

THE DEVIL IS SO BEAUTIFUL  
Tatsumi Hijikata 1928 - 1986

*This text was written for the 2004 St. Petersburg International Film Festival's special film program on Butoh dance and was published in the St. Petersburg Times, Nov. 2004*

"Sacrifice, provocation, violence, nakedness - the chaos of the early stages of butoh, were all a part of Hijikata's daily life." wrote butoh dancer Yoko Ashikawa in 1990 reflecting on Tatsumi Hijikata's dance of utter darkness (Ankoku- butoh). Born in northern agrarian Akita prefecture in 1928 Hijikata came to Tokyo at a ripe age of 24. Passionate about dance, he entered the avant-garde of 1960's post-war Japan, a time marked by swift internationalization, cultural insecurity and ardent political activism among Japan's youth. Hijikata in particular associated himself with many writers like Yukio Mishima, whose "Forbidden Colors" was borrowed as title for Hijikata's radical 1959 production addressing the taboo of male erotic love. In it a young Yoshito Ohno simulated sex with a live chicken locked between his thighs. Hijikata was, along with Kazuo Ohno and Akira Kasai, the founder of Butoh, Japan's most significant and internationally recognized contemporary dance movement.

Butoh is difficult, a slippery topic, widely misunderstood and often shrouded by conflicting definitions. This has its negatives but is good because it implies Butoh is not a fixed form. Butoh is something to be searched for, to be deciphered. One by one. Although unique to Japan, Butoh was influenced by western avant guard trends like surrealism, happenings, fluxus, German expressionistic dance, and the writings of Antonin Artaud. Hijikata was himself both a lover and hater of all things Western. A young student of dance at a time when European style and aesthetics were dominating dance culture in Japan, Hijikata found himself bowl legged and clumsy with big ambitions and fantastic ideas. Butoh was born when Hijikata rebelled.

In the 1970's after the creation of many works dealing with the male sensual body like "Forbidden Colors", "Rose Colored Dance" and "Anma" he became focused on Butoh as a regional dance of the Japanese body in particular, exploiting turned in knees and the low center of gravity. Images were central to Hijikata's training as was seeing the body as object. Hijikata went beyond national identification. Painting bodies white his subjects became a blank canvas from which to transform into plant, animal, element. He threw words like tiny bombs to fuel a totally new kind of dance born from the inside, out.

After 1974 Hijikata left the stage and focused on teaching and directing. He also published two books about dance "Being jealous of a Dog's Vein" (1976) and "Ailing Dancer" (1983). He declined all invitations to perform outside of Japan, never leaving his native soil. Hijikata's originality and fecund imagination are striking as his legacy pulses throughout the world. He died of cancer January 21, 1986.

- Alissa Cardone (Tokyo, 2004)