

The NW Butoh Wave

The resurgence of a Japanese dance form premieres at the Paramount

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Sankai Juku will perform at the Paramount Theatre. Photo credit: STG.

A wave is quivering across Seattle.

Deploying the quiver, the twitch, the fidget, and the undulation that creates the shape of the 20th century Japanese dance form "butoh", Daipan Butoh Collective is at the center of a local resurgence of butoh in Seattle. They are calling this resurgence "Northwest Butoh Wave."

Collaborating with regional and international guest artists, Daipan has brought together a diverse range of local butoh dancers, and has worked together to schedule over a dozen performances, workshops, and conversations about butoh this autumn.

The first of these guest artists to be featured has been Katsura Kan, a first-generation butoh artist, who joined the Daipan Collective for their Oracle & Enigma benefit performance on October 8 at the Fremont Abbey and then answered questions during a post-show discussion.

The full list of these events are posted on Daipan's website, but a major highlight of the season is the upcoming performance by Sankai Juku at the Paramount Theatre.

Sankai Juku founder and director Amagatsu Ushio brings to Seattle his new work "Tobari," which he says explores the universe beyond our earth.

"For about 15 years, I wanted to deal with 'star'" as a theme in my work, but I could not step forward toward it for long time," says Amagatsu.

"I was searching for it, but was not grasping it, always wanting to make a work out of the theme. Then, two years ago in 2008, I finally felt that I could touch and handle this subject."

Although Sankai Juku is performing older works in other cities on its U.S. tour, Amagatsu wanted to feature this newer work in Seattle. "Seattle is a very special city for us, and we always feel privileged to come back," he says.

Amagatsu admits that Seattle evokes bittersweet emotions. Although Sankai Juku's 2010 U.S. tour began in New York, Amagatsu notes that many of the company's previous U.S. tours were launched in Seattle.

He also recalls Sankai Juku's fateful Seattle performance in September, 1985. "Our accident happened in Seattle," he says. This proved to be a turning point. "After the accident, parents of the dancer who passed away encouraged us to keep on going."

To continue Sankai Juku's work, Amagatsu built a long-term relationship with the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris.

In 1981, Amagatsu had received his first offer from Théâtre de la Ville to co-produce a new work. "At the time, I did not know much about the theatre, so I told them that I needed to think about their offer!"

Only in hindsight did Amagatsu realize the importance of this opportunity. "Years later, the director of the theatre, Gerard Violette, told me that I was the only artist who had ever told him that I needed to think about a commission offer from Théâtre de la Ville," he says.

"I could have never imagined that the relationship would continue this long," Amagatsu says of the Théâtre. "They have co-commissioned twelve works in 26 years, and I am truly grateful to them for giving Sankai Juku the support that we needed."

Throughout these years, Amagatsu has maintained his focused vision. "I had been a member of Dairakudakan which then (and now) consisted of a large number of performers," he says.

"In contrast, I wanted to create a company that consists of a small number of dancers and explores the possibilities of expressions that can be attained by 'the less.'"

This "less" includes restraining the size and growth of the Sankai Juku company, despite great enthusiasm by young dancers to join in Amagatsu's work.

Of new dancers, "I ask them to be an intern, in a way, for a year or two, then, gradually they go onto the stage," he says. "I'm not planning to increase the number of our troupe suddenly. Taking time to accept them is important."

But integrating new dancers provides a learning experience for Amagatsu, in return. "For me, what's been refreshing is that working with young and new dancers, I realized that some of the words I use for creation and choreography have been codified, so, I needed to explain them in more neutral words from point zero," without the aid of mirrors or music in rehearsal.

Much has been written about the practice and meaning of butoh. At heart, butoh is the exploration of the realm between life and death, and the facial and bodily contortions of butoh arise from the exploration of the movement found in the stillness of that realm. The body's acts of sensing lead to eruptions of small twitches and shakes, as well as sudden explosions of large movement.

Amagatsu remains dedicated to these explorations. "While I respect and pursue the basics of Butoh, founded by Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, I, as the second-generation, was determined to establish 'my own Butoh,' by confronting my 'self,' just as the founders did so to establish the art form of Butoh," he says.

"I thought that it was important not just to inherit Butoh from the founders, but simultaneously to pursue my own path, because the background, social context of the work, and individual experiences and characteristics are all different," Amagatsu says.

Katsura Kan would agree that a hallmark of butoh is individuality. "Butoh has no form," says Kan. Its only criteria? "It must be not boring."

Sankai Juku's "Tobari" performs on November 3, at The Paramount Theatre, 911 Pine Street, Seattle. Daipan Butoh Collective events listed at <http://daipanbutoh.com/events.html>.