

# Going Back to the Origins of Butoh Dance

## A dialogue with Masaki Iwana

Bologna, August 2018



*'Half Demon' 2016 Photo © Chiara Tabaroni*

**Masaki Iwana is one of Japan's most respected Butoh dancers. He has created and presented more than 500 performances that have made him known throughout the world. In Ca' Colmello, up in the hills of Bologna, he will propose the workshop called 'The Intensity of Nothingness'. We interviewed him.**

A word before answering your questions. Though all the questions are accurate, we have to establish that there is a big gap in recognition between yours and my thinking about Butoh. Based on that, there is a possibility that a large misunderstanding may be generated if you do not grasp what is *behind* my words.

**What is your definition of Butoh?**

As you know, you can not hold Butoh in a single word. By each Butoh artist, by one's experience, by thought "Butoh" shows different aspects.

For me Butoh is:

- 1) To be able to realise internal landscapes throughout the body. It means to draw “Time and Space” inside of me.
- 2) To be able to express “dark intention”. Dark intention does not correspond to good intentions, rather in the totality of life, I mean the part that is not lit.
- 3) Finally, the way of expression should not be done by established methods, but should be created by oneself. If you rely on established methods, the expression will already be institutional at that stage, then you lose freshness and pureness.

### **What is the difference between movement and dance?**

This is clear. Movement is merely the driving of the body, and dance is the realisation of imagination through the body. The realisation of personal dreams, desires, poetry and imagination through the body is dance.

The most striking example is “immovable” is not an movement – “immovable” is an important element in dance. Of course, there is the condition that this “immovable” has certain content.

### **To which among the inventors of butoh, the gloomy Tatsumi Hijikata and the luminous Kazuo Ohno, do you feel more connected?**

This is a difficult question. Because I am not a student of Hijikata, but rather am a Hijikata sect (bitter smile). Without fear of misunderstanding, the base of Kazuo Ohno’s dance is the contemporary dance of Western Europe imported to Japan in the first half of the 20th Century, and Christian faith elements and improvisational sensation and perception are driven there.

On the other hand, Hijikata strictly forbids improvisation. According to his saying “Although being born itself is improvised, why do you have to dance improvisation on the stage?” Not only that, but Hijikata's Butoh (especially during the second half of his artistic life) starts from his complete originality. It is not selfish originality derived from individual thought, but from precisely having observed the era and the environment he experienced, he converted these into a very sure method as expression.

In conclusion Ohno is a spiritually great and sublime dancer who was a great presence that nobody could imitate. On the other hand, Hijikata left a tremendous methodical heritage in the sense that he left a great estate for later generations. However, at the same time it can also be said that Hijikata

created a contradictory environment which is against his discourse of his having lived “Do not eat with other’s heritage”.

### **Have you worked directly with them?**

For as long as I have been an independent butoh artist I have not exchanged so often with them. Still, when I was working as actor, my theatre company made collaborations with Hijikata’s troop “School Black Butoh” in 1971. It was the first meeting with him. Then in 1983 I was invited by Hijikata to join his creation. As for Kazuo Ohno, we have not worked together but he came to see my performances several times and our exchanges were very friendly.

### **If so, after so many years what remains in your practice of that experience?**

As I mentioned before, I am not Hijikata's student, I know little about his method. However I got a big suggestions from his thinking which became the source of his method. For example, “crab crotch”. Since the weight of the load on the poor farmer's back, the centre of gravity is applied to the outside of the soles of the feet. As a result, naturally the centre of the body (hip bone) will be in a floating state. In addition, I got many hints about Butoh from his discourse. For example “When you saw a leg handicapped person, if you have feeling of jealousy for him, it is is departing the moment as a Butoh dancer”.

### **Which forms does the theme of Death, so frequent in the historical performances of Hijikata and Ohno, take in your work?**

Such questions are not good for me to reply with the most dislikes. Because the death of a person is not uniform, moreover the “death” expressed by Hijikata and Ohno has nothing to do with myself or my own death. Learning the butoh death as a style means just the death of my own dance.

### **You have created and presented more than 500 performances. Are they all completely fixed, or are they partially improvised?**

In the early history of my dance probably over 500 times I strictly fixed the pieces, but in the last 20 years many elements of improvisational sense have increased. More accurately speaking, there are often improvisational correspondences among strictly defined pieces. In addition, as long as it is a “living thing” the work becomes improvised.

**In general what is the relationship between organised structure and free dance, in your work?**

I answered this in the previous question, but in general I do not use the words “free dance”. Even if improvisation is possible, improvisation is a process that accumulates sensations and conception accurately for the coming one second ahead, which is different from free dance.

**As a teacher, what kind of attention do you try to build during your workshops?**

It is difficult to answer because your question is too global, but dare to say, I use the greatest energy to watch and observe each participant. Because in my thinking, Butoh is not in the category of “teach / be taught”. What I can do is only to demonstrate the characteristics of that person to the utmost, and to let them express that better.

**What relationship is established between animality and rationality, in the practice that you propose?**

I don't understand this question in my understanding of English.

**“The Intensity of Nothingness” (L'intensità del Nulla) is a laboratory you have already experimented with on several occasions. “Open to performers, researchers, dancers, musicians, visual artists, architects and all those who are interested in a deep research on their body”. Which of these elements usually surprises the most those who participate?**

The meaning of releasing this laboratory to all people is that, speaking without fear of misunderstanding, people in general are more flexible in thinking than professional dancers, sometimes they bring new perspectives and approaches than professional dancers. Especially, for example architects, they bring in ideas that we had not imagined before from their specialist thinking/research. Of course we welcome trained dancers, however sometimes it is a problem that they show institutionally regulated stubborn thinking and behaviour.

**How is it possible to affect the way you perceive your body and your movement in just five days?**

You should think that it is almost impossible. Very often as I say, it will take about five years to catch one important substance in dance and movement. I have been dancing for about forty years, so if I calculate simply, I only know

eight things. Nevertheless, participants gain some hints through our five days of practice, and it is possible to take this home and make from it a big fruit.

**To conclude, which movement are you looking for, at this exact moment of your life?**

I'm looking for movements without any purpose – an aimless, useless body.

**/ ENDS**

**Dialogue with Masaki Iwana and Michele Pascarella, 8 August 2018**

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**L'intensità del Nulla**

Workshop di Danza Butoh

Domenica 5 – Giovedì 9 Agosto 2018

**Baba Jaga, Casa Laboratorio Ca' Colmello**

via Gesso 21, Sassoleone fraz. di Casalfiumanese, 40020 Bologna, Italia

Tel: +39 349 282 6958 / +39 340 782 3086

Email: [info@babajaga.it](mailto:info@babajaga.it) / Web: [www.babajaga.it](http://www.babajaga.it)

**FURTHER READING**

**Kazuo Ohno**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuo\\_Ohno](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazuo_Ohno)

**Tatsumi Hijikata**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatsumi\\_Hijikata](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatsumi_Hijikata)

**Masaki Iwana**

<http://www.iwanabutoh.com/>