

Los Angeles Times

Monday, June 30, 2003

Letting go -- to get in touch

The dance form butoh wakes up your inner child, and your dormant muscles too.

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Special to The Times

I went into my first butoh class with no idea what to expect. I had never seen a performance of this avant-garde Japanese dance form, so I had little more than a stock image in my mind of dramatic dancers covered in white body paint.

It was easy to sense it would be challenging, though. When I called to inquire about the Body Weather Laboratory, taught by internationally acclaimed butoh master Oguri at the Electric Lodge in Venice, I was warned to warm up in advance and bring an extra change of clothes because I would sweat that much.

"You won't be able to walk the next day," said Jamie Burris, 38, who has danced with Oguri for a decade and handles class administration.

Burris was right. Years of gymnastics training and yoga practice did little to prepare my muscles for Body Weather, an intense method of butoh training developed in Japan in the 1970s. Despite a healthy slathering of Ben Gay and some ibuprofen, my thighs, hips, calves, stomach and shoulders ached for three days.

Pain or no pain, this was one of the most playful and interesting experiences I've had in years.

Butoh, shortened from ankoku butoh, meaning "dance of darkness," emerged in Japan in 1959, combining elements of Japanese theater, martial arts and improvisational modern dance. Butoh dancers explore how different environments subtly influence movement, sometimes practicing and performing outdoors. Because butoh's founder, Tatsumi Hijikata, grew up on a farm in the cold climate of northern Japan, dancers' movements sometimes resemble those of farm laborers, crouching low to the earth and moving slowly, instead of standing erect as in Western dance.

The white body paint often associated with butoh is a convention from Kabuki theater that many performers no longer use. Costume and staging now vary immensely, but simplicity remains a mainstay.

While butoh classes are sometimes designed to closely resemble performances, Oguri's class incorporates classic butoh movements, while training the body and mind to unleash individual creativity.

If you plan to give it a try, leave your inhibitions behind and don't expect strict technique instruction. Butoh is more about a process than a specific form, which may explain why it attracts not just dancers, but artists of all stripes.

When I walked in the door for my first lesson, I was immediately handed a wet rag and put to work wiping the studio floor, a communal way to prepare the space, while warming up the body. One veteran covered the studio mirrors with a curtain, so we'd focus our attention inward instead of watching ourselves.

The three-hour class of about a dozen people, newcomers and veterans, meets twice a week and is broken into three parts. During the first hour, we formed two single-file lines and repeated a series of odd movements called "MB" for mind and body, muscle and bone, movement and balance.

"Falling down is fine," said Sherwood Chen, 30, who helped lead the class. "Respect your limits, but challenging them is also a form of respect."

We walked knock-kneed while rolling our heads, lifted our arms and legs in alternating directions like puppets on strings, arched into backbends and crawled across the floor in bridge positions, and we hopped around the studio on our rear ends to jazz tunes and Japanese pop.

The movements looked simple, but trust me, they were not. Toward the end, I was panting like a puppy.

"We work really hard to break the physical limits, to break some habits or patterns," Oguri said.

No kidding. The second part of the class featured a series of partner manipulations. This was similar to yogic stretching and breathing, except I relaxed and relinquished control as my partner stretched my body into various poses, using her weight to deepen my range of motion.

The effect was similar to a massage, so if you don't like the proximity of a partner, this class is not for you. At one point, two people moved my body at once, gently lifting me off the ground and swinging me around like a child.

In fact, much of Body Weather reminded me of child's play. We even played tag. With freedom to be silly, the class was full of humor, and it reawakened a childlike spontaneity and wonderment. This was especially true in the third hour, designed to develop sensitivity.

In one exercise, we closed our eyes, while a partner led us around by our finger, touching various surfaces to hone our senses. Then, as a partner watched over me, I wore a blindfold and attempted to walk backward, downstairs and outside the building. Crossing a threshold, I had a moment of panic and gasped. Oguri urged me to walk slower.

After making it outside, I noticed the wind and the hot pavement on my bare feet as if I'd never felt them before. Brushing past some bamboo and between some plants and a metal railing, I was lost in a familiar environment, as the scent of some unknown food wafted by.

"If you close your eyes, you can see different things," Oguri said. "You can feel more senses. Dimensions change."

By the end of class, I was physically exhausted, but mentally charged.

Not all butoh classes are as rigorous as Oguri's. Instructors Joe Talkington of Corpus Delicti (with classes in Pasadena and Hollywood) and Don McLeod of ZenButoh (with workshops in various Los Angeles locations) said they teach mainly slow, meditative movements seen in many butoh performances.

Because butoh is considered a radical form, never to be defined, there is no uniform method of instruction.

Each butoh dancer has a unique teaching technique, although most incorporate improvisation and some form of "image work," giving dancers mental images to inspire movement.

Body Weather is probably the most physically demanding butoh class in Los Angeles, but Oguri urged me to stick around to see the results.

"We don't use whole muscle movement in daily life," he said. "If you continue after a month, your body will change a lot. You'll feel much more hungry. You'll have more flexibility, awareness and energy. It will open your mind up, and you'll feel happy."

I did feel happy, but truth be told, butoh was unique; I don't think I can even begin to understand it after one or two lessons. All I can say is be brave. Jump right in and experience it for yourself — the pain and the joy.