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### **Alien Butoh Festival plays at being foreign**

A festival of "alien" butoh is an interesting proposition, given that many people in the performing arts world perceive butoh as an alien visitor in its own right, in terms of being contrary to the forms that dictate most established dance styles.

The Alien Butoh Festival at Jean Jean in Shibuya Oct. 1-6 played on the concept of butoh being foreign, and not just different, by showcasing a slew of butoh bodies from northern Europe. The festival was produced by Imre Thormann from Switzerland, who danced "Burnt Soil." The other performers were Kitt Johnson from Denmark in "Epi Pha Nic Vii," Gregor Weber from Germany in "Window Changes" and Susanna Akerlund from the Swedish butoh company Su-en performing "Scrap Bodies."

Akerlund's performance Oct. 3-4 was an interesting demonstration of how the forms and nuances of butoh can develop once fully integrated and removed from the all-encompassing embrace of the sensei/choreographer. Akerlund's training was with Yoko Ashikawa, the woman who danced with butoh founder Tatsumi Hijikata and founded her own group, Hakutobo, which is now named Tomoe Shizune & Hakutobo.

Akerlund trained with Hakutobo from 1988-1993 and performed with the company and also the student company Gnome, before setting up her own group in 1992 and touring her choreography in Sweden, and to other Scandinavian countries, Russia, Germany and the Czech Republic.

"Scrap Bodies" was performed in collaboration with music by Lee Berwick, lighting by Jens Carlsson and spectacular metal artwork by Gunnar Stening. The tour continues in November to Seattle, San Francisco and New York.

The work is themed to the possibilities of movement and exploration afforded by a scrap-metal yard in Uppsala, Sweden, from which Berwick sampled the sounds emanating from the movement of this detritus of consumption. It premièred in the scrap yard in an imaginative use of site-specific work, which is all too rare in the home of butoh.

Akerlund has kept much of her original training with Ashikawa in the style of Su-en - the consciousness and intimacy of gravity that informs butoh performance, the facial contortions that express despair and glee, with the mouth of a homeless cripple. She adds to this a sense of dramatic theatricality, and a delicacy of texture brought by her natori (professional license) in traditional Japanese jiuta-mai dance.

One of the differences between the two art forms, she says, is that jiuta-mai is danced to an external stimulus, whereas the impetus for butoh comes from within the body. "With jiuta-mai, we more often convey our response to natural phenomenon, such as rain or flower petals falling. Butoh is danced in connection with actual existence."

The physical movements of mountains of scrap metal inspired both approaches. "As we watched what was happening in the scrap yard, it was like looking at a constantly changing landscape," she says.

For Akerlund, her training with Hakutobo gave her a history of creating choreography that has its base in the "living body" that creates it, with all its social and historical context. "Ashikawa taught us that we cannot choose existence piecemeal. We must face it as it is, whether or not this leads to a pleasant aesthetic experience or not," she says. "We're not in a position to accept only a few molecules when lightning strikes."

"Scrap Bodies" is a work of dramatic contrasts, and a major development from earlier pieces such as "Kaze no Cho," which premiered at Tokyo's Tiny Alice six years ago. It opens with a series of peregrinations around the stage, which can be traced by the footprints left by the white rice powder makeup used on the body.

Akerlund explores metal artworks with a gummy grin and the delight of finding beauty in the discarded, in a parallel to the practice of seeing the spectacular in found objects which has so amused the fine arts. This section segues into an explosive frieze of the kind of dance you'd expect if the builders of the pyramids took a quick break to ape the drawings on the walls. The metal artwork is an integral partner in this, down to a stunning copper headdress, which also evokes a goddess of metal-workers.

Yet this is all the prologue for the emotional crux of "Scrap Bodies," when in silence Akerlund draws herself up into a slack-jawed gigantic shape, collar bones like excavated eyebrows high over nipples like eyes, and holds the physical tension to its breaking point. The final section in a blaze of light defies most traditional butoh structures of withdrawal and abjuration, as Akerlund flings herself at the wall in fetus shape, or bouncing around on her butt like a perverted elf while playing with the metal spheres.

For those who operate on a fixed definition of butoh, it is a challenge. For others who perceive the dance form to have the potential for limitless development, it is long overdue.

Although it has been noted that traditional butoh lends itself to the sterner artistic expressions of the northern hemisphere, this Alien Butoh Festival was a welcome addition to the surge of performance this year inspired by the Buddhist commemoration of the death of founder Tatsumi Hijikata 13 years ago, which is expected to culminate with performances by Kazuo Ohno and Akiko Motofuji, Hijikata's widow, next month at Setagaya Public Theater.

For an art form that is now researched at postgraduate level in academic institutions worldwide, it is an exciting time. And the age-old controversy here of questioning whether it is equally well served by non-Japanese bodies may finally be laid to rest.