**Ohno Kazuo (b. 27 October, 1906 Hakodate, Hokkaido, Japan; d. 1 June, 2010 Yokohama, Japan)**

**Summary**

When Ohno Kazuo died at age 103, he was an international legend memorialized in newspapers around the world as a Japanese modern dancer, a pioneer of *butoh*, and a captivating performer of astounding depth and playfulness. However, the phase of his performance career that led to this worldwide renown did not begin until age seventy-three with a 1980 performance at the Nancy International Theatre Festival. With that performance and subsequent frequent touring, Ohno played a significant role in introducing butoh to the world, some twenty years after its initial development by Hikikata Tatsumi, Ohno, and a group of Tokyo-based dancers. Although Ohno performed frequently in other choreographers' works, and was sometimes joined on stage by his son, Yoshito (1938--), he is best known for the improvisational solo performances from the last quarter century of his life, including three pieces directed by Hijikata. Unlike some of his fellow butoh performers, Ohno maintained the modernist belief that dance is capable of expressing universal human experiences.

**Training**

Ohno was a physical education teacher at Kanto Gakuin (1929-1934) and Yokohama's Soshin Baptist Girls' High School from 1934 until his retirement in 1967; even after that he worked as a part-time repairman at the school until 1980. Ohno had been deeply moved by modern dance performances by Antonia Mercé, known as ‘La Argentina,’ and Harold Kreutzberg, but was not impelled to take dance classes himself until he was required to teach dance as part of his job. Beginning in 1933, he studied with three of Japan’s modern dance pioneers, Ishii Baku, Eguchi Takaya, and Miya Misako, the latter two of whom studied under Mary Wigman in Germany and were instrumental in introducing *Ausdruckstanz* to Japan. Ohno’s dancing was interrupted by nine years of military service, including one as a prisoner of war in Papua New Guinea. Upon his return to Japan in 1946, Ohno resumed classes with Eguchi and Miya, and at age forty-three in 1949 began giving a series of solo modern dance recitals. That same year he established the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio.

Over the next decade he performed in his own modern dance work and in dances by other choreographers, including Andō Mitsuko. Reviews from this period note a particular interiority, a quality for which he would come to be known later as a butoh dancer. Although his movement vocabulary underwent a transformation, the modernist underpinnings of his work did not. From 1960 to 1967, Ohno largely abandoned his own choreography to be a participant in Hijikata’s avant-garde *ankoku butoh* ‘Dance Experiences’ alongside his son, Yoshito. After 1968, Ohno performed onstage only occasionally, although he continued to teach at his home dance studio and made a series of experimental films with Chiaki Nagano. In 1977, Ohno had the second debut of his solo performance career with the landmark choreography, *Admiring La Argentina*, directed by Hijikata. This dance draws from a range of images (the transgender prostitute, Divine, from Jean Genet’s *Our Lady of the Flowers*; a small girl; crucifixion; a woman) and is performed to a variety of music, including Bach, tango, and Maria Callas.

**Contributions to Modernism**

Ohno’s significant contributions to late-twentieth-century dance flow directly from his exposure to European modern dance and his extensive experience in Japanese modern dance. Like the dancers he revered from the 1920s and 1930s, Ohno himself was a singular artist, with an idiosyncratic movement vocabulary and a distinctive physique. His dances refigured aesthetics, transforming his gnarled joints, aging body, and angular yet playful movements into a dance of sublime beauty. Dance for Ohno became a way of revealing one’s inner world, and of accessing and communicating humanist and spiritual truths about life and death. Unlike Martha Graham, however, Ohno believed these truths could not be accessed through a set movement vocabulary or choreography, but must emerge from each individual.

**Legacy**

Ohno performed internationally through 1999, and in Japan through 2004, even from his wheelchair. He attended his last workshop in 2005, at which point his son, Yoshito Ohno, took over the twice-weekly open classes at the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio, which he continues to lead. For the last years of Ohno’s life, he was confined to bed, where he was nursed by some of his closest disciples, and visited by a stream of artists from Japan and abroad.

Dancers from all over the world trained with Ohno, and his students have played a significant role in spreading and perpetuating butoh. And yet, Ohno’s butoh lineage is more diffuse and harder to trace than Hijikata’s. This can perhaps be attributed to Ohno’s interest in improvisation over set movement. Moreover, although he taught countless students in his twice-weekly workshops, he continuously insisted that he had ‘nothing to teach’, preferring instead to offer archetypal images—of women and flowers, in particular—and ideas for them to explore in search of their own authentic selves through dance.

**Rosemary Candelario**

**List of Selected Works**

1949 *Jellyfish Dance*

1969 *A Portrait of Mr. O*, film, directed by Chiaki Nagano

1971 *Mandala of Mr. O*, film, directed by Chiaki Nagano

1972 *Mr. O's Book of the Dead*, film, directed by Chiaki Nagano

1977 *Admiring La Argentina*, directed by Hijikata Tatsumi

1981 *My Mother*, directed by Hijikata Tatsumi

1985 *The Dead Sea*

1985 *Viennese Waltzes and Ghosts*, directed by Hijikata Tatsumi

1987 *Water Lilies*

1990 *Flowers-Bird-Wind-Moon*

1992 *A White Lotus Bloom*, *Oguri Hangan*, *Terute Hime*

1995 *The Road in Heaven, The Road on Earth*

**References and Further Reading**

Fraleigh, S. and Nakamura T. 2006. *Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo*. New York: Routledge.

Hosoe E. 2006. *The Butterfly Dream*. Tokyo: Seigensha Art Publishing.

Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio. 2010. *Kazuo Ohno: Chronicle of a Lifetime 1906-2010*. Tokyo: Canta Co. Ltd.

Ohno, K. and Y. Ohno. 2004. *Kazuo Ohno’s World from Without and Within*. Trans. John Barrett. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.

Ohno *Beauty and Strength*. 2000. Tokyo: NHK Software. DVD.

**Paratextual Materials**

Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio website: http://www.kazuoohnodancestudio.com/english/

Proposed photo

http://www.pierreolivierdeschamps.com/POD/kazuo\_ohno.html The artist’s contact information is also on this website.