

# Dance and Older People in Japan



Fergus Early, report on Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship

# Dance and older people in Japan

## Introduction

I set out to base my travelling fellowship around dance and older people in Japan. Japan has the longest human life expectancy of any nation and I knew that many of the most respected performers in both traditional and contemporary dance were much older than would be considered normal in western countries. I was also enormously attracted to the culture of Japan through a superficial and sketchy acquaintance with its literature (poetry and Murakami), graphic tradition (anime and manga), dance (Butoh), cinema (Kurosawa, Ozu) and theatre (Kabuki). My aim was to look at dance and older people in the professional world and in recreational and therapeutic contexts. I also had a very specific aim: to conduct two interviews with performers who were continuing to dance into older age, which I hoped might form part of the forthcoming book I am editing with choreographer Jacky Lansley – ‘The Wise Body: Conversations with Experienced Dancers’; published by Intellect Books (2011).

As it happened, Jacky also had long-term plans to make a trip to Japan to research interdisciplinary practice in dance and theatre – the subject of a Continuing Professional Development course she had designed. She secured funding for her research from the Sasakawa and Daiwa Foundations. We therefore co-ordinated our trips and planned activities and meetings together where our individual interests coincided. We also arranged for a London-based Japanese theatre practitioner and associate of Jacky’s to help research aspects of the trip and to accompany us as interpreter for part of the time in Japan

There is no doubt that older Japanese people look healthier and appear on average to be more active than British or US elders. Even in Tokyo, one can see many older people riding bikes around the city (helped by the fact that cycling is allowed on the pavements). Obesity is still eye-catchingly rare in Japan and I understand that the incidence of age and obesity-related disease, such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease is much lower. Traditionally, older Japanese people have been looked after within their own families.

However, both of these very positive facts disguise an alarming reversal: western-style food is becoming more and more popular, particularly fast food, and related illness is on a steep upward curve. At the same time, with the imperatives of the developed world forcing both adults in a family to work full-time, a larger number of older people are now living in residential homes. Social welfare in Japan is apparently closer to the US model than the western European one, with little state provision, and I heard a number of worries expressed in Japan about the amount and the standard of care provided for older people. The practice of offering structured activities, including dance, to older people in day and residential care, now quite widespread (if patchy) in the UK, has barely begun in Japan.

Much of what follows is taken from my blog written during the trip, with later additions, and is in reality a sort of travelogue with comments. I was at times inspired to write short poems and, wisely or not, have included them in the text. This was a journey whose resonances continue to echo through my mind, but whose direct impact seems to be on a slow burn - I don't yet know, after nearly a year, where its influences will lead, but I know they are there, nudging me towards some large or small revelations.

## ***Tokyo***

### **First Days**

#### ***Sakora kubuki means a cherry blossom blizzard***

During the brief, 2-3 week cherry blossom season, you feel sure that the Japanese are a nation of tree-worshippers. Crowding every park, castle and temple, snapping the blossom by day and by night, picnicking under the trees on blue plastic sheets in huge groups, it supersedes all other national concerns.

We arrived in Tokyo late on a Sunday night. On Monday visited Ueno Park, near where we're staying and was amazed to find the park thronging with thousands of people. After a while we realised that this was the start of the Cherry Blossom Festival even though the cherry blossom was barely out. I was charmed by a delightful performance on the side of a path by a young man with a Diabolo, accompanied by a young woman playing the accordion. Both moved as dancers and blended skill with a light and humorous

manner. Visited the National Gallery and saw paintings (portraits, long narrative cartoon-like sagas, battles), panels, kimonos, swords, statues of Buddhas, shrines. Struck that there were very few Westerners anywhere - I suppose it is not anybody's holiday time right now and tourists are few.

### ***Yoshito Ohno***

Later that week we had a tortuous journey to find the studio of Yoshito Ohno. Yoshito is the son of Kazuo Ohno, one of the founders of Butoh dance - the particular manifestation of contemporary dance theatre that developed in Japan in the 50s and 60s and still has many practitioners of different kinds. Kazuo Ohno was still alive, though quite ill, at 103 (he was dancing into his hundredth year) and Yoshito has kept his tradition alive and is a formidable performer and teacher in his own right. He must now be in his 70s. Having found the right train we got out at the wrong stop and followed a rudimentary map that was posted on the studio's website deep into the heart of Yokohama suburbia. It was pouring with rain. With the almost inexplicable generosity of spirit that seems to be a feature of Japanese towards helpless foreigners, a man we asked the way of walked around the area with us for nearly an hour in the pouring rain. In fact he failed, but somehow, 5 minutes later, someone else took us to the door of the studio.

We found Yoshito conducting a small class, giving the participants each a piece of raw, unspun silk to improvise with, drawing out the different qualities of tensile strength and extreme softness. His own demonstrations were minimal, but moving and extraordinary. As the dancers worked, he played different musics and altered the lighting to bring a moment of total theatre to this small studio in a suburb of Yokohama. At the end of class, we joined him and the dancers in eating garlic bread and drinking tea. Yoshito agreed to be interviewed by us when we returned to Tokyo at the end of April.

### ***Yuko Ajichi and Muse Company***

The following day we visited Yuko Ajichi in her office in Tokyo. Yuko has been a pioneer in the development of community dance in Japan and has brought over such artists as Wolfgang Stange, Cecilia Macfarland and Adam Benjamin, as well as commissioning established Japanese choreographers to make work for integrated groups. With Yuko and two other artists, Aki and Hiromi, we spent several hours talking, eating and

drinking. Yuko was instrumental in setting up several of our subsequent meetings, including an arrangement to watch some classes that Aki regularly gives in a day centre for people with learning disabilities.

As here, the community dance movement has been an important catalyst for those projects that have occurred and the models seem mostly to have come from the UK. There didn't seem to be any company or individual following anything like my own company's model of creating and touring shows specially devised for older audiences, accompanied by specially designed workshops. The initiatives I witnessed and heard about also seemed quite separate from one another.

### ***Ninagawa and the Saitama Theatre***

We rounded off an exhausting week (just negotiating Tokyo's transport system is a major test of endurance and ingenuity - it is in fact superb, but difficult to penetrate at first) by going to see a production of Henry VI, directed by Yukio Ninagawa, at the Saitama Theatre on the outskirts of Tokyo. It was superb - the direction was a sort of choreography, played on a traverse stage with endless 'alarms and excursions' of fighting men hurtling from one side to the other. The physicality of the Japanese actors was striking and seemed to be second nature to them. The following day we went back to the Saitama Theatre to talk to Maimi Sato and Sachiko Ukegawa, two of the producers, about the work Ninagawa has been doing with the 'Golden Theatre of Saitama' - a project now several years old of a non-professional company of older performers. They come from all over Japan and were selected by audition. There are 42 of them and new work is written for them by playwrights. They rehearse for a month each year and perform for a month. Some of them have the opportunity to perform in other productions at the theatre - several of them were part of the 'mob' in Henry VI. It is obviously a very well-funded initiative and has a working practice that those of us who work with older people's theatre or dance groups in the UK might envy. Unfortunately, the group is not in rehearsal or performance right now, so we could not watch them.

## Talk talk

In Tokyo posts and traffic lights

Talk to you as you go past

In Kyoto at the Fushimi Inari Taisha shrine

A raven talked to me

And so did three cats

But the foxes were silent as stone

In Akashi the toilet talked to me

When I would have preferred it

To hold its peace

## *Cherry blossom in Kyoto*



Kyoto is a narrow city, lying North to South between two lines of hills. It was the former capital of Japan and has the reputation of being the most beautiful city in the country. At first sight it is not very different from Tokyo or Osaka, but soon you realise that around every corner is an amazing and ancient temple or an enigmatic Zen garden - perhaps nothing but raked gravel and a number of rocks. A feature of many temples is a large red entrance gate: one shrine has taken this to almost absurd lengths, with paths winding up a mountainside lined with thousands of gates, each only about 2 feet from the one before. The gates form something like a ceiling to the path, so you climb the stone steps through a red tunnel, all the way to the summit, 650 metres up. Every few hundred steps there is a shrine, mostly guarded by foxes, one with an open mouth and one with a closed mouth. Buddhist shrines are a sort of sacred jumble of stone statuary, offerings, (including, here, miniature torils or gates), candles, water springs. As you return downhill and approach the main temple buildings, the shrines get closer and closer together, jostling for space until they converge in a mad agglomeration. In most ways the Japanese have exquisite visual sense, but there seem to be two areas where this doesn't apply - shrines and town and city planning: national treasures of ancient sites seem to be frequently buried in a mass of insensitive new development.

Tokyo and Kyoto are the least threatening cities I have ever been in. The traffic seems docile, the people amenable, phenomenally helpful and friendly, if sometimes rather nervous of us at first.

### ***Norikazu and Ritsuko Sato and the Japanese Contemporary Dance Network***

In Kyoto we had a long meeting with Norikazu Sato and his wife Ritsuko. Nori runs the Japanese Contemporary Dance Network, based in Kyoto. Nori was originally a Butoh performer. He spent 2 years in New York, working for Dance Theatre Workshop and was very impressed with the US network NPA. On returning to Japan in 1997, he decided to set up a dance network in Japan, to link up and give strength and support to the emerging contemporary dance groups and individuals as well as other connected organisations such as theatres, promoters and even critics. JCDN now runs an annual touring circuit, taking a large number of companies and individuals on tour throughout Japan and to other Asian countries. JCDN also arranges choreographic residencies for Japanese and foreign artists and exchanges with other countries. Recently, the importance of the UK initiatives in community dance has been recognised and artists such as Cecilia McFarland and Rosie Lee have run intergenerational projects and established Japanese choreographers have been commissioned to create work in community contexts. This work is adding to the work that Yuko Ajichi has been doing for some years with her Muse Company, bringing artists such as Wolfgang Stange to Japan.

### ***Butoh.***

Whichever way you turn in Japan, you come up against Butoh. Butoh was Japan's first post war indigenous modern dance/theatre form. In the post-war period, US modern dance was a driving force in Japanese dance, but in 1960, choreographer Tatsume Hijikata and performer Kazuo Ohno launched Butoh, the 'dance of darkness'. This was in part a reaction to both the American modern dance tradition, which was seen as imported, and to the traditional dance-theatre forms such as Noh Theatre. There were some correspondences between Noh and Butoh, as far as I can tell, with Butoh borrowing the intense and slow pace of Noh and its sliding walk and transmuting its



Kazuo Ohno

masks into a stark white make-up. The form's darkness seems to me to reflect the pain and devastation of Hiroshima and perhaps had some part to play in helping Japan face its past - its militarism, the cataclysmic and humiliating nature of its defeat (and the appalling means by which the defeat was effected) and its post-war years as a virtual American fiefdom. It's hard to imagine what that succession of events might mean to a nation's psyche, but I feel sure that Butoh has been in part an examination of that question.

Butoh's first performer, Kazuo Ohno, began his performing career in his 40s and is still alive at 103. He performed into his 90s. His son, Yoshito Ohno, works in his father's studio in Yokohama and, himself in his 70s, continues to perform in Kazuo's improvisational and theatrical style.

### ***Late night TV***

Japanese TV is pretty bad - game shows, food shows, Samurai soaps and shows which humiliate animals are some of the highlights, but then there are sometimes long and wonderful programmes about music, art, Noh Theatre, Nihon Buyo (traditional Japanese dance) and so on. Watching TV late, an older woman is dancing - first on old film in black and white - she looks around 60, completely without the Miyake Odori coquettishness I had come to associate with women's Nihon Buyo. Short, almost dumpy, with an intense power, deriving I think from her extreme precision of placing, eyes, dynamic and gesture. Extraordinary sudden jumps, one landing on two knees, and fierce stamps out of the blue. Later, more film of her, now in colour and probably aged about 80, with white hair and a face more mask-like than ever, in a samurai dance. Revelatory - the title of a booklet documenting a Butoh festival in Budapest is 'The Intensity of Age'. It could refer to this amazing performer.

## *Akashi*

We were lucky enough to stay with the parents of our friend Yoko in Akashi, a small city near Kobe, sleeping in a traditional house, with sliding paper doors and tatami mats and sleeping on futons. In the local library, just round the corner from where we stayed, we asked if there was any dance activity for older people. Yes, there was a ballroom class going on right now. We peeped in and were immediately invited to come in and watch. The Mini Mini Dance Circle comprised about 16 men and 24 women, plus teacher, assistant teacher and manager. They are aged between 60 and 80, meet weekly and perform around 3 times a year. The group had beautiful co-ordination and style. The teaching was meticulously precise. Apparently, some of the group had been attending for years and some for only a few months, but the difference was not really visible. Each person pays 1,000 Yen per month (maybe £8) and although the hall is given free by the town, the group is entirely self-supporting.

It seems that there are another 3 older people's ballroom clubs in this small city, all well attended. I surmise that in fact ballroom dancing is the most widespread dance activity practised by older people in Japan (as it probably is in the UK). There is also in Akashi a blind person's club and a wheelchair dancing club.



Akashi also had a wonderful fish market and probably the most luxuriant cherry blossom of anywhere we went.



While in Akashi, we paid a visit to the famous pottery in Tamba which inspired Bernard Leach, with its long tunnel kilns extending up the mountainside.

***Tamba Pottery***

**The cloud comes sniffing  
down the mountainside  
and kiln smoke rises cautiously  
to meet it**

**In the long house  
pots stand, glazed brown  
under our reverent gaze**

At one point, I found myself unable to resist the challenge of Japan's most famous poetic form, so here are

*Two haikus*

**The big man enters  
a noisy toyshop and buys  
a paper balloon**

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**The baby's eyes close  
slowly like the sun setting  
on the horizon**

## *Miyajima Island*



Shinto monks performing a fire ritual at Daisho-do, Miyajima

We come to this little island, just off the coast from Hiroshima, to attend the Toukasai (peach blossom) Festival. Here, every April, Noh players come here from all over Japan to dedicate themselves to their art and perform for two full days in the beautiful little Noh theatre within the Buddhist temple of ... It is also the site of an extraordinary ritual dedicated to two forest deities at the Shinto shrine of Daisho-do. As we come off the ferry, we are amazed to see little Shika deer wandering about the streets, happy among the throng of visitors, tolerant of being stroked and eating one's tourist map. After checking in to our beautiful traditional-style riyokan, which has been an inn run by the same family for 300 years, we walk to the Shinto shrine. A crowd of several hundred is gathered around an oblong enclosure with an altar at one end, with what seem to be

customary offerings of apples and oranges and blossom. Along with most of those present, we write our wishes on small pieces of wood (which we pay for - there is always much good fortune on offer at Japanese temples and shrines, but it always costs) and give them back to a monk who stacks these prayers into wooden boxes. A group of yellow-clad monks arrive and station themselves around the edge of the space, at one end sits what look like senior monks in blue. The ceremony seems to be all wood and fire related. Ritual actions are repeated in each corner of the space – an axe is wielded, we are sprayed with water from a tree branch, arrows are shot from bows, wind is wafted over us. All the while a continuous and vigorous chanting is kept up - I ask a Japanese friend if she knows what the chant is saying, but she does not recognize it as Japanese - possibly Sanskrit? In the centre of the space is a large cubic shape which is covered in cypress branches. Finally, one of the monks sets fire to it. It burns fiercely and as the flames destroy the outer covering, we can see that there is a solid wood frame holding it together. The monks offer the wooden prayer sticks we have all inscribed to the head monk, who blesses them. The monks then throw them in bundles onto the fire. This takes a long time as there are hundreds of these prayers to be blessed and burnt. After the fire has consumed all our wishes and sent them heavenwards on the sweetly coniferous smoke, the monks expertly rake out the embers into a lane of smouldering ashes. They line up in their bare feet and march in file with high-kneed stamping along the burning pathway. After, many people, and in particular older people, walk along the embers. No-one appears to be hurt. I am too chicken to try (and, I rationalise, I do not want to take my touristic prurience into a scene which obviously means a great deal to many there). The whole ritual is very clear and performed with great aplomb and good humour by the monks who seem quite unsanctimonious yet generally respectful throughout.

### ***Noh Plays***

We had already seen a Noh play in Osaka, soon after leaving Tokyo. Later I bought a book of some of Arthur Whaley's translations of Noh plays and began to get a sense of the form. Somewhere I read that W.B. Yeats had written some 'Noh plays' and I began to realise why when I saw the mixture of deep sympathy with the natural world, love of words and music and intense melancholy that characterises these slow moving and ritualised events and which has so many echoes in Irish literature and art. In Miyajima, as part of the complex which forms the Buddhist Temple of Itsukushima, there are two

stages: a Noh theatre, where the plays are performed by different companies for two whole days and another, smaller and ancient stage where Bugaku dances dating from the 8th century are also performed during this festival by the monks. The entire monastery is built into the sea, on stilts, so at high tide one sits and watches the plays just a couple of feet above the water, with shoals of little spotted fish swimming below. As the tide receded on our second morning, a deer wandered across the sand between stage and shrine, while overhead a wide-winged kite circled and one was reminded of the close alignment of nature, spirituality and art in Japanese culture.



Itsukushima Buddhist temple and Noh theatre, Miyajima Island

Something in the slow moving intensity of Noh is quite addictive. I wonder if my Catholic upbringing has made me particularly receptive to long slow half understood ceremonies in indecipherable languages. (Maybe another link with Ireland here?) It is noticeable that the majority of the performers who play the *Shite* (protagonist) and the *Waki* (guest) - the two main actors in a Noh play - are quite old. I think this may have two causes: firstly Noh performers have always performed into their later years, but secondly there are probably fewer young people going into Noh now than in the past. Like all Japanese traditional arts, it is mainly transmitted through a family structure, with skills being

passed from father to son for generations. This dynastic structure has led to markedly different styles of Noh being linked to different families. I was also particularly interested in the *Kyogen* – mainly comic players who are interpolated into the plays and have a very different style of acting and dancing – much more naturalistic and boisterous. This juxtaposition makes me think of the ballets of 15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century European courts, where nobles performed the dignified and graceful ‘main’ characters, while ‘grotesque dancers’ tumbled and played the fool in light interludes.

## ***Hiroshima***

A pilgrimage to Hiroshima was always on the itinerary, with the main event a visit to the Peace Museum. This is magnificent: beautifully constructed, hugely informational, harrowing and crystal clear in both its condemnation of Japanese militarism and the absolute evil of nuclear weapons. I was sharply reminded how marginal this issue has become in British politics - almost forgotten as a cause for real debate - and ashamed at how flabby I had become about it. Hiroshima is one of only two places on earth (with Nagasaki) that can speak with absolute authority about nuclear weapons and their use and it has one message above all others that is written on the cenotaph of all those who died on and after August 6th 1945:

**Let all the souls here rest in peace**

**For we shall not repeat the evil**

Waiting for my friends outside the Peace Museum, an older Japanese man and a younger woman came up to me. 'May we talk to you?' he said. 'I am a guide and my friend is a volunteer guide who would like to practice her English'. 'Go ahead', I said. The younger woman, reading from her book, explained the meaning and symbolism of the monument behind us which commemorated those who died as a result of the atom bomb. I congratulated her on her English. The older man explained that he was 81 and was a child in Hiroshima when the bomb exploded. His family all died, but he survived. Where was I from, he asked and when I told him, responded 'Ah, I think England is a place which values what is important and will support the road to world peace'. I said I hoped so. 'Our mayor has written a peace declaration. Perhaps you will make sure people in England know about it'. I said I had a copy of the declaration and I would do as

he asked and I would also tell people I had met him and how important that was to me. He thanked me and they both left.

### ***Kawada Psychiatric Hospital, Okoyama***

In my preliminary research on dance and older people in Japan, I came across the name of Kayoko Arakawa and some practice she was undertaking in a psychiatric hospital in Okoyama. With Yuko Ijichi's help, I tracked down Kayoko but then discovered that she was no longer working in the hospital. However, the person who had been her assistant, Yayoi Yamashita, was still working there and I managed to arrange a visit there on our way back from Hiroshima. Yayoi was running a movement workshop for older, long-stay patients in the hospital. The session was seated and not very different to work that I, or others in the UK might do. There was a pleasant use of song and a charming exercise where each person in turn said what it was that was troubling them (mostly physically) that day and then the whole group sent healing thoughts and gestures towards that person in a chanted rhyme. Yayoi is a trained clinical psychologist and was well supported in her work by the director of the hospital. However, as with most of the community projects that I came across, it seems to be isolated. There doesn't seem to be many other projects like it and certainly no network to lend support and provide liaison such as our own Foundation for Community Dance or Arts in Health movement.

### ***Osaka***

We made two trips to Osaka – the first was to watch a Noh play and the second was to visit a project called Musubi, for homeless men. Older men, previously employed during the massive building boom in Japan and now homeless and without families to support them, are a particular social issue in Japan. One of the ways that the Japanese have sought to address this issue is to develop areas of cities – particularly in Tokyo and Osaka – which are virtually ghettos for homeless people, with high-rise hostels accommodating large numbers. Musubi (meaning 'link') is housed in a tiny space on the ground floor of one such tower block. Tables, chairs, a couple of cupboards and a kettle seem to comprise the furnishing and in order to perform for us, tables were shunted together to produce 2 or 3 metres of space. The project is coordinated by one woman, Tomomi Ishibashi, with minimal financial support. The participants are all men, mostly, I

would guess, between 55 and 80. Their chosen form is kamishibai (paper theatre) which is a traditional Japanese story telling form in which the story teller illustrates his or her narrative by sliding pictures into a box formed as a miniature proscenium. Kamishibai, which reached the height of its popularity in the 1930s, is often credited as an important ancestor of manga comics. Musubi have amplified this form by working as a group, rather than a single storyteller, and acting out the characters and story alongside the framed pictures. The story they tell us is of the adventures of a little girl, portrayed by a man of about 80 in a pig-tailed wig. Earlier, this same man showed us a wonderful dance in a sandwich board which was charming and comic and strikingly reminiscent of Kyogen performers we saw in interludes of Noh plays. It seemed that the men write their own stories, paint their own story cards and devise the action themselves. It also transpired that Musubi had visited England a few years ago as part of a festival of homeless people's arts, organized by Streets Alive Theatre Company.

Musubi is touching and inspiring. With good support from one worker and with their own initiative, this group of older men has established a project that is a social scene and a creative enterprise for themselves in what would otherwise be a bleak and lonely situation.

As a reminder of the context that Musubi comes from, here is an article which, although written in 2004, seems equally pertinent today – the park dwellers in their tent villages are still there, as are cardboard box encampments around the main stations. The wonderful 'Musubi' project involved exactly the type of older, unemployed and homeless men described here.

### **Japan's homeless face ageism**

By [Takehiko Kambayashi](#), Contributor to The Christian Science Monitor / October 18, 2004

#### **TOKYO**

Living in a shack under Tokyo's elevated expressway, Hiroshi finds himself hitting an invisible wall - his age. The stocky man in his early 50s, who declined to give his real name, started living on the street after losing his job as a forklift operator. Despite decades of experience in that job, he cannot get rehired: "I apply for the position many times, but companies never look at my skill but only pay attention to my age," he says, shaking his head in wonder.

Hiroshi's experience is not unique. The number of homeless people in Japan is on the rise, and experts say that ingrained cultural attitudes about age are exacerbating the situation. The problem has become so prevalent that Doctors Without Borders - a nongovernmental health organization accustomed to missions in the poorest of nations - has sent staff to this hi-tech, high-rise capital.

In central Tokyo, the number of the homeless nearly doubled to about 6,000 in February 2003 from 3,200 five years ago. A first-ever nationwide survey found 25,296 homeless people in Japan. But the actual number of the homeless is much larger, insist those close to the issue. The survey also shows that the average age of the homeless is 55.9 years old and that those from 50 to 64 years old make up about two-thirds of that population. Moreover, about 55 percent of them used to work in construction; many were day laborers who toiled without fringe benefits to help Japan flourish in the postwar era. But the recession has hit contractors hard.

In February this year, Tokyo announced that 2,000 apartment rooms would be rented out in the next two years to park dwellers. The government will employ them for six months in such jobs as cleaning or guarding public spaces. Some welcomed Tokyo's step and said other big cities should follow suit. But Mitsuo Nakamura, a leader of a support group for the homeless, says renting out rooms is not the answer. "Many of the homeless are desperate for a job. But there are no jobs," Mr. Nakamura says. "We should respect their willingness to work."

In Japan, however, not only the homeless but those over 35 have difficulty finding a job - especially if they are unmarried. Companies expect married men to work more strenuously, since husbands here are usually the sole breadwinners. That's why most of the homeless are middle-aged or older single men - a unique aspect of the problem of homelessness in Japan, activists say. "Most of the homeless are systematically eliminated from society," says Nakamura. Japan's homeless problem is attributed to "deeply rooted discrimination."

While homeless people suffer from low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy, age discrimination reinforces their sense of alienation, say those who look after them. Yoshie Omura, a nurse with Doctors Without Borders, says one homeless man broke into tears when she simply said hello. "Because they are alienated from society for a long time, they don't expect to be spoken to," she says. Nobuyuki Kanematsu, director of the Association Against Ageism, a non profit organization near Tokyo, says age discrimination comes from a prejudice against middle-aged and older people. "Companies tend to think people in that age group are stubborn, inflexible, weak, and forgetful," says Mr. Kanematsu. "Regardless of age, there are capable people." Another factor of the discrimination is Japanese discomfort with a younger boss having an older subordinate, he adds. Some citizens like Kanematsu, who has brought a lawsuit against the government for ageism, are demanding that the government outlaw such discrimination. Officials at the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare say they will take action by the end of the year against those employers who discriminate against older job applicants without "legitimate reason." Kanematsu worries about loopholes. He argues

that Japan must develop interest groups that look after the rights of minorities, like the elderly and homeless, to keep pressure on the government to act.

## *Travelling to the Northern Alps*

Travelling on a train through Japan, one might suppose at times that the whole of the central island of Honshu, except where a mountain disturbs the flow, is a continuous city. In pinprick contrast to the murrain of concrete, asphalt, steel and wire that litters the land, Japanese people plant tiny urban gardens, often on the city pavements themselves. Before coming to Japan, I had imagined wide paddy fields, with blowing seas of young rice plants; apart from the fact that the rice planting season is more than a month away, such fields as appear are hemmed in by the railway line on one side and urbanisation on the other. Only the wild and woolly hills, heaped on most horizons, truly defy the clutter of Japan's post-war sprawl.

Going north, into the Japanese Alps, the train meanders along a wide river valley, gradually climbing as the hills grow larger and behind them white mountains loom. As we rise higher, it is as if we have gone back in time two weeks: below, on the coastal plain, cherry blossom has been and gone. Here, higher and cooler, it is still in its fullest bloom, clustering in clouds in the populous valleys and smouldering high among the still bare trees on the mountainside.



We stay in a holistic centre, recommended by our friend Adam Benjamin, who is married to a Japanese person and is quite often in Japan. It is set high in the mountains, reached by a road that just re-opened the week before, after being closed by snow all winter. The hills are covered by virgin forests inhabited by wild boar and large families of monkeys – both species seem to be skilled marauders, attacking farm and domestic crops. One day we woke to what sounded like gunfire and came out to see what was going on – it was a farmer trying to scare off a group of monkeys with fire crackers; they seemed unintimidated, walking off slowly, looking back contemptuously over their shoulders. In the centre, the meals are vegetarian, macrobiotic, mostly very good, but one or two things served at breakfast defeated me – they were just too unfamiliar in taste, look and texture. Each meal is prefaced by a long lecture (in Japanese) about the food, what it is, how it is cooked, what good it does you and so on. This has a certain monastic feel to me, like monks being read the scripture while they eat. We bunk off for one meal and savour chilled soba noodles with Adam, who has just arrived with his wife Tamami and their 3 boys, in a restaurant down the hill. The morning starts with either yoga or a walk in the forest which is just waking after its winter shut down.

Up the hill is a beautiful wooden dance studio, just completed. Adam is here to run a two day workshop, culminating in an inaugural performance at the studio. It is a great success. The students are funny, self-confident in the improvised context and very inventive. The studio has sensitive, indirect light that glows in the warmth of the rich red wooden walls and ceiling. The studio inspires Jacky and I for our long-term ambition to build a studio in Cornwall.

## ***Return to Tokyo***

On the final leg of our extraordinary trip, we return to a packed timetable in Tokyo.

### **Yasuo Imai**

We visit Yasuo Imai's studio. He is the doyen of Noh performers - at about 86 he still performs regularly. He greets us at the door, talking immediately about how he loves camellias, not interested in bowing and customary Japanese ceremonial. He is giving a lesson in Noh singing to a pupil who must himself be in his 70s. Sensei Imai beats time with a closed fan and stops his student from time to time to correct a rhythmic or tonal inaccuracy. Much of the song is a kind of chant, with just occasional pitch changes, often at the end of verses. The voice, as ever in Noh, has a lot of vibrato; the chanting quality, punctuated by rises and falls, seems to me to show a distant communality with the voices of Catholic priests delivering 'sung masses' that I grew up with. After, he shows us part of his collection of costumes, modelling kimonos and 300 year old masks. He is genial and friendly and, as we always found in Japan, very generous with his time.



Yasuo Imai and pupil show us how to fold a kimono

## Outside the Imperial Palace

The pine trees are sculpted like poodles  
Each clump and pom pom  
Studiously thinned and pruned by men in hard hats  
No off-shoots, stray wisps or ambitious twigs  
Mar the perfect asymmetry  
Each specimen conforming to the model  
Painted a thousand thousand times  
For a thousand years  
- This is how a pine tree is required to look

### Interviews

We conduct 2 interviews this week which we hope will form part of our book *The Wise Body*, one with Senzo Nishikawa, an older Nihon Buyo (traditional Japanese Dance) dancer and one with Yoshito Ohno, whose studio in Yokohama we visited earlier in the trip. Our friend Yoko accompanies us for both of these interviews and acts as interpreter. Senzo Nishikawa is officially a 'national treasure' – we had seen him perform in London with his son Minosuke, shortly before we came to Japan. He was very gracious but tended to the monosyllabic. His son, who spoke very good English, attempts to amplify his father's answers. At the end, Senzo allows us to photograph him in his studio. It was a delightful visit, but probably not material for our book.

The second interview is with Yoshito Ohno, whose studio we had already visited when we were earlier in Tokyo. This is a remarkable occasion – after speaking to us for nearly an hour, Yoshito decides that words are not the right medium to express what he wants to say and disappears, shortly coming back in a fresh 'costume of white shirt and trousers and proceeds to dance 5 magical solos for us, which we film. His interview forms part of our book which will be published by Intellect Books in May this year (2011).

### **Akiko Kawashita**

When we visited Yuko Ijichi on our first stay in Tokyo, we met a community dance teacher called Akiko Kawashita. Now we went out to a suburb to see her teach two sessions in a residential centre for disabled people. This remarkable centre housed people of all ages, gave work to the adults (mainly market gardening, knitting, small-scale manufacturing), contained a school for children and young people and provided interesting activities, like dance classes, for the residents. The place was more like a village than a care home and had a relaxed and contented atmosphere. Aki gave two sessions, one for the older residents and one for young people. It was notable that even quite severely disabled older people were encouraged to take as active a part in the dance sessions as possible, but wore quite a lot of protective padding if they were vulnerable to falls. Aki said that the place was completely untypical – all the other places where she led sessions were extremely risk-averse and restricted what she could do with participants to the safest possible minimum. We participated fully in both sessions which were memorable experiences. We inquired of the director if there were many examples of this kind of centre; he said that there was maybe one other similar, government-funded centre in the country, but that this was the only centre that housed children and adults together. He said that they had realised that dance could contribute greatly to the development and well-being of the residents and that this provision was unusual.

### **Noh lesson**

Through the good work of Yoko, we manage to arrange a lesson in Noh. We have already bought our kimonos, obis and tabi socks, but it turns out that the tabi socks are all that are required. In our hour's session we get to do little more than adopt an approximation of the Noh player's posture – tipped slightly forward at the waist with elbows open and hands held before one's navel – and the characteristic slow and sliding walk, toes lifting slightly as the foot glides forward, then subsiding to rest as the weight settles onto a new foot. It is demanding and fascinating, despite its minimalism. Afterwards the teacher, like Yasuo Imai, shows us an amazing collection of ancient costumes and masks and allows us to try them on. His studio, also like sensei Imai's, is beautifully kept, with the characteristic pine trees painted on the back wall and mirrors that can be concealed or revealed for working on technique.

### **Meetings**

Our final days are packed with meetings: Manami Yuasa, of the British Council, Yoshiyosu Ohta, who runs an organisation called Able Art Japan (Association of art, culture and people with disabilities), Achiko Tachiki, a dance critic and journalist, Kayoko Arakawa (the originator of the work in Kawada Psychiatric Hospital in Okoyama) who is planning an International Somatics conference in 2011 which she asks us to attend.

### **Departure**

On our penultimate day we ascend the Tower of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Museum from where, it is said, you can see Mount Fuji on a good day. It is not a good day, a misty haze clouds 360 degrees of the view. We feel sad to miss this iconic image of Japan. The next morning we haul our suitcases, bulging with Japanese costume, bits of pottery, woodcut prints and so on, to Ueno station and to Narita Airport. The plane takes off on the short hop to Seoul and, quite soon after take-off, the pilot says 'on the left hand side of the plane you have a good view of Mount Fuji'. We rush over to the other side of the plane where, fortunately window seats are vacant, and gasp in pleasure as the gorgeous symmetry of Mount Fuji rises white-topped out of the surrounding plain. A fitting farewell.

### **Conclusions**

Conclusions are difficult. I learnt masses. I was fed by so many things. The visit was of a length that felt really substantial and allowed me to achieve just about everything that I had planned. I also felt that I had made real contact with a culture that is radically different to ours. As regards older people, I found a culture that traditionally reveres older people but has begun to find them a problem. I found pockets of wonderful community dance activity but no national strategy. I found a society that in some ways seems utterly conformist and is certainly efficient beyond the wildest dreams of any UK bureaucrat. As in every society, it is the artists as much as any group who carry the flag for positive, healthy values and present alternatives to stifling conformity. I found the aesthetic sensibility that underlies everything intoxicating. The sense of *arrangement* that guides the way park workers lay out their brooms in a perfect fan pattern when they go off for a tea break or the exactness of the decision to place a rock just *there* in a Zen garden was reassuring. I have no doubt that this sensibility is retreating before the tides of Western

practice, but to find a society which still sets considerable store by aesthetic decisions is a relief and a tonic..

In my time in Japan, I did not make much contact with younger artists and what is evidently a vibrant contemporary arts scene – my area of interest was elsewhere. I came away with the impression of a country at a quite difficult point in its social development – older traditional systems, of social care, for example, which rely on a close-knit family structure, were beginning to break down in the urbanized and technologically advanced metropolises of Honshu, while the social networks, both voluntary and statutory, that sustain many of the activities that older people participate in in the UK, were still embryonic. In a country with such a large older population (22.6% of Japan's population is over 65 – in the UK the comparative figure is 15.7%, Japanese life expectancy is 82.6 years, the UK's is 79.4 years) this is clearly problematic. Nor do I say this with a rosy vision of the UK's social care systems – I think older people, by and large are appallingly treated in this country – but we are making some headway towards a joined-up network of provision and policy that (if it survives the cuts of the next few years) could begin to make a real difference to the lives of older people. From my superficial acquaintance with Japan, I suspect that there may be some painful steps to be taken on this road.

However, the wonderfully developed and ancient culture of Japan doubtless has a few tricks to pull yet. One of my most vivid memories from early in our stay in Japan, was of older men and women cycling sedately along the wide pavements of Tokyo in the rain (how sensible to realise that a bicycle has more in common with a pedestrian than it does with a car – in the UK riding on the pavement is a crime) holding an umbrella as they pedal. This image seems to embody a strand of rational thought about people and the urban environment that we rarely see in this country, encompassing sensible traffic laws, healthy living, independence and mobility for older people and a pleasant aesthetic. That can't be a bad start on which to build an improved future.

And finally, a couple of questions which stay with me for future research and resolution, or which may just hang like puzzlement in the air:

- How can we (in both East and West) convince people that the longer and healthier survival of older people is an amazing opportunity for our societies rather than a problem?
- How can we make it clear that the values and practices that dance has to offer are fundamental to true civilization (and perhaps our very survival?)
- How can I as a Westerner best honour, respect, reflect and draw inspiration from an ancient and rich culture like Japan's?

**I'm enormously grateful to Jamie Balfour, Julia Weston and the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for the wonderful opportunity I have had to make this extraordinary journey - to see, learn and be delighted by so many new things and different people. It was indeed the trip of a lifetime.**

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