



# At the Hawk's Well – *a dialogue between Japan and the West through the dances of a hawk woman*

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*Abstract: The aim of this article is to compare different versions of a dance solo created for William Butler Yeats's At the Hawk's Well. This play was recognised as part of the Noh theatre repertory in Japan. We suggest that through the hawk woman's solo it is possible to observe the evolution of a dialogue between Japan and the West, since dance itself can be considered a whole universe of knowledge. In the specific case of Yeats's drama, the discussion also extends to the relationship between tradition and avant-garde, past and future, life and death. From the many different versions of At the Hawk's Well we chose the first, created by the Japanese choreographer Michio Ito, and the 1981, 1982 and 1991 Noho productions. In all of them the characters of the old man, the hawk woman and the young Cuchulain were maintained. The mood was dreamlike, exactly as the poet always wished.*

## *The traditional Noh*

There are two kinds of dance in the Noh theatre – *shimai* (dance with a chorus) and *mai* (dance with music only). In both of them the basic gestures are: the *suriashi* (gliding the feet across the floor) and the choreographic circles of the characters in order to see each other (during the first part of the dialogues). At first sight, these two choreographic modes could easily be integrated into Western choreography, but the dance sequences with the typical *kata* are more difficult to reproduce. The basic *kata* is *kamae*: the arms draw a circle, the torso inclines itself forward, the knees are slightly flexed, and the centre of equilibrium is in the lower abdomen. The posture must be stable and natural. The actor moves across the stage with a slow walk, gliding his feet, and without altering his posture, as already mentioned.

The movement is always horizontal and does not allow for vertical fluctuations. The movement comes from the hips (which is why the centre of equilibrium and strength is the lower region of the abdomen). Great concentration is required to guarantee the non-movement of the hips as well as the posture, even during the movements of the head, arms, torso and legs. Years of training are required to master the ability to sit, rise and move all the while maintaining this basic posture. The discovery of perfection here (directly influenced by Zen Buddhism) lies in reducing each movement to the barest minimum. The basis of

Noh dance is the stopping of each movement at the moment the muscles are most tensed.

It is not by chance that in the Noh theatre the model of movement concentrates its dramatic power in moments of non-movement. In this context one does not see the explicit gesture projected in space. Nevertheless, the tensed musculature is bursting with inner movement. This is the interval of the *ma* – the time-space interval in which anything can happen. With *tabi* socks gliding across the stage, *shite* and *waki* design curves and straight lines (Komparu, 1983, 214:223). Fantasy meshes with reality through the feet of the characters. On the Noh stage it is the *shite* and *waki* steps that weave the network (on the floor) that is able to translate the tenuous relationship between what is real and what is not.

It is estimated that there are around 250 patterns of movement, although the majority consist of variations of the thirty basic *kata*, combined and repeated at random. Komparu (1983, 217:218) classifies them as realistic (would-be descriptive), symbolic and abstract. The realistic movement is, for example, the *shio o kumu* (empty the water); the symbolic is the *omote e tsukau* (use the mask) and the abstract, the *sayu* (movement to the left and right, that marks the beginning and end of many dances). The realistic models frequently correspond to the text and are used to describe the action; the symbolic ones, on the other hand, are a kind of stylising of a real gesture; and the abstract ones bear no relation to reality, not representing any specific meaning – they normally appear in instrumental dances, *mai*.

### *The Noh theatre and the West*

To discover the best way to adapt this movement to a Western text, as in the case of *At the Hawk's Well*, is not an easy task. The Noho group, for example, experimented with a number of different solutions. In the first production, the director Jonah Salz, chose the character of the old man to reflect his intention of merging the Japanese aesthetic with that of the West. His movements should “echo” the Noh and not copy it. The actor McAteer was invited to create something special for this character. Since the text referred to a kind of “climbing-walk,” McAteer says he lifted his left foot very slowly, about fifteen centimetres from the floor, after taking a step, and then bent down. After this sequence, he remembers having transferred the weight of his body and his right foot was abruptly dragged, while the left suggested a slow walk, coming from behind to take a step forward (McAteer, 1985:3). Many found this movement complicated, but it was the first attempt to modify the *kata* of the Noh, following the method of the symbolic composition (based on the action of climbing, the gesture in the dance was stylised).

In the second production of the play, the old man, with a more dejected air, walked slowly in the traditional Noh style, and carried a bamboo, in the vertical position, right in front of his body. The right arm was bent and parallel to the floor. All the movements of the old man were considerably reduced, maintaining a more controlled and static posture. During his dialogue with the young man, he looked at him or stayed apart (another typical Noh posture). In this second version, according to McAteer (1985:4), the old man seemed to lose a little of the tension in his body, which had characterised the opening of the 1981 performance, in which his attitude had been more in line with the Noh because of the use of a mask (of a traditional type), different from the more modern and abstract version used in Kyoto. This gave a much stronger “Noh feeling” to the Tokyo production.

As for the performance of the young man, it was also different in the two productions. In the first, he made extravagant movements: he entered crossing the bridge with a long *naginata*. This crossing lasted three minutes, with musical accompaniment. This type

of movement is more frequent at the end of the plays, but was modified here. In the second production, the young man was the main actor. His long entrance was maintained, but it changed the focus of the play – the attention was centred on the young man.

It is important to reveal who the main actor is and who the supporting actor is because Noh drama does not allow for this kind of doubt. As the Yeats play is a Noh drama, with Western adaptations, many doubts occurred in relation to the distribution of rôles, and it was up to the director to define the quality to be highlighted: the tragic character of the old man or the heroism of the young one. Another difficulty deriving from the text was to choose the right moment for the *shimai*. McAteer considered this a complicated choice because in *At the Hawk's Well* there are no long sections of the chorus, apart from those at the beginning and the end; and the *shimai* needs this accompaniment (and does not usually appear at the beginning or the end of plays).

Eighty lines before the most important *mai* of the Hawk Woman, between lines 128 and 179, there are three of the longest speeches of the play, with around fourteen lines each. They are not consecutive, although they constitute the only part in which the dialogue is not so agitated and presents characteristics of confrontation, thus being able to harbour a *shimai* (whose nature is more reflective or descriptive). Of the total of forty-four lines in these three dialogues, thirty-seven are in conjunction with the music, with the main part of the text spoken by the chorus. Therefore, in the Tokyo performance, there were three small and separate dance sequences interpreted separately by the old man and the young man. They lasted about two minutes each, corresponding to the three above-mentioned dialogues. This never occurs in the traditional Noh, where only one actor interprets the *shimai* and the average duration is of three to five minutes (*op. cit.*:28). McAteer considers it would have been a good option to have let only the old man dance in the last two and a half minutes, instead of cutting the *shimai* into three parts.

However, if it was already difficult to create the *shimai* for the play, it was even more complicated to choreograph the *mai*. Although there are about 150 different *shimai* in the Noh, there are only seven or eight *mai* and only three or four are frequently danced. The themes of the *mai* are accompanied by music, inviting the spectator to reflect on the history or on the characteristics of that play in particular. The movements are very similar to the *shimai* and the duration depends on the play. The *mai* almost always lasts from three to ten minutes (Wakamatsu, 1985:2). In all the Noh productions, the choreography of the *mai* was created by Chin Kham, who studied the Noh, kabuki (Fujima style), and t'ai chi ch'uan. Her dance includes clear elements of these forms, combined in a choreography that suggests the Hawk Woman flying, jumping and sometimes, very threatening. For McAteer, Chin Kham's choreography could be considered more as a Japanese ballet, which little by little tells a story – which is not a characteristic of the Noh (although there are a few exceptions, like the *Momiji gari* play).

Another criticism levelled at Chin Kham was that her *mai* was sixteen minutes longer than the longest Noh *mai* (maximum ten minutes). Furthermore, in terms of movement, McAteer considered that there were more elements of the t'ai chi and of the kabuki than of the Noh. Chin Kham (1980:3), in turn, rebutted the criticisms by explaining how she had created the movements. She affirms that she started from the principle aesthetic fundamentals of the Noh to calculate the intervals, and the time and rhythm of each part. These elements would guarantee the quality of the flying bird. Furthermore, Chin Kham related the t'ai chi to the Noh in the position of the legs and feet.

The choreographer explains that the *suriashi* walk refers to the Japanese *hara* or the

Chinese *tan tien*. These are derived from the Chinese martial arts and the t'ai chi. Chin Kham refers to the concept of energy, also using the term *chi* – which can signify spirit, soul or movement (Komparu, 1983:126). Thus, in the solo of the Hawk Woman, she united the *suriashi* and the rooting position of the feet on the floor – typical of t'ai chi. As a result, there is a long walk with a light inflection of the knees, through which the Hawk Woman should seem powerful and solemn. As for posture, Chin Kham affirms that she made several experiments. In the first production the shape was rounder, with a stronger reference to t'ai chi, letting the energy flow securely and supporting the other parts of the body after being collected in the *hara*. In the second production, in Tokyo, the posture was elongated, in the elegant style of the Noh, with the shoulders held backwards, and the lines straighter and more angular.

It was possible to observe the application of the *jo-ha-kyu* progression in Chin Kham's choreography at certain moments. *Jo* appears in the introduction as a slower dance, with majestic movements which gradually build to the *ha*, an exhibition of circles, spiral movements and a kind of feeling of suspension. The climax that marks the transition from *ha* to *kyu* is expressed by the approximation of the Hawk Woman in the direction of the *hashigakari* aisle. The tension is prolonged until it reaches the *kyu*, which would be the battle between Cuchulain and the Hawk Woman. In fact, in each scene we can notice the *jo-ha-kyu*. For example, in the final struggle, there is a movement of preparation of the Hawk Woman (slower), after gaining strength (still *jo*), actions of attack (*ha*) and the fast blow (*kyu*). As for the *ma* (interval of time-space), it is clearly transmitted in the first half hour in which the Hawk Woman remains guarding the well. While she is sitting, without action, we can see her power projected through no movement. The choreographer states that she used this scene in her experiment with t'ai chi and meditation.

In July 1991, the Noho Group presented *At the Hawk's Well* for the third time, under the direction of Richard Emmert. The presentation was bilingual (English/Japanese). Instead of the chorus there were two spirits, who introduced the play and then sat as guardians of the Hawk Woman and the well. The characters of the old man and the young man were considered to be real people, using masks, and speaking in Japanese. The spirits and the Hawk Woman, without masks, spoke in English. The climax, as the programme of the play indicates, was again the *mai* of the Hawk Woman with Chin Kham.

### *The beginning of the story*

When the experiments of Michio Ito, the choreographer who created the first version of the choreography for the Yeats play, and Chin Kham are analysed, two distinct visions arise. Depending on the option to remain faithful to tradition, to change the idiom of the presentation or to create a new vocabulary of movement, a new mode of thinking is established – a philosophical model that draws the map of a new world with each pattern of movement that is brought to the stage.

The choreographer, actor and dancer Michio Ito is considered to have been one of the first Japanese artists to study and experiment with an aesthetic integration between Japanese tradition and modern Western dance. He was born in Misaki-Ty Kanda, Tokyo on 13th April of the twenty-sixth year of the Meiji era, which is the equivalent of 1893. His father, Tamekichi Ito (1864-1943), was a friend of the famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and was therefore influenced by the ideas of modern Western architecture.

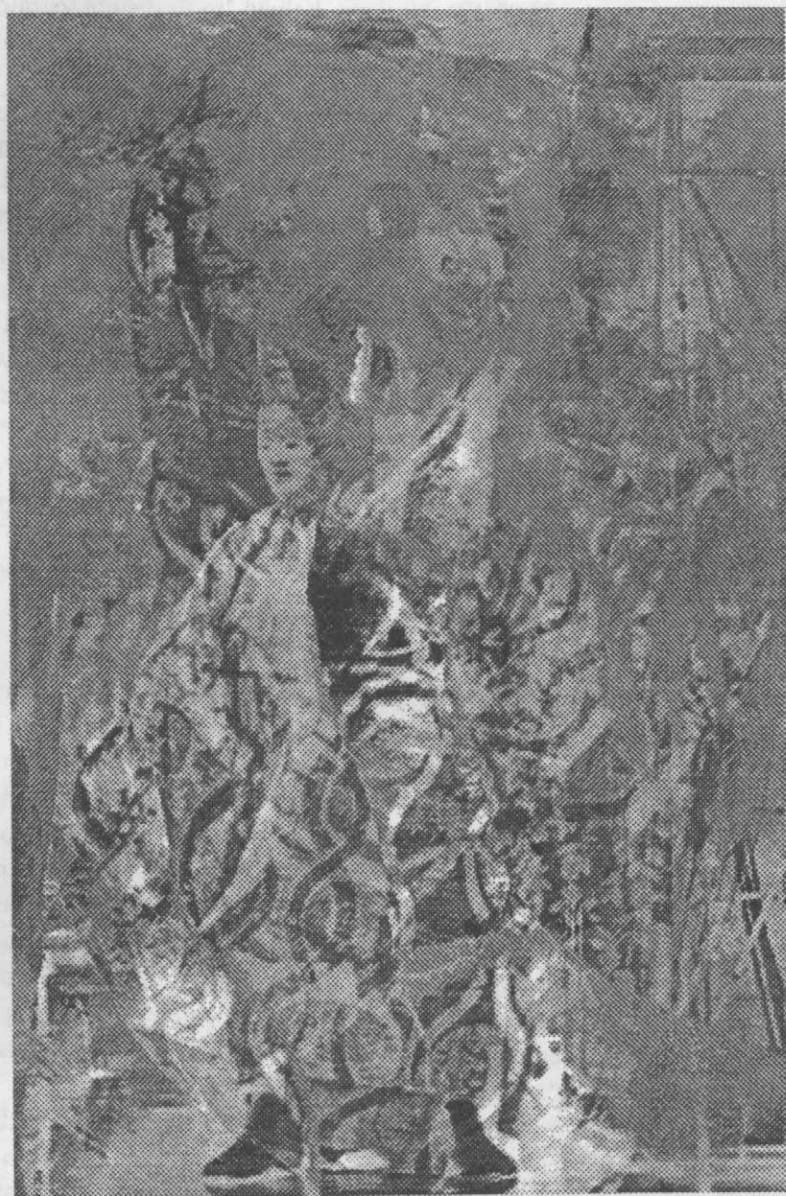
Ito's interest in art appeared very soon. From his earliest childhood he attended

many kabuki and shimpa plays. His intention was to graduate in music and work as an opera singer. He was the first born and his family wanted him to have a profession as an engineer; however he was given permission to study singing. His debut in the theatre was in a Shaka play, in which he was part of the chorus. Immediately afterwards he participated in *The Yuya*, from the official Noh repertory (Ito, 1956:5).

His artistic formation had hitherto been composed of piano classes and the *shimai*. Even so, more and more involved in his passion for the theatre, he founded the group *Toridesha* with his classmates. The first performance was *Interiors* by Maeterlink. Ito (1955:7) speaks

with great pride of his young students and what they felt at that time with an audience including such famous figures as Tsubouchi and Koyamauchi (masters of modern Japanese theatre). The group was very inexperienced. *Interiors* was well chosen. At that time, the first decade of the twentieth century, the symbolist movement, especially Maeterlink's plays, fascinated young Japanese artists, as did the photographic material of the stage, created by Gordon Craig, which started arriving at the famous Maruzen bookshop, where Ito had his dream of creating a new theatre. Baku Ishii (later a very famous choreographer) encouraged Ito to leave Japan. So, after finishing the first staging of *Toridesha*, in November 1910, Ito left for Germany, upon his brother-in-law's advice.

Year 45 of the Meiji era began, and the great dream of Ito was to attend an authentic opera and become a singer. In Paris, however, this dream was transformed after he attended one of the great performances by the classical dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. According to Ito's



brother Koreya Senda (1980:12), Nijinsky helped Ito to decide to study dance. However, the presentation of Isadora Duncan, which he saw immediately afterwards, was even more important.

This was because Ito considered Nijinsky's classical ballet to be a very distinct technique of the Japanese dance with which he had already grown familiar in Tokyo. Duncan, one of the West's modern dance pioneers, worked with movement based on Greek dance, with the energy centre coming from the solar plexus, the movement free and the dancer barefoot. It was without any doubt a technique closer to Ito's own experiments. However, due to her constant travelling, Duncan was not available to teach him.

At the same time, through an article in a newspaper, Ito heard about the presentation of *Orpheus*, a play produced by artists such as Gordon Craig, whose work Ito had already admired in Japan. Extremely excited, he went to see the play and decided to study at the Jacques Dalcroze Institute in Hellerau, where the play was staged. This gave rise to his personal research project, whose aim was not only to develop competent dancers but also to create a new dancing philosophy and a method capable of uniting the principles of modern German dance with Japanese tradition.

### *Two universes of knowledge*

Ito researched into the intersection between East and West, trying to find a common point between Noh theatre and modern Western dance – especially its German form. On the other hand, Chin Kham tried to achieve an adaptation, intending to conciliate Eastern gesture (she mixed t'ai chi with *shimai*) with the Western rhythm imposed by Yeats's text. Chin Kham was correct in contending that Noh gesture could be adapted to Western choreography, since it is composed of movement patterns (*kata*). Nevertheless, this alone is not sufficient to be effective in a process of aesthetic confluence. As one of the possible criteria for deepening this process, Chin Kham considered the degree of application of the elements referring to time and space (*ma* and *jo-ha-kyu*). Thus, in the Hawk Woman solo, the choreographer modified the *kata* (utilising other Eastern techniques) and adapted the dance rhythm to Yeats's text (McAteer explained in detail the difficulties and solutions of the Noho group in adapting the *shimai* and the *mai* to the Western model).

Chin Kham identified two important points in the hybridisation process between the Eastern and Western aesthetics: the gestural vocabulary and the notions of time and space. However, if her intention was to establish a dialogue between Japan and the West, the process was rendered fragile when she restricted herself to Eastern vocabulary (t'ai chi and Noh above all), trying to find the minimum possible "adaptation" and remaining faithful to the Noh theatre structure. It was a fascinating experiment, but with very little dialogue with the West.

In 1984, the Traditional Theatre Training Programme was set up in Kyoto by Jonah Salz and Rebecca Teele, from the Kongoh School of the Noh Theatre. Under the consultancy of the Noh leader Udaka Mishishige and other teachers, a six-week programme was organised, with daily classes preceded by a short orientation about Japanese culture. The objective was to introduce the universe of Japanese tradition to artists, scholars and students from other parts of the world.

Working with such distinct universes necessitates the absorption of new techniques of body preparation. For many artists/researchers, this process brings with it the possibility of living in the gap between evanescence and the earth, the virtual body and the living

organism, the dream and the reality. Yeats and Ito tried to review this deep and invisible gap. Chin Kham tried to project it without contravening the internal logic of the Noh theatre system. At the end of the fifties, through Yukio Mishima's text and Tatsumi Hijikata's body, the pain of this void was to enable the human body to be presented in all its degeneration and fragility, in the form of the *Butoh* dance. This was a philosophical proposal to give existence to a body living on the edge of crisis. This body would never have been born without Ito, Yeats and Mishima, among others, all of whom sought a means of survival in a world made fragile by the pain of knowledge.

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