Yes, I went to the makeup room and I saw some cotton wool in the room. Then I decided to have this cotton in my nostrils. Yes, in Japan when someone is going to die, people put cotton in their nostrils. And I was also thinking of the cold weather we are having in New Delhi. I was thinking of how to prepare for that weather. I remember I had this type of cotton nostrils as I had last night in, 1995. Then I wanted to have water when I saw the venue. I wanted to have water all over the place.
- Schilder** Now let’s talk about your relationship with the audience. Do you directly react to the audience while performing?
- Tanaka No. Not in the sense that I react in a direct manner. In the last night performance, I didn’t directly “chat” with the people, rather I kept watching people. But sometimes, I am interested in people who are passing by.....while I am performing. So, I see them while I am performing. Sometimes these elements are also integrated into my performance. All are improvised; and spontaneous. When I am dancing, the activities going on in my head is quite a lot: listening to the people, listening to the environment.....I listen to many different sounds. At the same time I have to observe my movements, I have to think about the imagination of the people. For example, if I do a movement I think of what the people imagine about it. If I touch the floor, I am sure, all of you have different imaginations. So I am not saying that “I am using my single imagination.” I have many imaginations. Many different layers are running at the same time. Yes, you are concentrating, yet you are trying to be “opened.”
- Schilder** Your description of the relationship with other bodies is fascinating. This gives me much confidence to express and prove my hypothesis that body image does not exist in isolation but principally a social phenomenon (Schilder 1970). Once the body image is created it starts continually changing. These changes not only occur in the beholder of the body image but in the onlooker’s bodily image as well. I have a proper case study to illuminate this idea. She is Anna, 42 years old, admitted to Bellevue hospital with a mental illness. A year ago, one of her children had been run over by a truck. Since then was having a lot of hallucinations. If someone moves a shoulder; she feels it in her. When a man sweeps the street, she feels the movement of her genitals (Schilder 1970). Thus she embodies the postural model of others into her body. We are not exposed or

aware of such situations unless we encounter a clinical situation like this or performative situation like yours.

Tanaka The way I work to present my art.....there is no method. I choose this way of performing because it is very interesting for me. And I got bored dancing on the stage. But people who are very much contemplating on dancing on the stage, for a big audience, that is their will but I don't want to do that. I don't have a method. I have lots of things to say about my decision; about my choice. But it should not necessarily be a method like Butoh. And I don't need to put a name on my activities. I don't want to be categorized. I don't really need to be remembered by the people. I want to meet the depth of the human being in my dance. So this dance is always impossible to translate into a language. I am trying to work with the dance before the language.....Yes; I don't need a language, because I am not telling a story. And I do not belong to one person. I am not doing one person's dance. Sometimes I feel I am a very old man; Oh !.....Sometimes.....I feel that I am like a woman.....So I have that kind of imagination, even in the performance, it is running through my body. So I just let my body imagine.

Schilder It is no surprise again when you say that you are experiencing different psychic attitude generated through the changes of your performing body. As my experiments and enthusiasm relies on these issues, I must say that, your description of the experience of fantasy situation adds another dimension to our discussion. When the performer's body experience the contraction or expansion through moving their bodies, these "loosening" of body movements tend to affect to change the body-image of the performer. (Schilder 1970 p. 208). Further these changes directly then affect to the emotional state of the performer. That may be the reason you are experiencing different impersonations during the performance. Again, these emotional states trigger the changes in the postural model of body-image. It is interdependent.

Tanaka I think when I am dancing, I always wish.....or.....imagine people. I don't need to use my emotion so much. But I think people should get the emotion when they see my body. It is not that I feel the emotion and people feel the same; but the opposite. People feel the emotions then I feel. People use their own imaginations upon my body and movements then I feel.

Schilder My friend, what you are claiming is the thesis that I have been working through all my academic life. I think at this stage I don't have to stress again the fact that the body-image does not exist by itself. Your body-image always connects with outer world and with other bodies and images. These body-images of other bodies continually influence your body and the psychic attitude that bring changes to your emotional states.

In some dance performances, you push your body to test the limit of the body and experience the pain. I have heard that your first performance was involved with such pain that you hanged yourself by a rope for a few minutes. According

to Beets, we experience the “actual body” while we are in pain (Schilder 1970). Even last night you started pasting mud onto your body after you poured cold water bucket onto your body. I am afraid; it was winter time in Delhi?

Tanaka Yes I agree.....it was cold. Because I am a farmer, mud to me is the richest thing in the world. It is full of life and full of death. So I like to connect always with the soil. Plants are dying in the soil and seeds are growing in the soil.my body is my biggest environment; my body is my first and last environment.

- Thank You -

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