

Fragments of Glass

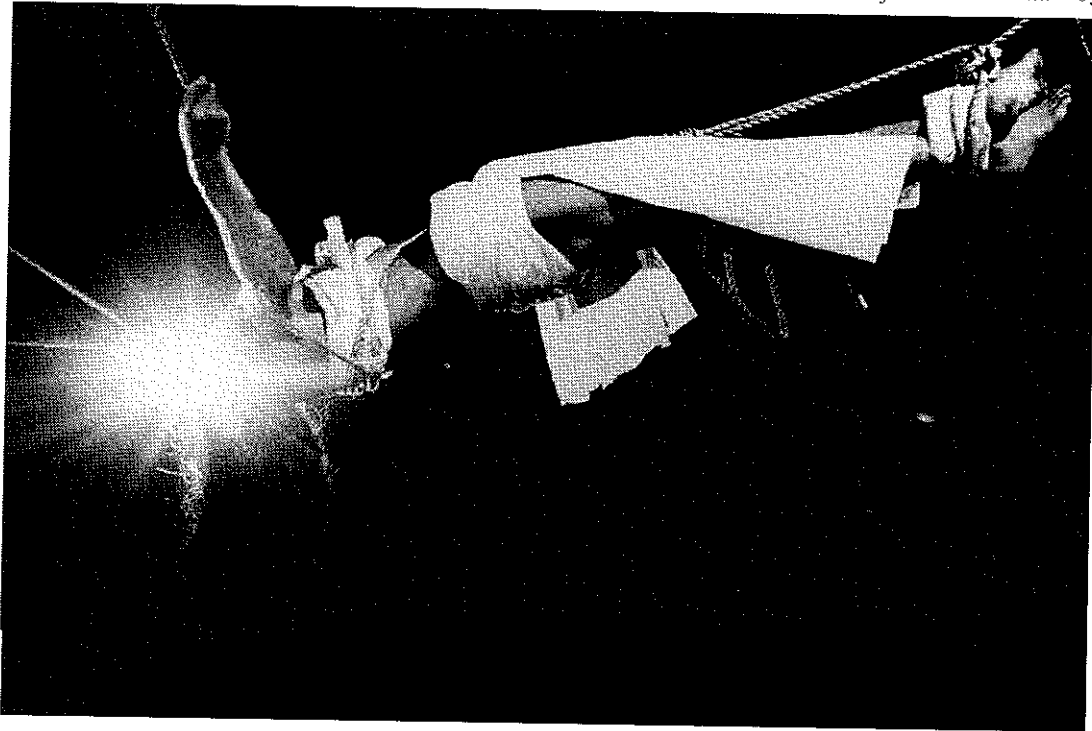
A Conversation between Hijikata Tatsumi and Suzuki Tadashi

moderated by Senda Akihiko

*Suzuki Tadashi is currently the Artistic Director of the Shizuoka Performing Arts Center in Shizuoka, Japan. He began working in theatre while a student at Waseda University. He was one of the leaders of the shōgekijō undō (small theatre movement) and his own group, Waseda shōgekijō (Waseda Small Theatre) produced numerous innovative works, with Shiraishi Kayoko as the main performer. Suzuki organizes the annual Toga Festival, in Toga, Toyama prefecture, which draws performing artists from around the world. He has a dozen books, including *The Way of Acting* (1986, Theatre Communications Group), which has been translated into both English and Korean.*

SUZUKI: I was late [learning about the work of Hijikata Tatsumi], I guess. The first time was in 1968, when I saw *Nikutai no hanran* (Rebellion of the Body) at the Nihon seinen kan Hall. In any event, my first impression was intense. On the whole, using the body for expression means there's a gap. There's a gap between the body and words and also a considerable gap between the body and space. And quite a wind blows between them. So you fill that gap with concepts and a desire to analyze. But the first time I saw Mr. Hijikata's *butoh*, I had the feeling that here was a space where there was no need to kill time like that. That's why I can confront something like the reality of Mr. Hijikata's actions themselves. Expression using the body that way doesn't happen very often. And it was extremely intense.

But when I see *noh* and such, I no longer feel that fictional perfection exists based on a sense of crisis or in that sense of terror that if you take even one wrong step you will fall backwards into a dreadful abyss. To all appearances things still are like that, but in fact they are quite stable. My first impression of Mr. Hijikata's work was that sense of crisis. My feeling was that there was something like a sense of crisis, that going in such a direction is difficult and also that what emerges from it is quite chancy. Even when a certain relationship comes about, it's really very good because the relationship has a sense of



crisis. I rarely get that feeling of chance from the stage. That was my first impression and it's never changed.

I think it's very hard for a person who uses the body always to go in such a direction in these situations. It's difficult because we are only human. In that sense, Mr. Hijikata has remained with me since that first time.

SENDA: Mr. Hijikata, I believe you saw [Suzuki's] *Gekutekinaru mono o megutte* (On Dramatic Passions, 1970) and *Toroia no onna* (The Trojan Women, 1974). What were your feelings about them?

HIJIKATA: Mr. Suzuki just referred to "space," "a sense of crisis," and how "even one wrong step makes you fall into the abyss." It's not about squeezing your body into a space but about its being stripped of things. If you're under the misapprehension that you are able to squeeze into a space, then something like writhing is exposed. What I felt on seeing Mr. Suzuki's productions was that the interpretation of space is something very dusty. If you're covered with dust, then even a fart will be connected to space and you don't have to think about space being chilly and antagonistic to the eyes. For example, if you turn the skins on things inside out, the hole created there is a space. Things turned inside out like that tightly fill up space and even envelop it. A body that is brought up breathing the air in such a place takes on the shape of hiding in space. Catching hold of space in a way that's like laying tiles or cutting snip-snap with scissors doesn't work that well. That way of stripping away is to strip something off as soon as it's laid down, then to supplement it with a regulated and systematized form so that, no matter what, the space that emerges is affected, like a person who is dragged off to someone else's house.

Dancers and actors are likewise dragging something along with them; when I saw Mr. Suzuki's productions characters were standing beyond such reckoning. That's why the thing decorated and the thing wrapping both emerging

1 Hijikata Tatsumi in
Hijikata Tatsumi to
Nihonjin: Nikutai no
hanran (*Hijikata Tatsumi
and the Japanese: Rebellion
of the Body*, 1968) at the
Nihon seimen kan Hall
(Photo by Nakatani Tadao)

there, come to be visible. He was stretching his hands out to such a thing. It isn't just a thing that has crashed into something and gotten injured. I became interested in his desire for securing that place exactly where the theatre synthesizes the body then catches hold of it again. It isn't the synthetic resin of any songs and plays or noh and *shingeki* [new theatre] I've seen till now. That's the feeling I got from Mr. Suzuki's productions.

In *The Trojan Women*, for example, the chorus squats down and eats rice balls while wearing padded kimonos. The people eating rice balls are themselves rice balls. They are squashed in their padded kimonos and that's why the rice balls suit them. If they were wearing morning coats, they would certainly stand out but it would sort of just end there. But being squashed goes well with eating a rice ball. For example, an old woman is quick to notice something on the ground and to pick it up. She can also readily stand on her hands. That kind of gesture alone jumps out at me. I saw it as quite interesting in those terms. Entering and exiting, running up to heaven and such gets to be too busy and a bit cold. The body shifts to the role of explaining a concept; it becomes clear for a time but it's not very interesting. Although I also see works of ideas only, Mr. Suzuki's were not like one of those.

And as for a sense of crisis when Mr. Mishima Yukio¹ saw my work, his first impression was just that—a sense of crisis. I demand a sense of crisis. I am not being visited by a sense of crisis, rather I am demanding it. And I later went to a place where I was provoking the landscape. As I grow older and my loss of strength becomes apparent, how people view me from outside has changed and so have their criticisms of me. I have the feeling myself of changing that way. Only crisis.

SUZUKI: Because that was after all the first impression

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Another thing: when a sheet of glass breaks, it makes fragments with acute angles, right? I was keenly made to imagine something like a whole that was initially made up of pieces of glass, something like the totality of the sheet of glass, which can no longer be seen because the pieces are scattered. Mr. Hijikata's productions have the form, the flash of glass fragments. That's why, when you try to put it into words, you seem to be using words without any guiding principles to them. To be able to pick up pieces of glass and treasure them. It's an extraordinary pleasure, I think. Because one part, or rather one limited part, made me imagine various things about the whole, I had the feeling that it could, in that sense, become an axis for thinking about theatre.

For example when I'm on the night train to Toyama, around Nagano there's suddenly a lone light in the middle of the mountains. Though I'm attracted by the light, I conversely have a feeling of an extraordinary expanse, and words just come flooding out. I probably have this feeling because it's dance, but words come out from my side. I think there are two things here: one is a special characteristic of Mr. Hijikata and one that of dance. In the case of theatre words come flying out at you. In Mr. Hijikata's case, I feel that words emerge from the audience. A limited part is very solid. The way it breaks apart is extraordinary. A poet is much less... (*laughs*)

I have the feeling that I'm giving words not to Mr. Hijikata but to a relationship which Mr. Hijikata expressed. I have consistently felt that it's an extremely rich but difficult one and that its structure is interesting. There are few words. I suppose, that have methodically entered Mr. Hijikata's body since words head to something like the inverted relationship which that structure exposes.

HIJIKATA: There are few, and that's because dance is created in a place



2 & 3 Hijikata Tatsumi to Nihonjin: Nikotai no hanran (*Hijikata Tatsumi and the Japanese: Rebellion of the Body*, 1968), a solo choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi at Nihon seinen kan Hall (Photo 2 by Hasegawa Roku; photo 3 by Nakatani Tadao)

where words are few. Yet many words are gradually becoming necessary, because this is a time when the body is required to put words into order. Dance undoubtedly has such an aspect to it, though of being created in a place where words are few.

It may be that the glass fragments Mr. Suzuki was talking about are holding on to matter that has been caught in headlong speed as a sense of crisis of the glass, before it becomes a slave to material. I don't know what sense of crisis will in future be replaced by what matter. But in childhood I lived endlessly in love with chances successfully lost, with entreaties that certain things not come about even as I wished for them in being alive. That became glass and is replaced by it. And it's not like bringing in a painter with new materials for some stage set.

That light that suddenly appears when you are on the night train is in your theatre productions, too. After all, if you reduce the use of lights, the audience will search and see. I think that's the body. So it's better to go to such a place for even one light like that, a light demanded by the body. If you don't, then anxiety that you are unable to dance unless you fortify yourself with principles will come to the fore, and dance, once you're onstage, will become stiff.

My comments have veered more and more to the stage but even now, as I attempt to talk about my state when dancing, I am visited by a moment of trying already to restructure it. Well, I guess if I say that I'm not aware of anything when dancing that's probably the light that Mr. Suzuki was talking about. That light is not necessarily the light that hits the eyes but maybe more like a reflection. That reflection has got to find its way into a mechanism di-

recting you to forget more and more. Once onstage you create a new role from what you have perfectly remembered. It too is creating a role of forgetting. This method of forgetting in the midst of forgetting is a mechanism that means you don't want to touch what you have once forgotten. If you don't do that, you will remember a pattern for the way of forgetting. The emotion at such a time is quite simple; it's sad. So when you get off the stage there are only trifling accounts of a scraped or skinned knee. But that scrape is definitely different from an everyday one. I've had that experience any number of times and that's pretty much the case.

SUZUKI: I can understand that.

HIJIKATA: But there are lots of people who say they don't know what they were doing onstage. Or they ask in surprise, "Is that what it looked like?" Such talk makes dance into something very mysterious and breaks it down into pieces. Lots of people seem to be doing that, but that's really not how it is.

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Mr. Suzuki said before that dance has no words. That may be so but how about this? I once spent about a year gazing into the faces of Buddhist statues. I can neither read *sutras* nor do I understand them, but the expressions that surface there [in the faces] have become words shaped like words that are aborted and words that have sunk into your head before they are conveyed to another: listening to a birdsong, a face whose entire head is permeated with the sound at the instant when the eardrums are pierced by a needle, just before the song is caught; with its tongue lolling out before its voice, a face that seemed to be layered and turned into a disheveled, lackadaisical face that was fixed marvelously in place as it attempted to speak; thought by too much thinking, one that had spirals on its forehead and, with everything missing below its nose, seemed to be sagging down to its ears. There is a moment when words are uttered from a body. There are quite a lot of words around *butoh* dancers, once you come to see that there are faces that envelop such sounds.

SUZUKI: I totally agree with you.

HIJIKATA: Then too, unless that's the case, it just doesn't really work to speak of words and the body and how to bridge the two.

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In response to being asked what I think about traditional performing arts, if I try to systematize what my *butoh* is by using traditional arts as the basis, some things spill over. That's why I feel I must firmly hold my own ground while talking.

On my way to seeing traditional performing arts, I built a house inside myself, then viewed them with this attitude of comparison: "This is what I have now show me what you are about." That means I have not made an exact study of them, by watching *kabuki* at *Kabuki-za* or *noh* at a *noh* theatre.

SENDA: Regardless of that, isn't it natural that you have inside yourself some way of confronting them?

HIJIKATA: For example, even when you look at a *noh* mask, it's not about expression but about how much space *noh* subjugates, what presses below its throat, like how many people are made to fight in how big a battle. It's on a large scale. If you look closely at the mask itself, its nerves all rise up and the part below its nose bites back strong emotion. A human being would drool but the mask makes moonlight slobber. I can't help seeing masks viscerally like this. And I go around to the back of the mask. There is a blurred mask there, like a burn scar. I keep going back and forth between the front and the

back. By doing so what I saw from a stylized point of view was transferred to reality and I get a certain degree of satisfaction from looking at it. It's a kind of independent study for me, piercing my eardrums with a needle at the instant before the sound is heard and, with this kind of control, looking at masks or words or sounds so as not to miss the very thing I hear. Otherwise, I cannot be satisfied.

But what is certain to me is that your measure is properly taken only when you get into bed, and when you wake it all falls apart even the furniture. That's why being in bed is reality and getting up from it is a dream. I'm not able to give much accord to going lightly to a noh theatre and fixing what I experience there in my head for the sake of applying the reality of what I have thought about in bed.

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SUZUKI: To greater or lesser degree, all people experience the flow of time within themselves and hear the sounds within their own bodies or know, to use Mr. Hijikata's words, the time spent in bed. In the case of theatre, however, by bringing in linguistic material, you clearly get into making your foundation something auditory, as Mr. Hijikata terms it, something like a bodily sensation, which moreover closely adheres to the body. But when words enter into it you get terribly divided. When you are divided, bodily sensations are weakened. You get really sucked in by the words and are cut off at the level of the performance. Cut off, the body in its entirety renders service to words for the sake of speaking, and a gap develops. A wind begins to blow at your feet. It's got to be a body that plays at how many words it can reel into the body. That's how it should be, but by immediately discarding that sensation and selling out your body to the world of meaning held in your hands, you come to feel safe and secure. In that sense the operation of actors is, I think, fundamentally based on a sense of incongruity when they speak words.

For example, reciters use extraordinary energy to perform *gidayū*.² The body is transformed through speech, and theatre demands that you directly pursue that transformation. Depending on what is spoken and where, there's a big difference in speech, because it's an artificial constraint.

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SENDA: In Mr. Suzuki's case, words do not exist as a means of communication at all, but rather as an alien substance for creating a kind of relational construct, and they enter as a catalyst. Because the communicative function of words in everyday life is nullified, they are, so to speak, something like a language in suspension that creates a relationship which exposes human substance. In that sense, they are of course quite similar to Mr. Hijikata's body. In the case of theatre, since it rashly claims to be a total art, the share allotted to words is not rich but excessive. Because the theatre simply relies on a toy called words, the body, which is central to theatrical language, too often becomes neglected. However, because *butoh* has no words there is, on the contrary a perception of deficiency, which is why *butoh* concentrates on the body. In Mr. Suzuki's case, words work as an obstacle or as an alien substance, as a catalyst for shaking your own body awake. In the case of *butoh*, what serves the role of an obstacle? Is it, for example, "music?"

HIJIKATA: No, it's not music. Human beings desire to live within a single sound. For example, the gong of a tolling bell on New Year's Eve envelops all emotions; it is not a sense of the evanescence of life. There is such a mechanism. From what desire does that desire to hide in a single sound come? Don't we use words because we are human beings? No, not at all. We are not raised



4 Asukawa Yōko in the
"A Room of Mirrors" scene
from *Geisen jō no okugata*
(*Lady on the Whale String*,
1976) choreographed by
Hijikata Tatsumi at Asbes-
tos Hall (Photo courtesy of
Keiō gijyuku University Art
Center)

on human milk. The fear that we are raised on some kind of milk we do not understand, that then is not music. The sound itself is enveloped in an echo.

If you enter from such a place, it isn't a matter of words and body. After all, dance and theatre were joined in one-act plays for a very long time, and poetry spilled over from it. Such things existed in the past; there were people who actually did that. But I don't take the view that it existed in the past but doesn't now. Inside this one body, there are various mythic things that are still sleeping intact. If there's a feeling of an obstacle with words, it's the same with dance. The work is how to excavate them at the actual site. But because you dance with your own body—without any intermediary, without using any tools, such as words or color—the notion that ecstasy happens all of a sudden is quite common. And that's a bit dangerous.

SUZUKI: I agree with you

SENDA: But it's still prevalent in the world of Japanese modern dance that which is without obstacles.

HIJIKATA: Ecstasy without obstacles. I would like to see something where such things float up like departed spirits. Performers are improvising while falling into something like a superficial ecology. They go in circles, always around the same thing. It's not improvisation on a way of disappearing, about not wanting to retouch what has once disappeared. There could be a work that quarries the body by daringly creating obstacles, but not obstacles that accidentally visit the body. But nobody's talking about this yet. So strictly speaking, the gestures of great actors are all *butoh*. They are brought into consciousness in a state where the actors seem to forget that they are speaking.



5 Ashikawa Yōko in *Hitogata (Human Mold, 1976)* choreographed by Hijikata Tatsumi at Asbestos Hall. (Photo courtesy of Keiō gijuku University Art Center)

Speaking in the extreme, there used to be one or two gods in a home and they went screaming mad while holding red-hot metal tongs. But they were not mad; they were looking precisely at themselves. I have watched them, with the feeling that I might be able to understand how to recapture the body rather than the independence of the precision.

SENDA: Just like the characters in one of Mr. Suzuki's plays (*laughs*)

HIJIKATA: I read books that I'm sent mostly about works in genres where obstacles are placed on purpose. I nod in agreement as I read, but before I try to read them with my body there are words that stick. And recently when I try to read and understand such things, lots of words bother me a great deal.

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Translators' Notes

1. Mishima Yukio (1925–1970) Japanese novelist and playwright was one of the most widely translated Japanese writers of the 20th century.
2. *Gidayū* is a chanted form of *gidayū-bushi*, a school of ballad-drama that developed together with *bunraku*. It takes its name from Takemoto Gidayū, a famous *shamisen* player at the end of the 17th century. *Gidayū* has a strong narrative aspect marked by a clear expression of feeling and strong tone coloration in the low notes.

Senda Akihiko is a theatre critic for the Asahi, a daily newspaper, and helped create recognition of contemporary theatre, including shōgekijō undō (small theatre movement), in Japan. Among his many books, Gendai engeki no kōkai (The Voyage of Contemporary Japanese Theatre, 1997) has been published in English by the University of Hawai'i Press.