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| Itō Michio (1893-1961) |
| Michio Ito |
| Itō Michio was a modern dancer and choreographer who worked in Europe, the United States, and Japan. Itō collaborated with William Butler Yeats on his *Plays for Dancers*, and is probably best known for creating the role of the Guardian of the Well in Yeats’s 1916 dance-drama *At the Hawk’s Well*. Itō’s methods, repertory, and experiments in intercultural performance endure today, although few of his works have been preserved. His international career was one of WWII’s cultural casualties. After decades of work with people such as Yeats in Ireland, the Washington Square Players and Martha Graham in New York, and large-scale productions choreographed for the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, Itō was interned by the U.S. in 1943 and repatriated to Japan where he continued to teach and choreograph until his death. Itō developed his own modern dance technique, the Itō Method, which adapted Dalcroze movement exercises into a style that he described as a fusion of ‘East’ and ‘West.’ Itō’s intercultural approach and ability to move between elite and commercial projects allowed him to move between different streams of modernism – German eurhythmics, British poetic drama, U.S. modern dance, and the Americanization of post-war culture in Japan. |
| Summary  Michio Itō was a modern dancer and choreographer who worked in Europe, the United States, and Japan. After training at the Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau, Germany, Itō collaborated with Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats on the 1916 dance-drama, *At the Hawk’s Well.* In New York City, Itō performed at the Neighborhood Playhouse and the Greenwich Village Theatre, and taught and worked with U.S. modern dancers, including Martha Graham, Charles Weidman, Pauline Koner, Ruth St. Denis, and Lester Horton. Itō moved to Los Angeles in 1929, where he worked in film and choreographed dance symphonies for the Hollywood Bowl and the Pasadena Rose Bowl. Following the events at Pearl Harbor, Itō 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. Itō developed his own modern dance technique, the Itō Method, which adapted Dalcroze movement exercises into a style that he described as a fusion of ‘East’ and ‘West’. Itō’s intercultural approach and ability to move between elite and commercial projects allowed him to move between different streams of modernism – German eurhythmics, British poetic drama, U.S. modern dance, and the Americanization of post-war culture in Japan. Training Itō was the first son of an old samurai family whose parents were active in the modernisation efforts of the Meiji Restoration and encouraged their children to pursue any avenue of interest. Several of his siblings went into the arts, including Itō Kunio, known professionally as *shingeki* theatre director Senda Koreya; musician and designer Itō Yuji; scenic designer Itō Kisaku; and musician Itō Osuke. Itō left Japan for Europe in 1912 to study opera with soprano Tamaki Miura and German musicians Heinrich Werkmeister and August Junker. During this year, he also studied traditional Japanese dance (*nihon buyō*) under Kichitoyo Wakayagi. At the end of 1912 Itō travelled to Germany to continue his opera training. However, following his arrival he devoted himself to dance, declaring that Vaslav Nijinsky, Isadora Duncan, and Anna Pavlova had inspired him. In August of 1913 he enrolled at the Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau, where he studied eurhythmics for a year. Eurhythmics’ 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 his later ‘dance symphonies.’ At the outbreak of WWI, Itō left Germany for London where his public and private performances of what he called “harmonized Europe-Japanese” dances in 1915 brought him to the attention of Yeats and Ezra Pound. Inspired by Pound, Yeats saw a connection between Irish folklore and the appearances of spirits of the dead in Japanese *nō* plays. Although Itō lacked formal training in *nō*, and had only a little in *kabuki* dance, the cross-cultural collaboration of dancer and poet proved fruitful and influenced Yeats’s four *Plays for Dancers* (1921). Most notable among these plays the dance-drama *At the Hawk’s Well*, in which Itō originated the role of the Guardian of the Well, was recognized as an important new departure for Yeats when it was performed before a select audience in Lady Cunard’s London drawing-room in 1916; it was later well received in New York and Los Angeles.   Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Itō’s ability to incorporate elements of Japanese culture into his Dalcroze training allowed him to create pieces that blended fluid abstraction with an emphasis on the body’s shape. Itō’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 U.S. artists turning to Japan as a model for experiments in symbolism and abstraction. Itō too was inspired by *nō* and *nihon buyō* and, after moving to New York in 1917, 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. A 1929 tour with his company finished in Los Angeles where Itō established a dance school and began performing at small venues for groups of art-lovers. He also began choreographing large-scale dance symphonies at places such as the Pasadena Rose Bowl and the Hollywood Bowl with as many as two hundred dancers who moved through geometric patterns as a visualisation of the accompanying music. Unfortunately, none of these successful large ensemble pieces still exists.  In Europe and the U.S., Itō’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, Itō’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 Itō 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.  Itō 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 Itō returned to Japan in 1943 he founded the Itō Michio Studio, which remained open until 1976, fifteen years after his death. The Itō 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. Itō intended his choreography to express a mood or idea; he avoided pantomime or explicit narrative. Working closely with music, Itō’s movement alternately corresponded and contrasted with the composition, echoing his eurhythmics 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 Itō as representative of an ‘authentic’ Japan or Asia, his modern dance peers recognized him as a charismatic and creative artist. Legacy Itō’s method, repertory, and experiments in intercultural dance and theatre performance endure today. After his death in 1961, his protégé Ryuko Maki maintained his dance repertory and training methods in Japan, passing them on to Satoru Shimazaki, who presented an Itō concert at Theatre of the Open Eye in New York in 1979. In 1964, Kyoko Imura founded the Itō Michio Alumni Association (ミチオイトウ同門会) in Japan, which continues to perform revivals of his work. The Itō method is also studied at some U.S. universities, marking Itō as part of the traditional relationship between modern dance and institutions of higher education. Such inclusion represents Itō as a key figure in the history of U.S. modern dance. Indeed, the Repertory Dance Theatre in Salt Lake City frames the Itō works in its repertory as recovering a ‘forgotten pioneer of American modern dance.’  While Yeats’s *At the Hawk’s Well* resulted from Pound and Yeats borrowing from Japanese *nō* drama, Itō’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. As one of the first choreographers to circulate between Japan, Europe, and the United States, Itō helped establish a path that was later traced by dancers such as Yuriko Kikuchi, and *butō* performers Hijikata Tatsumi and Kazuo Ohno. Throughout his career, Ito advanced the cause of cultural interchange. On the brink of WWII he made several trips to Japan trying to avert war between two countries he loved; asked to choreograph the opening and closing ceremonies for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, he envisioned dance that celebrated peaceful cultural exchange, but did not live to see that project materialize. Selected List of Works: *The Fox (1916)*  *At the Hawk’s Well*, choreographer (1916)  *Bushido*, co-director, scene designer (1916)  *Pizzicati*, solo performance (1916)  *Pinwheel Revel* (1922)  *Tango* (1927)  *Tone Poem I and II* (1928)  *At the Hawk’s Well* director, (1929)  *Pageant of Lights* choreographer, director, (1929)  *Etenraku, Blue Danube*, choreographer, director (1937)  *ミカド (The Mikado)*, choreographer (1947) |
| Further reading:  (Caldwell)  (Cowell, East and West in the Work of Michio Ito)  (Cowell, Michio Ito in Hollywood: Modes and Ironies of Ethnicity) |