



SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL

A solo dance of remembrance

In *Kuu*, Yoshito Ohno pays homage to his father, world famous *butoh* pioneer Kazuo Ohno, writes **EDITH PODESTA**

YOSHITO Ohno's solo dance piece *Kuu* (Emptiness) paid homage to his father: world famous *butoh* pioneer Kazuo Ohno, who died last year at age 103. Ohno's dance was like a lens of grief, celebration and remembrance for his lost father – even if his form of expressive movement is not easily appreciated by everybody.

Butoh (*Bu* meaning dance and *toh* meaning step) originated in Japan in the wake of World War II and quickly gained an underground following in Tokyo in the 1960s. Rather than a set of movements, *butoh* celebrates the beauty of the individual's body – for every dancer, there will be a unique expression of the *butoh* form.

The performance opened to Bach's *Organ Toccata*, revealing Ohno, now in his 70s, standing transfixed with head bowed and back to the audience – caught in what seems to be a moment of silent commemoration.

This beige-suited graven solo image, now unaccompanied by his father who was his dance partner for

over 40 years, stood motionless, with only his ribs seen to "dance" as he breathed. As his paralysed grief continued, every shift in the audience caught one's attention – in this stillness, everything becomes a dance and everyone a dancer.

In the blink of an eye, the soundtrack morphed and Ohno turned and began to gesture with the weight and calculation of a person in immense physical pain. Images flickered and whispered on his palms and fingertips as his hands recounted the memories shared with his father in painstaking detail. And there were memories of a child as well as an adult.

When Ohno disappeared with a sleight of hand and re-entered wearing bunny ears, he moved across the stage with unbridled playfulness and joy, simultaneously awkward and elegant, at times corporeally quoting the ballerina's *bouree* and then hopping around the stage like Peter Rabbit. By switching his head-dress, he transformed yet again, his hands and head becoming flowers.

He possessed innocence and such generosity as he glided along the fine

line that divides the worlds of the living and the dead.

The final chapter in this dance of remembrance came to a close as images of Kazuo Ohno's weathered 100-year-old face and hands were projected across the stage. As he lost his ability to walk in 2001, he concentrated his dance in his hands. As Ohno held a small hand puppet cast in the image of his father, the final *pas de deux* between father and son was a powerfully fragile – this stunning eulogy transcending form and cultural boundaries.

Butoh is not for everyone. It takes its time, like a 100-year-old man gesturing for something that he needs. But it can also surprise with the innocence and wisdom of a child's impromptu dance performance. *Butoh* requires your empathy, your patience and your curiosity. *Kuu* could be any of our stories. I left the theatre thinking of my own father, lost in the thought of his worn hands – I want to remember.

Contributing reviewer Edith Podesta is the head of acting at Lasalle College of the Arts



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