**Ito Michio (b. 13 April 1893, Tokyo, Japan; d. 6 November 1961, Tokyo, Japan)**

**Summary**

Ito Michio was a modern dancer and choreographer who worked in Europe, the United States, and Japan. After training at the Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau, Ito collaborated with Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats on the 1916 dance-drama, *At the Hawk’s Well.* In New York City, Ito performed at the Neighborhood Playhouse and the Greenwich Village Theatre, and taught or worked with U.S. modern dancers, including Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, Pauline Koner, Ruth St. Denis, and Lester Horton. Ito moved to Los Angeles in 1929, where he worked in film and choreographed dance symphonies for the Hollywood and Pasadena Rose Bowls. After Pearl Harbor he was interned, and repatriated to Tokyo in 1943. When the war ended he became head choreographer of the Ernie Pyle Theatre in Tokyo, creating productions for the occupying troops. Ito developed his own modern dance technique, the Ito Method, which adapted Dalcroze movement exercises into a style that Ito described as a fusion of ‘East’ and ‘West’. Ito’s intercultural approach and ability to move between elite and commercial projects allowed him to move between different streams of modernism—German eurythmics, British poetic drama, U.S. modern dance, and the Americanization of post-war culture in Japan.

**Training**

Ito’s parents were active in the modernization efforts of the Meiji Restoration and several of his siblings went into the arts, including the director Senda Koreya, musician and designer Yuji Ito, scenic designer Kisaku Ito, and musician Osuke Ito. In 1912, Ito studied opera with soprano Tamaki Miura and with German musicians Heinrich Werkmeister and August Junker. During this year, Ito also studied traditional Japanese dance (*nihon buyō*) under Kichitoyo Wakayagi. At the end of 1912 Ito travelled to Germany to continue his opera training. But after he arrived, he devoted himself to dance, declaring that Vaslav Nijinsky, Isadora Duncan, and Anna Pavlova had inspired him. In August 1913 he enrolled at the Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau, where he studied eurythmics for a year. Eurythmics’ linking of movement and rhythm formed the basis for his choreographic style, while Dalcroze’s movement choruses, as in the 1912 *Orpheus and Eurydice*, influenced Ito’s later ‘dance symphonies’.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Ito’s ability to incorporate elements of Japanese culture into his Dalcroze training allowed him to create pieces which blended fluid abstraction with an emphasis on the body’s shape. Ito’s collaboration on *At the Hawk’s Well* with Yeats, Pound, Charles Ricketts (set design), Edmund Dulac (costumes and music), and Alvin Langdon Coburn (photography) was part of the larger trend of European and US artists turning to Japan as a model for experiments in symbolism and abstraction. Ito too was inspired by *nō* and *nihon buyō* and, after moving to New York, he created his own versions of *nō* plays, *Tamura* (1918, 1921) and *Hagoromo* (1923), and two *kyōgen* in 1921. He performed with Adolf Bolm’s Ballet Intime in 1917, at the Neighborhood Playhouse and Greenwich Village Theatre in 1918 and 1919, and with Martha Graham and Charles Weidman in orchestral dramas staged by Irene Lewisohn in 1928. In California, Ito choreographed large-scale dance symphonies with as many as two hundred dancers, who moved through geometric patterns as a visualization of the accompanying music.

In Europe and the US, Ito’s success in lucrative commercial ventures often derived from his status as a Japanese performer. In venues such as London’s Coliseum and in Hollywood films, such as *Dawn of the East* (1921) and *Booloo* (1938), orientalist expectations framed his performances as exotic. In New York and California, he satisfied producers’ desire for supposed authenticity by designing costumes and scenery, and by staging works such as *The Mikado* (1927). However, once he returned to Tokyo, Ito’s commercial capital lay in his knowledge of American entertainment. At the Ernie Pyle Theatre, he staged revues that featured orientalist scenes of Asia and tap dancing numbers. Although Ito was explicit about the division between his artistic and commercial work, his Dalcroze-based abstract movement style remained visible even in his commercial choreography, such that his modernist sensibility transcended the high-low distinction.

Ito began teaching around 1919, creating one of the earliest codified systems of modern dance technique. He operated his own studio in New York and also taught at the Denishawn School, at Carnegie Hall, and in Los Angeles. When Ito returned to Japan in 1943 he founded the Ito Michio Studio, which remained open until 1976, fifteen years after his death. The Ito Method emphasises movements of the upper body and arms, which move through two sets of ten basic gestures, each based on the Dalcroze series of twenty arm movements. Even transfer of weight through the feet and precise rhythm ensure continuity of movement and control of energy. Ito intended his choreography to express a mood or idea; he avoided pantomime or explicit narrative. Working closely with music, Ito’s movement alternately corresponded and contrasted with the composition, echoing his eurythmics training. In the U.S. he often worked with Japanese composers, or choreographed to Westernized arrangements of Japanese music. This approach was central to his self-conception as an artist who unified Eastern and Western performance traditions. While audiences and reviewers commonly interpreted Ito as representative of an ‘authentic’ Japan or Asia, his modern dance peers recognized him as a charismatic and creative artist.

**Legacy**

Ito’s method, repertory, and experiments in intercultural performance endure today. After Ito’s death in 1961, his protégé Ryuko Maki maintained his repertory and training methods in Japan, passing them on to Satoru Shimazaki, who presented an Ito concert at Theatre of the Open Eye in New York in 1979. In 1964, Kyoko Imura founded the Ito Michio Alumni Association (ミチオイトウ同門会) in Japan, which continues to perform revivals of his work. The Ito method is also studied at some U.S. universities, marking Ito as part of the traditional relationship between modern dance and institutions of higher education. Such inclusion represents Ito as a key figure in the history of U.S. modern dance. Indeed, the Repertory Dance Theatre in Salt Lake City frames the Ito works in its repertory as recovering a ‘forgotten pioneer of American modern dance’.

While *At the Hawk’s Well* resulted from Pound and Yeats borrowing from Japanese *nō*,Ito’s participation in the original 1916 production laid the foundation for subsequent versions that built on this intercultural pattern. For example, Mario Yokomichi, Jonah Salz, and Richard Emmert all have created versions of the play that re-adapt it to traditional *nō* form, both in English and Japanese. Moreover, as one of the first choreographers to circulate between Japan, Europe, and the United States, Ito helped established a path that was later traced by dancers such as Yuriko Kikuchi and butō performers Hijikata Tatsumi and Kazuo Ohno.

**Tara Rodman**

**Selected List of Works**

1916 *The Fox*

1916 *At the Hawk’s Well*, choreographer, the Hawk. With Ezra Pound, W.B. Yeats, Charles Rickets, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and Edmund Dulac.

1916, *Bushido*, co-director, scene designer. With the Washington Square Players.

1916 *Pizzicati*, solo performance.

1922 *Pinwheel Revel* with Angna Enters

1927 *Tango*

1928 *Tone Poem I and II*

1929 *At the Hawk’s Well* director, with Lester Horton

1929 *Pageant of Lights* choreographer, director, at Pasadena Rose Bowl

1937 *Etenraku, Blue Danube*, choreographer, director. Hollywood Bowl

1947 *ミカド (The Mikado)*, choreographer

**References and Further Reading**

Caldwell, H. (1977) *Michio Ito: The Dancer and His Dances*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Cowell, M.J. (2001) ‘Michio Ito in Hollywood: Modes and Ironies of Ethnicity’, *Dance Chronicle* 24 (3): 263-305.

Cowell, M.J. (1994) ‘East and West in the Work of Michio Ito’, *Dance Research Journal* 26 (2): 11-23.

Takeishi, M. (2006) *Japanese Elements in Michio Ito’s Early Period (1915-1924): Meetings of East and West in the Collaborative Works*, ed., D. Pacun, Tokyo: Gendaitosho.

Wong, Y. (2009) ‘Artistic Utopias: Michio Ito and the Trope of the International’, *Worlding Dance*, ed., S.L. Foster, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 144-162.

**Film Documentary**

Homsey, B.O. (2012) *Michio Ito: Pioneering Dancer-Choreographer*, Los Angeles Dance Foundation.

**Paratexts**

Ito Michio in costume for *At the Hawk’s Well* 1916, photographer: Alvin Langdon Coburn; image in the collection of the George Eastman House

<http://www.geh.org/ar/strip21/m197601544805.jpg>

Ito Michio ca. 1922, photographer: Nikolas Murray

Image in the collection of the George Eastman House

<http://www.geh.org/ar/strip89/htmlsrc/m197100450011_ful.html>