

A ritual intensity

Butoh dancing demands intense passion from its exponents. PETER WILSON reports from Japan

MOST people would call butoh the weirdest dance form in the world.

A product of Japan's '60s avant-garde underground, it is a dark world of dance without structure, best known for its grotesque faces and lack of anything which resembles Western notions of dance, art or fun.

Dancers — usually naked and covered in white powder — writhe about on a stark stage, at one time jerking sharply, at another balancing on one foot or moving painfully slowly as they show the body and its simplest movements in a strangely unfamiliar way.

Ugly, powerful, and when performed well, a disturbingly moving spectacle, it is not everyone's cup of tea but is quite simply the most intense of all dance forms.

Although influential in modern dance, butoh has never gained a mass audience and the fact that it both draws on and confronts traditional Japanese performing arts such as Noh theatre makes it less accessible to foreigners unfamiliar with Japanese culture.

One of the most unlikely performers in the Tokyo butoh scene is Tess de Quincey, an Australian who has spent the past four years working full-time as a member of a butoh troupe in the mountains north of Tokyo.

When uninspired, butoh can be obscure and impotent, and even though it has developed cult followings in the US and Europe the movement is generally becoming tired.

But the consistent strength of de Quincey's work is attracting attention in Tokyo's fringe dance and theatre world, the milieu which created it.

When she dances, she grips you in the guts with an invisible hand — if you are wise enough to simply absorb the performance without grasping for themes and messages.

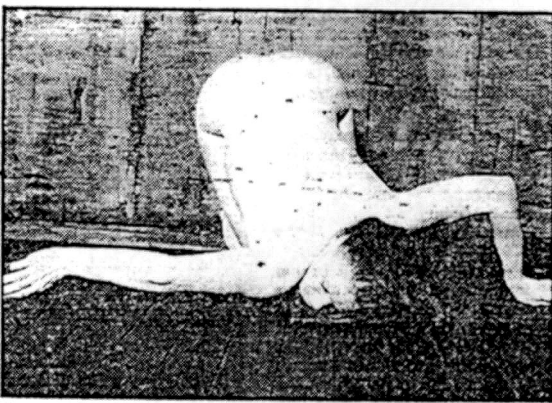
Capable of looking like a demented foetus while performing, in her "human" guise she is an attractive 35-year-old who supplements her income by modelling in Tokyo.

Often called the dance of darkness, in butoh the human body is stripped not just of clothes and ornaments but even of conventional, socially learned forms of movement.

"I perceive it as being about getting away from social trappings to the essential human being," de Quincey says. "A natural body without decoration"



A silent scream roaring from a distorted face, terrified and terrifying.



Tess de Quincey has spent four years as a butoh troupe member.

Her dance has a potently slow pace which almost warps time. What seems a 15-minute performance actually takes an hour but this entrancing control of pace controls an exhausting range of wordless emotions.

One European reviewer wrote that "there cannot be less movement to express such an extraordinarily complex and wordless tragedy."

In a recent Tokyo performance, de Quincey lay on her side naked while a spotlight created grim shadows on her back. The lighting was stark, the accompanying music haunting and eerie.

As she writhed the back somehow lost its human form and took on an unfamiliar, startling character. In another performance a silent scream roars from a distorted face,

terrifying and terrified. The dancer balances painfully on one foot for an age before collapsing.

With an Australian mother and British army colonel father, De Quincey grew up in London before moving to Australia as a teenager and later spending 12 years in Copenhagen working in political theatre, graphics and modern dance.

In 1983 she saw butoh pioneer Tatsumi Hijitake perform in Europe.

"It blew me apart, I sat there for an hour saying, 'What is this stuff? I had to go to Japan to find out about it.'"

Leading performer Min Tanaka invited her to join his troupe and she has since toured Europe several times and performed two brief seasons in Sydney.