

The Possibilities of Minerals, Particles and the Body

An interview with Saburo Teshigawara

Interviewed by Yuichi Konno
Photo: Ryosuke Kikuchi

Kenji Miyazawa's poem "Haratai Kenbairen" is infused with the traditional arts of Iwate in northern Japan. "DAH-DAH-SKO-DAH-DAH", Saburo Teshigawara's dance inspired by the poem, has been re-staged and newly adapted twenty years on from its premiere.

Minerality and Musicality

Tokyo / Scene: I'm very interested in how "DAH-DAH-SKO-DAH-DAH" has changed since its original incarnation. It's not the case that you are just repeating the same thing, right?

Right, actually during the performance there are also changes in order to improve the piece.

TS: Has your approach to Kenji Miyazawa changed?

We could call this revival a "revision". I was the only performer in the premiere so the structure certainly changes, as do parts of the settings and music. I want to approach it in a fresh way.

TS: When you first made the piece we went together to Taneyama in Iwate, which has links to Miyazawa. Looking down from a hill in the Taneyama plains, mist at the bottom was rising up and enveloping you... In Taneyama there is no boundary between the stars and the earth. It feels like you are melting into it. That is the same starry sky that Miyazawa also looked at, isn't it?

Yes, it was beautiful, a very special vista. A large and

gentle plateau that was suddenly swallowed by the fog. The green hills and sunny sky were like a giant white screen. Miyazawa's poetry gives us a feeling of the universe and mineral things; they give a sense of noise, rhythm, music. We can hear sound from the air. The air is ringing. The wind is ringing. Miyazawa called poetry the phenomenology of the mind, and I strongly feel the body, minerals, wind, air, distance... I think that the world portrayed in his poetry reveals the primordial place of dance.

The Body is Made from Particles

TS: We could use the words "materiality" and

"Haratai Kenbairen"

A poem written by Kenji Miyazawa and themed around the Kenbai folk dance practised for over a hundred years in the northern Iwate mountain village of Esashi. Miyazawa himself composed around twenty songs in his short lifetime and is known to have said that music flowed in the currents of his own literary world. When he was young he was enamoured with the classical music of Beethoven and Debussy, and then in his last years became awakened to the music of his native province of Iwate. In Miyazawa's musical works we can thus feel a "globalized" perspective in the commingling of Occidental and Oriental (or Japanese folk) elements.

"physicality" for Miyazawa, but your dance and staging has a feeling of things and the body melting. Materiality melting physically...

Humans are originally related to things and have memorized various movements. So even if there were no more things, the movement is remembered. For example, if you memorize that turning that corner means you arrive at a shop, you draw a map inside your head. Drawing that map is comparable to choreography, and we can say that in this way, humans could make dance. The "kata" [form] we find in classical Japanese arts is surely the same kind of thing, no?

Human movement is defined by things, it is generalized, popularized, socialized. On the other hand, the body itself has a surface made up entirely of curves, while the inside, the internal organs, are liquid forms. Originally the body is a collective of particles formed, to the extent that it cannot segment, by the linking of the death and birth of cells. I have long thought that body expression and dance viewed from that standpoint then heads in an utterly different direction, and its possibilities expand. If this is our base, then we can surely create totally different movement.

TS: Otherwise you end up just always going down the same path, right?

Well, I'm not negating always going down the same path, but it's like the mechanism where, for example, in a camera if you don't press the shutter you cannot take a photograph. So, in order to take a picture, you give the meaning of form [kata] to the mechanism of the body, and operate it. Talking about pressing a shutter is perhaps a silly way to put it but the aim of my dance is not to re-enact meaning. I understand it as feeling the body is like intricate particles, dissolving. Then the body will create movement that is not prescribed by purpose or meaning.

Training to Fall Well

TS: It must be difficult to utilize each dancer's differences and then compose Miyazawa's poetry into movement. How do you instruct dancers about the movements?

I cannot and do not codify performers. Usually, codifying the choreography is important, though.

TS: Yes, it's not like just putting lots of words together will make a poem.

KARAS conceives movement as stream. How will that stream be born? And then how can we make new movement in that stream, and the next generated movement? That's how it continues. It's not just about movement as single numbers. For something that is a so-called "single movement", whenever there are multiple elements intertwined together, it forms a "plural number". A slight change creates a large stream.

There is no movement like straight lines. Straight lines in the body are just a constructed image of "straight lines".

TS: In place of memorized movement that is prescribed with purpose and meaning, do you then nurture the body?

Yes, in place of memory, proficiency in accepting the outside world is necessary. If you memorize, you then have to follow the course that goes from memory to movement. And then you make mistakes. I think that if you "choreograph" something, on the contrary, then you become unable to move. Physical movement is smoother when memory is not complete. More than a re-enactment of memory, a necessary and prompt response is correct. I thought this when looking at large numbers of swallows for a long time, especially flocks that glide at high speed and sharply intersect. Why do they not hit each other? They can instantaneously sense the movement of the air, gravity, light, the distance between each other. And so they understand each other's positional relationship, their velocity and angle, and then make the necessary changes and control their movement. They cannot fly if choreographed. They become one with the conditions acting on them in the sky. There are many things we can learn from birds.

TS: But that's the extreme opposite of ballet, isn't it?

There are some things I always say at the start of a workshop: "Throw away your instinct for self-preservation." "Do not try to protect yourself or your body." "Don't try to do something." "Be careless." "Be irresponsible." Normally in life people just call these things flippant. For the body, what is important first of all is not having any preconceptions or fears. But this is not simple, so if you are unsure you should take your time. It's fine just doing it bit by bit, that's all.

TS: It's scary, you have to liberate your awareness of security. You can say it but it's not a simple thing. What surprised me in your performances is how you would fall over, lightly. It's incredible that we cannot see the consciousness of it, any awareness that right now, say, I am going to fall over to my right.

Human bodies are originally made so that its balance can collapse. Use that well and there are all sorts of things you can do. Ordinarily humanity protects its balance as much as it can. It takes a considerable tense effort to stand up straight. On the other hand, breaking your balance means you can skilfully ride a car, run, walk, sit, and lie down. Utterly normally embrace the body and physical movement, and you can certainly feel the "craft".

The Adventure of Movement

TS: In that way your dance always creates movement that we cannot predict. What is the magic?



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Well, everything is built upon facts but I always want to make something that is beyond my own imagination. This kind of contradiction is very important. In order to turn Kenji Miyazawa into dance I want to face up to “DAH-DAH-SKO-DAH-DAH” without being held up by the ideas I already have. I always want to close in on unknown territory. And to do that, you must prepare the body.

TS: It's likely humanity wants to believe there is order in the universe.

The universe is a space beyond numbers, billions and billions, it's beyond even space. We wouldn't understand even after thousands of years of research. Not knowing is interesting. And yet, the human body is more interesting. It's mystical that we can consider physical movement at the level of dance. Both nature and artifice become interesting if looked at through the body.

TS: Yes, like the movement of the wind that moves leaves. Drawing lines of elementary particles colliding with each other is also a kind of dance, isn't it? If you were to make an ultimate kind of dance like that, you'd never know when it would end.

For me, dance is using the body to question of how far can you take the span between us and the universe.

TS: Yes, I sense that. It's the feeling like with Miyazawa's language that no matter how far into the beyond you go, you can soon return. Though it comes back, it's just a little bit misaligned. But that misalignment is your dance.

You've hit the nail on the head. I don't really like dance, well, so-called “dance”, at any rate. I'm not negating dance, just memorized dance. I often say that if you want to create dance, you have to do things other than dance.

Sound Chorus of Life and Death

TS: What do you think of tackling Kenji Miyazawa's poetry “now”?

Last year [2011] there was the disaster in Tohoku. I can't add anything about that here, but in Miyazawa there is a unique concept of death. Like a calling to the human soul again, transmitting it. When that kind of dance-like thing lifts up from the ground, you wonder what did Miyazawa think about the stars?

TS: Yes, life and death seem to melt together, don't they? Miyazawa also wrote that when his sister died, it wasn't his own experience but it seemed like a simulated one. Though, if he'd really died then he couldn't have written that.

I don't feel like there is a line between life and death. Certain language in Miyazawa's poetry seems like the chill of the night. Or a sound that sounds like the ground ringing, the air ringing, a chorus of life and death. Miyazawa's poetry does not feel aesthetic. This is also a good thing. It's real sound. Music being played by living people and dead people. Perhaps that's what wind is.

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Saburo Teshigawara (director, choreographer, artist, lighting designer)
Born in 1953. He began his unique creative career in 1981. After forming KARAS in 1985 he sought to find new kinds of artistic expression that cannot be confined to the existing framework of dance. He is active worldwide. Due to his creative approach to transforming a space through light, sound, air and the body, his influence has been felt not only in the dance world but also on the art scene. Recently he has been directing opera to great acclaim. He has taught at Rikkyo University's College of Contemporary Psychology (Body Expression and Cinematic Arts course) since 2006.