

COMPLETION REPORT

Butoh Shakespeare in Southeast Asia

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Butoh has been described as Japan's greatest contribution to modern theatre, and its influence has extended to the ways in which Shakespeare's plays are staged. However, there has been no study dedicated to the relationship between *butoh* and the Bard, or to comparing the usage of *butoh* across multiple adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The first of such studies, this project sought specifically to focus on Southeast Asian productions of Shakespeare which employ *butoh*. It compared the work of well-known Singaporean director, Ong Keng Sen, with the lesser-known output of Lee Swee Keong, a director and *butoh* dancer from Malaysia. Although Ong's *Search: Hamlet* (2002) which featured *butoh* dancer Carlota Ikeda is well known among Shakespearean scholars, Lee's sustained engagement with Shakespeare has resulted in a substantial body of work which is unparalleled in Asia in bringing together *butoh* and Shakespeare. Besides acting with KL Shakespeare Players in *David Glass's Tempest* (Mar 2019), Lee has directed the *Shakespeare Meets Butoh* series comprising *Plots of a Tyrant* (2016), *Laments of the Dead* (2016), *Star-crossed Lovers* (Nov 2018), and *Old Lear* (2019).

In this study, artistes and directors were interviewed to uncover their reasons for delving into *butoh* and their experiences of approaching Shakespeare through *butoh*. Textual and performance analyses explored the significances of the convergence of *butoh* movements and Shakespearean dialogue at selected moments in performances. The study revealed that Malaysian artistes were drawn to *butoh* because of its striking visual beauty, as well as its Asian origins, in contrast to other contemporary dance forms which originate in the West. The antithetical relationship between the emphasis on wordplay in Shakespearean drama and *butoh*'s emphasis on the visual and visceral was discovered to be the most fruitful aspect of bringing together these genres. It opened up new ways for Shakespearean actors to experience and express their characters by moving them beyond the formal elements of verse and diction. Additionally, *butoh* artistes like Lee manifested a playful disregard for Shakespeare's cultural status in the West and for scholarly interpretations of his plays, thereby allowing them to engage more deeply with the narrative and emotive aspects of these works. The study also revealed that productions were more likely to draw on the many facets of *butoh* to enrich the performance of Shakespearean texts when *butoh* artistes were directing or given substantial freedom to interpret their roles within the performance. By contrast, directors steeped in Shakespeare tended to employ *butoh* in superficial ways to represent the aberrant 'Other' in opposition to the male, Caucasian norm.

This study is significant to the growing field of Asian Shakespeare because it suggests one way in which Asian actors and directors can engage with Shakespearean texts in a productive, decolonized manner. It also highlights another way in which Japanese culture is contributing to the global trajectory of Shakespearean performances. Whereas *kabuki*, *noh*, and Japanese cinema have long been acknowledged as enriching the global performance of Shakespeare, *butoh* should now also be recognised as exerting significant force.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

7 November 2020, Sejong University Seoul and on Zoom (hybrid)

Conference: Intersections in Shakespeare (4th Biennial Conference of the Asian Shakespeare Association)

Paper: "Butoh Shakespeare under the Wings of Asian Directors"

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Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)