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ABSTRACT

Dance practice is often hidden inside dance studios, where it is not available for dialogue or interdisciplinary critique. In this paper, I will look closer at one of the accents that my body has held since the year 2000. To Swedish dance academies, it is perhaps the most foreign accent I have in my dance practice. It has not been implemented as 'professional dance' in Western dance studios. This foreign accent is called Nihon Buyō, Japanese dance, also known as Kabuki dance. Nihon Buyō, Nō or Kabuki are local performing arts practices for professional performers in Japan. A few foreigners are familiar with these practices thanks to cultural exchange programmes, such as the yearly Traditional Theatre Training at Kyoto Art Centre. There is no religious spell cast over the technique or a contract written that it must be kept secret or that it must not leave the Japanese studio or the Japanese stage. I will compare how dance is being transmitted in the studio in Kyoto with my own vocational dance education of many years ago. Are there similarities to how the female dancer's body is constructed? Might there be unmarked cultural roots and invisible originators of the movements we are doing today in contemporary dance?

ABSTRAKT

Dansutövandet hålls ofta dolt innanför dansstudion där det inte görs tillgängligt för dialog eller tvärdisciplinär kritik. I denna text kommer jag att se närmare på en av de dialekter som min kropp har sedan år 2000. För svenska dansakademier är det kanske den mest främmande dialekten som jag har i min danspraktik. Den har inte implementerats som "professionell dans" i dansstudior i väst. Denna främmande dialekt kallas Nihon Buyō, japansk dans, även kallad Kabuki-dans. Nihon Buyō, Nō eller Kabuki är lokala scenkonstformer för professionella scenkonstnär i Japan. Några få utlänningar känner till dem tack vare olika kulturutbytesprogram, till exempel den årliga traditionella teaterträningen, T.T.T., på Kyoto Art Center. Tekniken är inte belagd med någon religiös besvärjelse. Det finns heller inte några skrivna avtal om att den måste hållas hemlig, eller att den inte får lämna den japanska studion eller den japanska scenen. Jag kommer att jämföra hur dans kommuniceras och förs vidare i studion i Kyoto med min egen yrkesdansutbildning för många år sedan. Finns det några likheter i hur den kvinnliga dansarens kropp konstrueras? Finns det några omärkta kulturella rötter och osynliggjorda upphovskvinnor till de rörelser vi gör idag i nutida dans?

A Body of Accents

Susan Leigh Foster writes, 'I know the body only through its response to methods and techniques used to cultivate it' (Foster 1992, 480). This describes the daily struggle to 'become a body', 'become a subject' and 'become a dancer'. My own text makes use of a personal perspective to evoke a bodily experience of Nihon Buyō—Japanese dance—for the reader.¹ Nihon Buyō is also known as 'Kabuki dance'. It is based on ancient forms of temple dance, festival dance, Bunraku, and Nō. However, 'Kabuki dance' is not the same as Kabuki theatre, in which, since the Tokugawa banning of women on stage in 1629, only men are allowed to perform. The history of Nihon Buyō 'reveals that, contrary to the common perception of Nihon Buyō as a traditional performing art, it is a creation of the twentieth century.' (Yamazaki 2001, ix). Nihon Buyō is a resurrected art form to help women reclaim access to the stage again.

To Western dance academies, it is perhaps the most foreign accent in my dance practice. It has not been implemented as 'professional dance' in Western dance studios. In this article, I want to explore how Nihon Buyō is—or is not—foreign to my body, compared to other dance practices I have studied. I write in three sections, the first describing how my body works to adjust to the foreign surroundings, the second describing how my body reacts to a foreign dance practice, and the third describing how the foreign might be received or rejected. If I look at the various dance practices I embody, there is absolutely nothing 'Swedish' in them, and my point in this text is to question which dances are included in the canon and which are not. I never



Photo 1 Photo description: The author performs Shizuno Odamaki at Oe Nob Theatre, 2011 Photo: Kyoto Art Center

learned Swedish folk dance; instead, I learned Croatian folk dance. In my professional dance education at the Ballet Academy in Gothenburg, I encountered a mix of classical ballet from Romania, Austria, the UK and the U.S., modern and postmodern dance from the U.S. and Belgium, jazz (Horton/Dunham/Ailey) from the U.S., flamenco at the barre from Spain and Sweden, and tap dance from the U.S. Even though the different dance techniques that I studied in my earlier training came from all over the world, they were not framed as 'world dance'. They were framed as techniques that a professional dancer must know in order to get a job, which we learned was something different from the folk dances of Croatia or Sweden. My dancer colleagues and I provide the living bodies for the colonisation of the world's different dance practices and their inclusion into—or exclusion from—the canon of 'professional dance'. Lena Hammergren has written about how African-American jazz was translated into Nordic

spaces, and how global movement vocabularies can critique the idea of a fixed geographical region, known as 'local' (2015, 102). Our bodies were constantly crafted as foreign to the different techniques we needed to study in order to become professional dancers. My dance practice has often been foreign to myself, and I have been struggling to embody my own body in order to make it a home, a struggle that through the years has included all the different techniques I have mentioned so far. I dance with many accents.

In what follows, I will take a closer look at one of the accents my body has held since the year 2000. Nihon Buyō, Nō and Kabuki are traditional and 'local' practices for professional performers in Japan, but a few foreigners are familiar with the practice, thanks to cultural exchange programmes such as the yearly Traditional Theatre Training at Kyoto Art Centre. I practice this technique with permission from the dance master Nishikawa Senrei, who argued that Nihon Buyō is also a contemporary technique, and I consider that this legitimates continuation of my own practice of Nihon Buyō and contemporary forms of Japanese dance.²

Japan is my second home, and my journeys to Kyoto are always directed to dance practice and to the study of Nihon Buyō (and Nō theatre) with Japanese masters. These journeys include struggles of 'becoming' in flesh and bone, in a society that always will recognise me as foreign. Most of the foreigners I meet in Japan are from other Asian countries. From 1945 until 1952, Japan was occupied by the Allied powers. I become a representative of these foreigners and intruders. It is only after a while that people understand that English is not my first language, and that I come from a very different cultural sphere than does an American person. Sweden is not that well known.

I would now like to invite you to follow me to Japan, more specifically to Kyoto.

My body turns foreign

My body turns foreign as soon as I arrive at Kansai Airport. This foreignness is both a mental and a physical state. I turn foreign when I squeeze into the little airport shuttle, and when I step into the *machiya* where I have stayed before. Nonetheless, I feel at home. My body remembers the choreography of this house from before. I bow from my hips to Matsui san, the lady who owns the house. This particular *machiya* is a beautiful traditional *obi*-maker's house in the Nishijin area of Kyoto. It is a wooden house, and the floors are covered with *tatami*. I run with tiny steps without lifting my heels to show her that I am effective and willing to help with cleaning or cooking. I do quite well before I hit my head against a sharp corner and almost run my elbow through a paper window. I do quite well before falling out of the tiny slippers while stepping onto the raised *tatami*-clad floor through the *shōji*, the sliding paper doors. I am well aware of the clumsiness one is subject to when trying too hard to fit in.

My body turns foreign as I ride the tiny Japanese bicycle along Horikawa Street from Teranouchi in the north to Shijo in the south. The bicycle is so small that it hurts my knees. Rather than sit on the saddle, I crouch on it, knees almost touching the handlebar. In order to unburden my knees, I pedal out of the saddle and stand up as often as possible all the way down to Shijo. There is only one gear, a very low one, which requires fast pedalling. My *yukata* flutters in the wind. I smile politely and nod at the people I pass. I want to show everybody that I am a good foreigner who will not cause any trouble. After a while, deposits of lactic acid add another heavy pain to overcome. In the past, my Romanian ballet teacher forbade us to ride a bicycle because it would develop thigh muscles that were too big. He said that we would have to accept that from that point on, in our careers as ballet dancers, we would have to take a taxi wherever we were going. Even walking had

the risk of developing the wrong muscles. I did not become a ballet dancer.

I know Kyoto from riding a bicycle. I know which roads are best for bicycles. Imadegawa is a key street, essential in my Kyoto history, but the Western part of this street is to be avoided if travelling by bicycle. The traffic here is quite heavy and the sidewalks are too narrow for bicycles. The performance space Kyo Ryu Kan, run by the choreographer Peter Golightly, used to be just north of Imadegawa.³ Here, Golightly taught jazz classes, and thus I was able to continue my bodily habitus from Sweden while taking a break from the 'new' Nihon Buyō body. One of the best playgrounds in the northwestern corner of Goshō—the imperial park—is reached through Imadegawa. Just north of Goshō, east of Doshisha University, the temple grounds of Shōkoku-ji provide a safe and silent bicycle space. I have experience of wobbly bicycles. I have a practice of biking north and south, and east and west, with one child on the cargo rack and another on the handlebar. I meet many Japanese mothers involved in the same practice. I think this practice makes my body less foreign. Because I emulate native mothers? Because I am a mother too, which is a global position. As mothers on bicycles, we become foreigners to the people driving cars. To me, the city of Kyoto is divided into dance spaces, study locations and playground places. I pass through different zones where I have performed, where I have studied and where I have played with my children. This is my eighth journey. Kyoto is my second home after Sweden, and yet I remain a foreigner.



Photo 2 Photo description: The author on a bicycle in Kyoto Photo: Peter Golightly

The Japanese dance studio

Horikawa Street is also essential to my Kyoto history. Horikawa, with its proud ginkgo trees, just about to shift into their autumn foliage. I remember them shining yellow, with oceans of gold surrounding them. Ginkgo, with its fan-shaped leaves, is often portrayed on *yukatas*, *kimonos* and *obis*, on porcelain, and on paper scrolls. The ginkgo trees are a reminder of my lessons in Japanese dance. Bicycling along Horikawa Street, from north to south—a fast ride dressed in a *yukata*—activates my body memory of the build-up before an *okeiko* (lesson), before learning a new choreography, which in Japanese is called *furi utsushi*. These are memories of anxiety, of knowing that I must show what I have remembered from last time. Two years or more might have passed since my last *okeiko*, but I must behave appropriately, and show no signs of tension. I must act as if it were yesterday. My body turns foreign as I enter the *dōjō*, even though I am no foreigner to this place.

Even though the female students practicing in the *dojo* seem to keep their private space and focus, they now and then rush to correct me. This did not happen while Nishikawa Senrei was alive. I am being watched, and at the same time, I am made more foreign than ever. I have to get used to the hands of many, reaching out to my body for correction. They straighten the *yukata* if it is tied too loose, and they readjust the bow of the *obi* if it hangs askew. I bow gratefully. They help me to blend in. I glance at their bodies, smaller and thinner than my own. I stare at their shoulders. Drawn back and down in the female construction? Broader, elbows lifted in the male construction? In between, neither male nor female, for the divine construction? There are three different gender opportunities—female, male and divine. Who am I? My own body reveals itself as a giant's body. How much should I squeeze the bones of my shoulders to make myself smaller/more 'feminine'? I am being moulded into a body of ideas suitable for Nihon Buyō, where the feminine stereotype in particular is complex. The feminine stereotype is a male-to-female technique, best described as the study of an 'intentional body', as it will never be realised (Mezur 2005, 177), or as an interaction between what Foster calls the perceived, the ideal and the demonstrative body (1992, 483). Srinivasan writes about how certain female characters in the Indian dance form Bharat Natyam require the performance of the 'ideal' Indian woman's behaviour. These characters do not question patriarchal authority (Srinivasan 2012, 27). Similarly, versions of an 'ideal' dancer's behaviour are practiced in the studio in Kyoto, and are ubiquitous for many dance practices, more or less gendered; in classical ballet and in Graham technique, for example. The physical etiquette of silent doing, the quiet agreement on hierarchy and the anxiety of having to strive to become as close to perfect as possible are familiar to me from other instances in my dance education. I am a foreigner in

Japan, but while studying Japanese dance, my bodily response to methods and techniques used to cultivate the dancer is no different than it is to classical ballet, modern dance or jazz.

At night, I clean the *dojo* with Emiko san. If I wear kneepads, I shuffle myself forwards on my knees. If I am without kneepads, I try to do like Emiko san and run on all fours. This is a very effective way, but painful if you have weak wrists. She is tiny and quick, I am big and slow. 'Dancers constantly apprehend the discrepancy between what they want to do and what they can do' (Foster 1992, 485).

When tradition travels

Sellers-Young describes how Asian performance techniques laid the foundation for the more reduced and contemplative expressions in postmodern dance, such as Cunningham's explorations of 'motion in stillness' and 'stillness in motion' (2013, 75). Srinivasan writes about how nameless dancers from India came to Coney Island in 1904 and how Ruth St. Denis, one of the 'mothers' of American modern dance, viewed and was influenced by their performances (2012, 9). St. Denis also studied with Japanese traditional musicians (who are usually also trained in dance), according to Ted Shawn (1904, 66–76). After encounters with Asian performers, St. Denis went on to establish her career as a soloist and choreographer; she is today considered one of the pioneers of what we know as American modern dance. Srinivasan argues that the inception of modern dance in America was a collective endeavour (2012, 22): St. Denis did not invent her 'Egyptian', 'Indian', 'Japanese' or 'Thai' dances herself. The Western modernist practices, with icons such as Ruth St. Denis, Artaud, Debussy, Brecht, Yvonne Littlewood and Martha Graham, are appropriated artistic practices from all over the world—Japanese dance, Odissi, yoga, capoeira and many more (Foster 2009, 10). 'Western' performers unmarked their cultural roots and failed to refer to their originators.



My narrative, and my research, would have been different had I decided to move to Japan for good. It is quite impossible for a foreigner to earn Japanese citizenship, since the Japanese state attributes citizenship by blood and not by location of birth. My friend and colleague who has stayed in Japan since he was seventeen years old holds an 'artist's visa' that he must renew every three years. He confirms that it is difficult to be a foreigner in Japan. In Sweden, I sometimes become 'the woman

Photo 3 Photo description: The author with Nishikawa Senrei at Senreinokai in Kyoto, 2010
Photo: Palle Dahlstedt

who performs Japanese dance'. It indeed points out one of my accents as a more foreign and culturally marked dance practice, easy to ridicule when moved to a different country. Once I was even described as a nameless 'hired dancer in kimono'. There is a conflict when deciding who is foreign to a dance practice, and who has the right to perform which techniques,

especially in the debate over cultural appropriation. I am a contemporary performer with many detectable accents, which I aim not to hide or mystify. If I approach the ballet barre, my body will instinctively adopt a certain bodily behaviour. However, in an improvisation class, someone may tell me that my movements look Japanese. This complicates any fixed understanding of 'local' or 'foreign' dance practices. Like most of my colleagues, I used to travel to the big dance cities—London, Paris and New York City—to study contemporary dance. None of this would be considered strange; rather, it would be seen as appropriate. I wanted to change direction and argue that Kyoto is also a dance city with a long tradition of many various dance practices. However, when I wear the *yukata* or *kimono* in Sweden, I become a symbol of someone who thoughtlessly steals a culture. Studying and performing American modern dance, Dutch new dance or Russian ballet in Swedish dance schools seems to be less problematic because of my ethnic Swedish background. Few see my performing of those techniques as a problem. I want to argue that Nihon Buyō—Japanese dance—is not more foreign to my body than other dance practices I have studied. Including Japanese dance in my contemporary work is an attempt at a non-hierarchical treatment of all dance practices, to show defiance to the ethnocentrism of dance and theatre in Sweden.

Notes

Furi utsushi literary means 'pretend copying'.

A *machiya* is a traditional wooden townhouse. It is a long wooden home with earthen walls and baked tile roofs. The front of the building is usually a 'shop space', having sliding or folding shutters where goods can be displayed (in this case, *obis*). It has small courtyard gardens on the inside and a large open-air kitchen.

Nishijin is a district in the northwestern part of Kyoto. In this district, a traditional technique called Nishijin weaving originated over 1200 years ago.

An *obi* is a sash for traditional Japanese dress. The broader *obi* is an essential part of the kimono outfit.

The suffix *-san* is an honorific that is attached to the end of people's names.

A *shoji* is a door, window or room divider in traditional Japanese houses. It consists of translucent paper over a frame of wood, which holds together a lattice of wood or bamboo.

Suriashi means 'sliding foot' in Japanese. In traditional theatre and dance, *suriashi* is performed parallel on bent legs. This can be practised at the beginning of a class, after the greeting ritual or within the choreography itself. *Suriashi* is also used when actors and dancers enter the Nō theatre stage.

Endnotes

1 I am using the Rōmaji spelling ('Nihon Buyō' and Nō') instead of the English ('Nihon Buyo' and 'Noh'), since the pronunciation of Japanese syllables is not exactly the same as English. Rōmaji was developed to describe the sounds of Japanese in the Roman alphabet.

2 Nishikawa Senrei (1945-2012) held a master license from Nishikawa school of Japanese dance. She created her own original intercultural dance performances, and toured all over the world.

3 Peter Golightly was a member of the art collective Dumb Type and is trained in contemporary dance and Nihon Buyō in U.S. and Japan.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt is a Swedish performer, choreographer, filmmaker and writer who often creates stage works based on her embodied life story. Her solo performance *A Particular Act of Survival* received the Slow Food Award at the Swedish Scenkonstgalan in 2015. In December 2018, Ami premieres a new piece in which she traces the story of her great grandmother through the Noh drama *Yamamba*. In 2015, she was

appointed as coordinator, together with the visual artist Dr Lucy Lyons, of the Nordic Summer University Study Circle 7: Practicing Communities—Transformative societal strategies of artistic research. Ami is a PhD candidate at Centre for Asian Theatre and Dance, University of London, and she is a member of the Peer Review Board of the Journal of Artistic Research.