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Cover Artist  
Yasuko Yokoshi

# Suspensions: Some Thoughts on Yasuko Yokoshi's Recent Work

by reginald jackson



TYLER TYLER PICTURED: KAYO SEYAMA AND JALIE ALEXANDER. PHOTO BY ALEXANDRA CORAZZA

With Yasuko Yokoshi's work, dance becomes a kinetic thinking through; it figures an effort to re-conceptualize pre-modern forms against contemporary ones to reshape the parameters of cultural ownership. She's wary of incorporating Japanese structures to any total degree, and this is a good thing, since it reorients our notion of what the category "Japanese culture" should include. Yasuko's respect for the traditional forms and her shrewd sensibility stand out. At the same time, her playful good sense makes room for *Giselle* and Lady Gaga; Raymond Carver and *nagauta*; Cat Power and *Tale of the Heike*, but does so without grabbing for shock value. Her unassuming admission that she's "just collecting the elements" belies the purposeful investments of her collage and its capacity to suspend our preconceptions.

Insofar as she has described dance as a non-linear language, it makes sense that Yasuko's dances tend to avoid trajectories of cause and effect. I appreciate this penchant for discontinuity as it materializes in Yasuko's work, mainly because it doesn't come cheap, nor does it aim to jolt the viewer with tinny flourishes. Anchored in a reverence for craft, its subversive interest feels more measured and mature than a superficial avant-gardism. It's important to point out that in contrast to many works that aim for a "fusion" of western and eastern elements, Yasuko's work doesn't treat these categories as soluble. While they might share associative links, there's no tendency to reconcile their contrast.

As a scholar working in pre-modern Japanese literature and drama, what has excited

me about Yasuko's work is her capacity to invigorate traditional forms in a manner that is both reverential and savvy. She respects traditions and brings a level of craft to her permutations that ingrains them with a weight so-called fusion artists lack. There are plenty of practitioners who aim for a hasty subversion that falls short to the extent that it's not grounded faithfully in the tradition it tries to divert. Often the race toward disruption comes at the expense of a sturdy foundation, with the result that what's built topples or feels off. Yasuko avoids this, and it contributes to her work's vibrancy.

When Yasuko explains that she's "there to serve the dance," it implies that the base referent takes precedence as something to be cautiously supplemented, if not enhanced. Moreover, this means that the evocative force of the movements can overshadow a concern for story. She has expressed concerns about the western market's thirst for knowledge, which can entail having to spoon-feed an audience with narrative explanations whose pat linearity subordinates the broader ambitions of the work. Forced translation (of the sort French audiences expect) sullies the art with plot summary. Storyline therefore occupies a provisional position in Yasuko's work, generally speaking, because the intelligibility of a narrative progression pales in comparison to the dance's fuller impact.

*BELL* strikes me as different from some of Yasuko's previous work in this regard. Along these lines, I also wonder about the particular challenge *BELL*'s vestigial narratives might pose. With *Tyler Tyler*

(2010), the 13th century *Tale of the Heike* referent allowed for more fragmentary citation by dint of its episodic structure; even if narrative threads crept in, they wouldn't last long before other arcs eclipsed them. However, in *BELL*'s case, the story matters and must be heeded even as other elements evolve. One motif shared by *Tyler Tyler* and *BELL* both is that of the *shirabyōshi* dancer, a female entertainer cum courtesan whose supple movements enchant as much as they warp social mores. The *Dojoji* legend tells of a naïve village girl who is courted and then abandoned by a duplicitous monk; breaking his promise to marry her, he escapes to Dojoji temple, asking the monks there to hide him under its large bell. The girl pursues him, her wrath transforming her into a fearsome serpent, until she finds the bell and coils herself around it, roasting the monk inside with her raging passion. In the Noh and Kabuki versions of *Dojoji*, the latter of which inspires *BELL*, the girl is recast as a *shirabyōshi* dancer who insinuates herself into the temple's exclusively male enclave, sauntering in from the periphery to assert her centrality. In this sense, she figures the kind of methodical infiltration and distension of classical forms that characterizes Yasuko's relationship with Noh and Kabuki. Significantly, the *shirabyōshi* figure *questions through dance*, skirting the Noh play's exclusionary mandate against women and upending staid conceptual binaries with her sharp Zen responses in the Kabuki version. This questioning goes to the heart of her symbolic appeal. Her maneuvers enact a practice of taking little for granted that dovetails Yasuko's own experimental craftsmanship.

On this score, *BELL* reveals its allegorical significance. This is a dance, a kind of choreographic transposition of idioms, that reflects upon dance as a kind of social and even spiritual practice. The Kabuki play, and the Noh plays that inspired it, highlight the transformative vitality of performance with dances nested within dances that provoke censure, conflict, as well as the potential for spiritual metamorphosis. There's no way to escape the misogyny of the original plays, but *Giselle*'s romanticism at least offsets this feature somewhat.

Yasuko maintains a deep respect for traditional Japanese performance even as her patience for overly conservative notions of Japanese culture wears thin. At the level of choreographic process, she deploys this principle by opening spaces for improvisation within the dance's more rigid structure. This allows the other members of her ensemble to contribute their collaborative input to the piece while simultaneously dilating its more orthodox contours from the inside. As Yasuko tells it, she "want[s] great shades of presence of the person," presence borne by a requisite high technique, but without attenuating the dancers' unique frequencies.

In *BELL*, the juxtaposition of ballet's aesthetic against Kabuki's makes for a palpable tension that plays out on multiple registers. Whereas the pointe shoe allows for a less earthbound characterization, more up-ness to emphasize the youth and feminine innocence of the protagonist, Kabuki's white dance-socks curb that cuteness. At a gestural level, one sees clearly how lightly or heavily the hips are set, if the arms are

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PICTURED: KUNIYA SAWAMURA AND YASUKO YOKOSHI. PHOTO: STEVE HART



KUNIYA SAWAMURA. PHOTO BY STEVE HART

more willowy or tensed; sonically, the squeak of the supporting dancers' bare feet stands out against the nearly noiseless slide of Yasuko's *tabi*.

But this isn't dissonance for dissonance's sake. Yasuko's style stresses certain thematic or emotional contiguities between traditions without pursuing a seamless overlap. She isn't interested in some cross-cultural blend and actively resists such a notion. Instead, she favors an intimate juxtaposition of different cultural forms without making them permeate one another. One example might be training a vocalist in a Kabuki-style idiom for the new piece; this will ring as earnest, controlled, and likely a little sour, too. Painstaking combinations like these accrue to a disorientation that prompts the audience to question what "cross-cultural" ultimately means.

The three most recent works, *Tyler Tyler*, *Hangman Takuzo*, and *BELL* emphasize a lived and living weight. In lieu of the kimono silks of *what we when we* (2006), this weight inheres within the poignant heft of a denim dress in *Tyler Tyler*, where Americana fabric trails the female dancer's limbs, unhurried. In the film *Hangman Takuzo*, it inhabits the undead body placing its burden on a rope, levied by a man who has trained himself to fashion the perfect noose. Shifting weight from one project to the next is necessary but not necessarily easy. In this vein *Hangman Takuzo* reads like a deep breath taken in the wake of *Tyler Tyler*: an uncluttered expanse in which to regroup and survey the essence of dance from a pared-down vantage. With its naturalistic framing and tranquil documentary

vener, the film transpires within a context in which life and art mesh. *Hangman's* matter-of-fact presentation renders performance as entwined with the rhythms of everyday life: gaudy gameshow neon from the T.V. in the unlit living room; insistent chops of vegetables coming from the well-lit kitchen. These sensations embed the man hanging from a ceiling beam—cord cinching his neck as television flashes lick the shadow of two stilled legs.

*Takuzo's* practice of hanging, Namiko Kawamura's "Naked-Walking-Forward": two types of bodies, and two respective convictions that each affirm life with their singular inflection. The film studies their actions, with the interviews attempting to ascertain some greater truth of movement beneath the mute austerities of hanging or walking. At one level, the film examines a body's rapport with gravity, where a single man can hang sandbag still and then send his body into sluggish orbit solely by raising his toe. Whatever force abides in that pendulous rotation, the camera seems intent on capturing some hint of it. With incisive focus, the film atomizes physical motion to the smallest degree possible in order to plumb the soul of dance. This vector extends beyond the human characters as the camera lingers on furnishings, cigarette smoke, wavering fruit branches, and rain-slick leaves, conscientiously ignoring all but the most fundamental facets of living and moving. Composed of these long moments, the film feels like an untrashed meditation on choreographic craft at a microscopic scale.

Through the film we learn to consider more

critically the ethical force leveraged by a man who hangs himself in the theater that is his unkempt garden. At the same time, we acknowledge Mika Kurosawa's steady bass note, which—both domestically and artistically—tethers him enough to hover without floating away. Yasuko mentioned during a screening of the film that "Mika is a grounding force for [Takuzo]." Indeed, the film accentuates the potency of such gravitational forces in its concern with Hangman's suspension. The literal and metaphorical senses of the term suggest a conceptual richness well worth exploring in another context, but suffice it to say here, suspension might operate as a kind of cipher for Yasuko's recent work: as a choreographic motif and as a broader generative ideal.

In *BELL's* traditional dramatic forebears, the massive Dojoji bell anchors all onstage movement in its orbit. Hanging or resting near the center of the stage, this prop commands attention as an object of scorn and as an enclosure in which the protagonist mutates from dancer to demon. The sheer range of maneuvers performed in relation to the prop foregrounds the array of questions that have propelled the creative process behind *BELL*. How does one portray the feeling of betrayal or the need for vengeance—without explaining too much? Or, how might empathy surface in a Kabuki setting? How grounded, or suspended, or sculptural must a gesture be before it moves the audience? And what movements must not be altered in translating the dance out of Japanese toward another idiom? When Yasuko was in residency at University of Chicago this past November, our

conversations wove between documentary and choreography, veered from the strains of corporate sponsorship to the physical and emotional repercussions of overly firm floors. ("The morale is better with a better floor," Yasuko reminded.) Needless to say, the dancers were extremely gracious throughout their stay—even as the unkind floors took their toll.

Aligning the ostensibly disjointed elements of the composition in a tightly-packed counterpoint might allow the attentive audience member to experience a resonance irreducible to harmony. If audience members find the piece moving—taking the dance in openly, from a certain engaged proximity—it won't be because the rougher edges of each component style were filed down to make them neatly interlock. Rather, the composition will thrive to the extent that its highly stylized sinews—its individuated blue and red threads—draw taut, flickering purple as their intensities peak then fade.

Once completed, *BELL* will pivot on momentary vibrations like this: tiny intervals of suspension that reverberate back through spine of the piece to convey Yasuko's body of work forward.

REGINALD JACKSON is an Assistant Professor in the department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, where he specializes in pre-modern Japanese literature and performance. His research interests include Heian calligraphy, narrative handscrolls, Noh drama, and contemporary Japanese dance. <sup>26</sup>