

DANCE LEGEND AND BUTOH PIONEER, KAZUO OHNO, DIES AT 103

Thursday, June 3, 2010

Dance Legend and Butoh Pioneer, Kazuo Ohno, Dies at 103

► [Share](#) | [Print](#) | [Download](#)

June 1, 2010 -- Japan Society laments the loss of renowned butoh dance performer and choreographer Kazuo Ohno, one of the movement's founders and pioneers. Ohno died of respiratory failure June 1, 2010, at 4:38 pm (JST), in Japan at the Yokohama Sen-in Hoken Hospital in Yokohama City, at the age of 103.

"It is extremely sad news for the dance community--not only in Japan and America but across all five continents," said Yoko Shioya, Japan Society's Artist Director, who oversees the Society's Performing Arts Program. "Although formally trained in Western modern dance, Kazuo Ohno, together with the late Tatsumi Hijikata, pioneered Butoh--Japan's inimitable contribution to contemporary dance. Ohno's influence on this form of expression is extraordinary, especially given that he changed the course of dance when he was well over the age of 50."

Japan Society had the privilege to present Kazuo Ohno in 1993, 1996, and the 1999 retrospective Requiem for the 20th Century, which was Ohno's final performance outside of Japan. Ohno continued to perform in Japan until 2004. In 2007, as part of Japan Society's 100th anniversary celebration, the Society presented a month-long butoh festival in honor of Ohno's 101st birthday, including performances by Ohno's surviving son, Yoshito Ohno.

About Kazuo Ohno

The son of a fisherman, Kazuo Ohno was born in Hakodate City, Hokkaido Prefecture, Japan, on October 27 in 1906. Ohno demonstrated an aptitude for athletics in junior high school and graduated from an athletic college in 1929, teaching physical education at a Christian high school. In 1933, Ohno began studying with Japanese modern dance pioneers Baku Ishii and Takaya Eguchi, which qualified him to teach dance at the Soshin Girls' School in Yokohama (from where he retired in 1980.)

In 1938, Ohno was drafted into the Japanese Army as an intelligence officer, and served on the front lines in China and New Guinea for 9 years during WWII. After returning from New Guinea, where he had been a prisoner of war, Ohno went almost immediately back to work on his dance and presented his first solo works in 1949 in Tokyo at the age of 43.

In the 1950s, Ohno met Tatsumi Hijikata, who inspired him to begin cultivating Butoh, a new form of dance evolving in the turmoil of Japan's postwar landscape. Hijikata, who rejected the Western dance forms popular at the time, developed with Ohno and a collective group the vocabulary of movements and ideas that later, in 1961, he named the Ankoku Butoh-ha movement.

During the 1960s, Ohno sought his own style while collaborating with Tatusmi Hijikata. In 1977, Ohno premiered his solo *La Argentina Sho* [Admiring La Argentina], directed by Hijikata and dedicated to the famed Spanish dancer Antonia Mercé (known as "La Argentina," whom he had seen perform in 1926.) He received Japan's prestigious Dance Critics' Circle Award for the performance and subsequently toured the piece, impacting the international dance world from the 14th International Festival at Nancy, France, in 1980, to his American debut in 1981 at La MaMa E.T.C. in New York City. Other cities on the tour included Strasbourg, London, Stuttgart, Paris and Stockholm.

With Hijikata directing, Ohno created two more major works, *My Mother and Dead Sea*, performed with his son Yoshito Ohno. Other works include *Water Lilies*, *Ka Cho Fu Getsu* [Flowers-Birds-Wind-Moon] and *The Road in Heaven, The Road in Earth*. He was awarded a cultural award from Kanagawa Prefecture in 1993, a cultural award from Yokohama city in 1998, and the Michelangelo Antonioni Award for the Arts in 1999.

Kazuo Ohno starred in the films *O-shi no shozo* [A Portrait of Mr. O] (1969) directed by Chiaki Nagano; *The Scene of the Soul* (1991) by Katsumi Hirano; and the documentary *Kazuo Ohno* (1995), directed by Daniel Schmid. He has written three books on Butoh, including *The Palace Soars through the Sky*, a collection of essays and photographs; *Dessin* with drawings and notes on his Butoh creations; *Words of Workshop*, a collection of lectures given in his workshop; and *Food for the Soul*, a selection of photography from 1930's through 1999. The latter two books were combined and published in English as *Kazuo Ohno's World: From Without & Within* (2004, Wesleyan University Press).

In 2001, though he lost his ability to walk, Ohno continued performing and developed ways to express himself through dance solely by moving his hands. In recent years, Ohno had been under nurse's care at home, but he continued his stage appearances, particularly in the butoh works of his son Yoshito Ohno. In January 2007, he made his final public appearance in Yoshito's Hyakkaryoran at a gala celebrating his 100th birthday.

Kazuo Ohno established the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio in 1949, and built the Kamihoshikawa studio in 1961 in Hodogaya, Yokohama, for the creation and rehearsal of his choreography. Now under the aegis of Yoshito Ohno, the Kazuo Ohno Dance Studio conducts workshops, produces performances and has established a butoh archive, collecting and classifying all materials related to butoh and Kazuo Ohno's legacy. For more information, visit <http://www.kazuohnodancestudio.com/english/studio/>.