

## Performance Matters

# Anatomy of Conflict

Naoko Maeshiba

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(Re)sounding Bodies East and West: Embodied Engagements with Japanese Traditions

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### Article abstract

This essay explores physicality in the context of intercultural theatre and the conflicts, challenges, and questions that arise in bringing my Japanese self into the Western classroom. My inquiry revolves around the internal process of rethinking the physicality of actors through various lenses: space and body, emotion and body, logic vs. ambiguity, and Western horizontality vs. Japanese verticality. Special attention is given to the relationship between body and space, with reference to the work of a Japanese director and playwright Ōta Shōgo. Through an excavation of my roots and reflections on my past experiences, juxtaposed with discoveries in my current classroom, the essay tracks a gradual shift in my soma (body) as I entangle my Japanese/Western construct, move toward a reintegration of the two, and embrace the question of whether a universal approach to potentiality in performance is possible.

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## Anatomy of Conflict<sup>1</sup>

Naoko Maeshiba

This practice-based essay is about my inquiry into the matter of physicality in performance. My suggestions about generating physicality deal with this matter from different angles: sensation in body, space and body, Western horizontality vs. Japanese verticality, head logic and body thinking, emotion and body, and approach to creating a potent body. My exploration of the physicality of actors is rooted in the flux and ambiguity of confidence and the confinement that I experience in my Japanese/Western body. First, I examine how I view the disconnect between body, mind, and space currently happening in the field of theatre.<sup>2</sup> I then explore and investigate the origins of my view by revisiting my cultural background and excavating the roots of my own physical/mental construct as someone born in Westernized, modern Japan and who moves back and forth between Japan and the United States. I will juxtapose my reflections on my past experiences with my current classroom experience, providing concrete examples of the conflicts, challenges, and questions that I confront in the process of merging Eastern and Western approaches. As I examine the East-West dynamics in my physical/mental construct, I call attention to the relationship between body and space, referring to the work of visionary Japanese director and playwright Ōta Shōgo. Ōta was an influential figure in Japanese theatre in the 1970s and 1980s when underground theatre flourished as a response to both traditional theatre and Western-oriented modern theatre.<sup>3</sup> The essay then turns to a reflection on the reintegration of my Japanese/Western body before addressing the question of whether a universal approach to potentiality in performance is possible. I conclude with an excerpt of my forthcoming workbook, *Anatomy of Conflict Workbook: Daily Practice for a Potent Body*.

### My Disconnect

What excites me most in performance is the fact that there is a live body on stage: a body that breathes, moves, sees, hears, and interacts with other bodies. What thrills me most is that holy moment when the performer's body starts vibrating with the space. My breath starts synchronizing with the performer's. I start feeling the particles of air.

Electricity runs through my body. My pores open, my temperature shifts, and I feel strong sensation travelling through my spine. I'm experiencing what she is experiencing. The colour around me starts altering. I am seeing what I'm not seeing. I sense what's arising in space through her body as a medium. It is like hearing an overtone in Tuvan singing. It's exhilarating. I'm alive. My cells are alive. I feel ecstatic. Sadly, this happens rarely. Most often, I'm staring at what seem like deadened bodies and an empty space. Whether it's Broadway or experimental theatre or educational theatre, in my limited experiences, I often find myself not engaging, not because the performance is in English but because of the disconnect that happens between the body and the mind, the body and the words, and the body and the space. I stop feeling and desperately start searching for some kind of thread to hang onto. My thoughts float away from my body, entering a sort of maze as I try to listen to and

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make sense of what's being presented to me. I stop breathing. I can feel my energy go up in my head. I try to understand. My head is hot. My body is in pain. I feel powerless. Many questions start swirling in my head. Why are their bodies not matching with their words? Why can't I just take make-believe as make-believe? Why do they just sit like that as if they didn't sense the feeling of the sofa? Why do they move as if they knew it all? What are they afraid of? What am I afraid of? Depth? Subtlety? Why do I not feel anything? I am alone.

I look around and the rest of the audience is having a great time.

Laughing, crying, feeling catharsis, and experiencing enlightenment. I sit, feeling like a complete failure, questioning myself. Why do I feel that it's not real? On the surface, I hear them speak beautifully, move around with finesse. The space is well crafted. But my own body doesn't quite believe it. Why? Maybe this has something to do with my Japanese upbringing.

## Japan in My Body

Growing up in Kobe, Japan, in the 1960s and 1970s, nature and culture merged all around me.

Playing on an unpaved road, seeing bats fly around in the orange dark sky, smelling the persimmons falling from a tree, sneaking into a neighbour's small cow farm and stepping on cows' droppings, hiding in a small cave and listening to the insects, and escaping from a small snake, the welding factory around the corner, the loud abrasive sound and smell of iron, the fresh scent of lumber from the lumberyard right behind my house . . . that's where I gathered neighbourhood kids and performed my first play. My feet remember the precariousness of different sizes of lumber. My hands remember the warmth of the soft earth. Every evening at twilight, as the sky got dark, I felt a little lonely and wanted to go home. The first day of spring, when the cherry blossoms arrived, my eyes, ears, nostrils, and skin all opened to enter into the festivity. I felt a little sad when the petals started falling. The boundary between my body and the environment around me often became blurry. Embracing and enjoying these precious moments was the main purpose of my life.

Indoor life was just as rich as outdoor life. In a standard size, traditional Japanese house, rooms are loosely separated by sliding doors. We also demarcate the space by taking off shoes, putting them on, taking them off and putting on indoor slippers, then taking them off and putting on toilet slippers, so on and so forth. In the house where I grew up, all the rooms were multifunctional. One room turned into a bedroom, a living room, and a study. Every time the room got rearranged and redefined, my default body position changed from lying to sitting to standing. I registered each room and its function through my physical sense. The small kitchen with a low sink was a place in which we often rotated our bodies, bent over and extended. The room that faced the corridor was the one where we sat on tatami mats, and the dining room was the only "chair" room, in which my body was allowed to extend fully, making me feel much taller. The bathroom entailed squatting low and sinking in lower. The energy from different spaces lingered, leaving their traces in my body. My body was an extension of each particular place, each environment.

*With these sensations still alive somewhere in my body, I approach young actors and immediately hit a wall. I find myself struggling with the feeling that I need to explain myself better through words. The more I talk, the more diluted the essence becomes. Since "speaking" is not my forte, I would often start from the physical life of performance and drive other elements from there. Yet again I immediately hit that wall. My students don't trust their own physical*

*sense. In fact, they don't seem to trust anything other than the words they are uttering. It seems there has to be an intellectual reason to make any action happen. So I grab a real object for them to work with. "OK, here, let's say there is this chair in the room and you love it." They stand next to it. They tentatively or carelessly touch it. They lift it, hold it, put it down again. They try to form some kind of a relationship with it, but often it appears to be difficult to form any real connection between their bodies and this object. They try to be agents enacting some action on it. It's as if they've inhibited themselves from engaging through their own feelings and sensations. I don't feel them or the chair. They try really hard to make something happen, to make some kind of context. Now it's a telescope, now it's a broom, now this, now that. A sliver of context emerges, but it is rarely enough to transform their stiff bodies, the chair, or the space. Nothing feels real. The room feels stuffy. I start getting exhausted and losing interest.*

*Somehow, moving is much more foreign to them than speaking. Sensations are even more foreign to them. I'm getting extremely desperate. Jump! Run around! What is your breath like now? Now touch the chair. Let the chair touch you. How do you feel? Stand. No, REALLY stand. OK, now sit. What changed? Lie down now. What changed? Stand up. What does it mean to stand? What is standing? Walk. What does it mean to walk? Are you breathing? Why do you breathe? What does it mean to breathe? Let's start from there.*

There is another thing about my Japanese culture—the invisible spirits that inhabit physical spaces. My family practised Buddhism, and they often talked about actually seeing and hearing the spirits. I was always curious about these entities I couldn't see but only sense. The back room of my house was dark and had a Buddhist altar, where all our ancestors slept. Without quite understanding the meaning of this room, I was scared of entering it.

This was the only room in the house with a door that creaked as it opened and closed. The door had a texture of many cracked lines, and when it was ajar, faint voices chanting in a mysterious tone seeped out of the room. The musty scent of incense, the gold inscription on three small, black tablets, candles, scripture, sweet offerings—things of and for the other world. The darkness was not just dark but thick and heavy on my body, suggesting the presence of something, even if I couldn't see what it was.

As I began sensing the intricacies of a physical space, I developed a sensitivity to the energy of and between the people in it. I often noticed a certain atmosphere subtly vibrating inside a person even if nothing was said or expressed verbally. I picked up an inkling of a fight even before my parents started the actual fight. I was learning that how people appeared to be on the outside and what was actually happening inside were two different things. Even though I couldn't see it, people's energy affected the energy of the space, which affected my senses and made me feel certain emotions. When my parents fought, the room felt gloomy and sticky. Something hard like a brown rubber ball grew in my solar plexus. The room turned the colour of red and yellow. I felt anger. When my grandmother read bedtime stories, I warmed up, opened, and felt cozy. I was filled with joy. When I found out that she left early in the morning without letting me know, my futon felt colder, the floor harder, and my body felt like it was shrinking. The bottom of my stomach turned ash-white. I felt sadness. I began to understand something about the intangible entities circulating in, around, and through tangible elements. When energy was flowing in and out of my body, my sensations were alive. My emotions pulsed strongly and vividly. It was physical.

*One thing that my students have trouble digesting is the idea that emotions are physical. Because emotions are invisible, they seem to think that they are some kind of entity that lives in their heads. Somehow, sensations are not easily accessible, and their relationship with emotions is vague to them.<sup>4</sup> They say they feel "emotional" without recognizing*

*physical sensations. I wonder if this perception about emotions comes solely from the environment they grew up in or are there any other reasons.*

## The West in My Body

I was born into a Japan already heavily infused with Western culture. Western practices and ideas were around me everywhere—in food, literature, music, fashion, media, and architecture. On a typical day, I would read Greek mythology, study *King Lear*, eat a hamburger my mother had made, and watch *Bewitched* on TV. We celebrated Christmas with a Christmas tree, turkey, and champagne while honouring the New Year by visiting shrines in traditional Japanese kimonos. The West entered into my body slowly and steadily. Constantly inhaling the scent of the foreign land made me itch. I began to yearn for the real experience of these foreign cultures.

As Japan has strived for economic growth, nature around me has gradually disappeared. No more rice fields, no more cow farms or butterflies in vast flowerbeds or mysterious vacant lots for adventure. Every piece of land became occupied by houses and other buildings. The whole culture was moving toward the sleek, efficient, fast, fashionable, and big. We focused intently on working toward our goals and eliminated the things unrelated to them. Achievement was a survival tool and a gauge of your value to society. My body became a crucial tool to support whatever I had to accomplish. There was no more space outside or inside of my body. I started to forget the sense of the land. I started to forget the feel of my body. We embraced the West with our Japanese bodies in Japanese space, but our land didn't grow big, and our physical features didn't become Westernized to match the change. The more imbued with the West I became, the more dissonant my existence grew. Traditional Japanese culture felt obsolete and implicit. It was hard to see what this mysterious and absolute ethos rooted in thousands of years of history had to do with who I was. The explicit societal codes, extracted from traditional values and warped to suit the contemporary societal needs, were similarly alien, and increasingly constraining, to me. I couldn't breathe in tiny Japan. I was dying to get out, leave my house, my family, and my country altogether.

When my small Japanese body stepped onto the vast land of the United States for the first time, it exploded and cried out—FREEDOM! Sheer optimism, light and casual attitudes, bold and bright colours, and friendly smiles all opened me up with excitement.

People didn't seem to care so much about exactly what you said or did. I LOVED that. There was a LOT of space, and infinite resources and future possibilities. Compared to the Japanese tendency of honouring conformity to the majority, American culture honoured distinct individualities. Instead of constantly caring about what people thought or how I could maneuver through small spaces and the people and objects in them, I was able to express my voice, own my space, and move around with dynamism and boldness. I could be me! Learning the new language, cultural code, and mannerism liberated me. The sense of autonomy made me feel invincible.

Then something happened. As I watched large American people occupy space and move with a wide confident gait, my body began to delineate itself from the environment instead of merging into it. The strong sense of "I" was established and became the agent for everything. I asserted my voice, toughening my skin to make a statement. I articulated my behaviour with a crisp contour. I acted as if I knew. I generated a new body suited to speak the English language, a body without ambiguity. As I felt more visible, I increasingly gained confidence. Living in this culture breathed a completely

different life force into my being, into a body that had been suffocating as if it were about to disappear into the homogeneity of merging I had previously learned. I was visible as a clearly defined individual. I became a “Japanese woman.” As I continued living in this culture, I realized that this definition affected people’s perception of me and my work. On the one hand, it explained me in very simple terms without my having to explain. On the other hand, it implied specific ideas, images, and expectations. I felt guarded and confined once again, but differently.

The dissonance I had been experiencing in Westernized, modern Japan, which appeared to be resolved when I landed in the United States, resurged and drove me to reestablish my Japanese identity more strongly and widely in this foreign country. Instead of trying to become like an American, I saw myself attempting to reintroduce a Japanese accent into my speech, and to act with an assertive yet reserved attitude in my interactions with people.

Reflecting upon the disconnect I’ve been feeling in both watching and directing/teaching a performance, I’m beginning to wonder if the source of this disconnect lies in my own disconnect from myself. Within the US context, my Japanese body, with its sense of the particular places in which I grew up—Japan, my house, these rooms, specific customs—and invisible physicality of emotion and is confined by an inappropriate space and body movement. My Western body has no ambiguity and is confident in itself, skin-toughened, and yet also defined as a specific image of a Japanese woman.

Where is my Japanese/Western body?

*Teaching actors in the United States had been a crucible that thwarted rather than afforded my Japanese body the possibility of generating a different sense of space and material. But as I observed my students’ guardedness, I started wondering if my own bias and tendency to perceive Japan and the West as two separate, even binary, entities rather than as points on a fluid continuum was making me blind to the source of their disconnect, closing the pathway between us. Perhaps the crux of this matter is more fundamental, having to do with our compromised self-image in the process of adaptation and survival. In the US, with its pronounced culture of individualism, I felt the need to project myself as a “Japanese woman living the United States.” In the same way, perhaps my students might be constantly responding to the implicit demand to project themselves as unique and distinct individuals. Performing this image day in and day out, a person’s physical, mental, and spiritual sense could gradually become fixed, obliterating other possibilities.<sup>5</sup> I feel a social armour that encases my Western body, that draws strong boundaries between us and space, between people and material around us, making bodies with which we come in contact surfaces to slide over not places to encounter, coalesce around, or acknowledge our commonalities. Piercing through the protective shells of my students’ Western bodies, I try to reach out and touch the unknown, the essence of their persons buried deep underneath. I don’t fully understand their culture, but if I loosen my own armour, I will start feeling a place of connection between us. And I realized that if I were to express the kind of spiritual/emotional potency of my Japanese body that I had cultivated and inhabited—its openness to an unknown that can touch me and change me—in the US context, it had to be in a different way.*

## **Working with Ōta Shōgo’s Water Station**

### **Body with Vertical Space Awareness**

In my conflicted state of being, I remembered one of my mentors, Ōta Shōgo, a Japanese director and playwright who taught me a very important lesson about theatre. He considered a human being to be not a speaking person but rather a fundamentally silent person. After all, we spend most of

our days in silence. He used a slow tempo and silence to reveal what was hidden underneath everyday human behaviour.

Ōta's theatre told a story about human beings as living organisms in the universe, not about individuals living in a society bound by its values. His work challenged conventional theatre by asking the question, "Can human existence itself become theatre?" Working with him, I developed a practice of verticality that would allow me to carry the energy of my Japanese body into the theatre worlds of the United States.<sup>6</sup>

His wordless play *Water Station* brought him onto the world stage in the 1980s. Characters moved very slowly across an open and bare stage, moving as slowly as sixteen feet in two minutes, stopping at the broken faucet in the centre of the space, living through their ephemeral moments before continuing their journeys. The sound of water constantly running from the faucet established a sense of eternity. This place was here first before anything else. Without explaining or intentionally demonstrating any particular attitudes or images, the actors just stood there as themselves. The weight of silence forced their bodies to release primal expressions buried deep under their skin. Personal histories evoked collective memories. The story of existence unfolded. Theatre emerged in their moment-to-moment metamorphoses.

Ōta's experiment with silence aimed to capture the existence, life, and death of a person born unto this earth. In order to help bring this lifespan onto the stage, he carefully prepared the stage surface. Stepping onto this surface, whether it was sand, metal, or water, brought acute sense of awareness to the actors' bodies. On this stage, the simple act of "standing" took on an entirely different meaning; a strong vertical energy shot up from the ground toward the sky, moving through the centre of the actors' bodies. The counterforce of gravity brought balance, pulling the actors down toward the centre of the earth. Standing on this vertical axis, propelled toward the sky and pulled toward the earth, the physical tension was reduced and space was created inside. Sensations poured inside and raw emotions spilled out of every single move they made.

When I first met Ōta in 1997, he told me his thoughts about verticality. We were meeting at a coffee shop in Osaka to talk about his plan for staging *Water Station III* the following year. After his usual long silence, he took my pen and started writing two circles on my notepad. The two circles were next to each other with about an inch of a space between. He drew a horizontal line to connect the two circles and said, "This is the 'You' second person connection." As soon as he drew this horizontal line, the space enclosed around the two circles, pouring strong energy into the space between two circles. Then he drew another set of two circles next to that. They were also separated by about an inch distance. He then drew a vertical line from each of the circle he drew. He said, "This is the 'I' first person connection. We shifted from 'I' connection to 'You' connection. The further we shift to 'You' connection, the further we go away from 'I' connection." When he drew a vertical line from each circle, two circles were still connected and related; however, there was another stronger connection—the connection with the space and the environment. Each one of the circles was connected to this larger environment individually. At the same time, they were connected with each other. But because the two lines were not connected with each other, there was a sense of openness that did not demarcate the space/environment the two circles were in.<sup>7</sup>

During a rehearsal process in 1998, some actors expressed to me that Ōta's work tends to be monologue-oriented, even when two people are on stage having a dialogue. By *monologue* here, I

mean that the character is part of the whole scene, not an individual. Ōta's *Silent Station* series revolves around each character's monologue, in other words, their inseparability from their environment. The central character in *Tales of Komachi Blown by the Wind* goes through the whole play monologuing in silence. Her entire monologue is written in the script, never spoken. Even his other works, in which multiple people are seemingly having a dialogue, are monologue-oriented. In staging Ōta's work myself, I have realized the challenge of working with actors who were going to engage in a "dialogue," which lessens the potency of his writing. A body evokes its life force in the vertical space it inhabits. It illuminates and moulds the space. It is a part of the space. Vertical space awareness is the beginning of the connection between an individual body and the environment, promoting and enhancing and the connection both between parts of an individual body as well as between the body and emotion.

*In my daily practice, I stand on the vertical axis, following gravity. My skin opens outwardly, and the inside and the outside start merging with each other. Overwhelming sensations pour inside. When I'm in this state of being, staying in the present becomes so satisfying that I cannot think about the past or the future. This is the first step toward a state of "being," a state of not knowing.*

When a body is organized optimally according to its structure and relationship with the ground, we can fully follow gravity. When we reach this state of being, effort becomes minimal and space inside opens up. It is worth mentioning that this open space doesn't necessarily lead to a sense of freedom for many people. Many of my students in the United States did not embrace this state of being but did express their sense of a void and a feeling of fear. It could be because they have a tendency to rely much more on external sources than internal ones in terms of both an impulse to act and a gauge of the outcome. Some of them use the word *empty* to express this state of being.

### Thinking with the Body

American actors impress me greatly with their dynamic expression. Bold actions, clear intentions, and vibrant presence. They enter every space as defined individuals—various body types, particular gestures, heritages, and styles. I rarely see this degree of definition in Japanese actors. I adjust my stance, trying to be on the same plane as my students, defining myself as they do. But I feel unnatural. There are things I cannot explain in words. Articulating for the sake of articulating gets me only in my head. I'm yearning to go back inside the warm cocoon where I don't have to explain or articulate: the unknown, that ambiguous place I know performance can access. I feel awkward about leading them with clarity, it might become too defined, but I need to direct them somehow. What do I say? How can I convey this quality I'm looking for? Not black or white but a fine gradation of grey?

Ōta challenged the audience by breaking the usual cause-and-effect logic. The lack of verbal information creates a certain ambiguity, which demands a different way of communicating with as well as a different type of understanding from the audience. During some inexplicable moments according to intellectual logic, the audience remained in a state of unknowing, searching for ways to shift their perceptions to experience the world of the performance. In Western realism, the context and the content can be established through the text and the design elements in addition to the actors' physicality. In *Water Station*, actors' bodies and their relationships with the space were the only content. On the bare stage, with minimal suggestive architectural elements, every second was magnified, making all the fine details visible. Slight shifts of the body, its placement in space, and its directionality and particular physicality, all created particular meaning. Changing the body ever so



slightly created a different context; their inner sensations affected their emotions and filled in the content. Honing one's attention to these nuances, trusting and following them, actors followed their bodies' logic.

Many of my students in the United States tell me they want to get out of their heads. They wonder if there is some other approach beyond analyzing what they are supposed to do and doing what they have analyzed. Despite recognizing their dilemma, they have a hard time letting go of the head logic. The urge to make sense is strongly ingrained in our social system. But when we try to figure out something with our heads, we go back to past habits and gauge the present against past standards. Operating with the head logic, we live in our heads' little space, forgetting that we are a part of the earth organism, following the law of gravity. Through "understanding" we fit ourselves into someone else's idea. Labelling, defining, articulating, we are constantly assuring ourselves of the meaning and value of things, including ourselves. This illusion has nothing to do with the only reality we have—our bodies. Thinking with the body is different. It means staying in the sensations all the time even if you don't understand or you can't explain. There is a Japanese phrase about understanding through the body: 腑に落ちる *fu ni ochiru* (fall into the gut). It's a physical sensation that the information you receive falls into your internal organs and becomes a part of your body. It is the state your whole being, body and mind together, is convinced. It has nothing to do with fitting oneself into someone else's idea. English also has a similar phrase, *gut feeling*, but this feeling seems to have little value compared to intellectual understanding.

*My colleague, a Russian director, and I have this conversation all the time. We would do anything that creates vibration inside our students' bodies in order to get them off-balance. We try all kinds of things to break their head logic: start rehearsal with a montage of body shapes, personal memories, objects, and music; speak at different tempos; reverse the sequence or make the sequence random; move time through aspect instead of tense.<sup>8</sup> And we still have not found a way to get the actors to let go of head logic. Perhaps off balance is still too intellectual. Perhaps it's still too logical.*

### "Waiting" the Body

How do you bring actors to this level of consciousness? To a place they can operate according to body logic? To a place where they just exist? In 1998, I had an opportunity to assist Ōta with his creation of *Water Station III*. I observed him in his rehearsal process and discovered one secret. He waited. He would wait in nothingness for a long time until something starts birthing. This "waiting" time was crucial for a seed to germinate, become ripe, and eventually release what he called an "unparaphrasable realm of existence." I'm reminded of one of the principles of *noh* theatre—accumulate and spend. The rhythmic cycle of accumulation and release is like nature's cycle. Accumulating what was coming in from all the directions of the space, their bodies slowly merging with the environment that surrounded them. Birthing what has been accumulated at the most unpredictable of timings, and then the next cycle starts.

In *Water Station III*, all of a sudden, time and space expanded to the past and the future. They became a part of one large organism, which included me. The surface of the performance space trembled with a certain rhythm, causing vibration inside my skin, stronger and stronger. A sensation I'd known for a long time but had forgotten arose in my body.

In this moment of waiting, my vision suddenly cleared and I started seeing everything vividly. It was as if my existence had expanded and burst out of my familiar body and connected with a larger

consciousness outside. My whole presence was there even if I didn't exactly know what is happening or what was going to happen. Tension mounted while I stayed in the unknown, listening to my own breath. I'm waiting. My body is curious. I'm given an ample freedom to imagine. I'm experiencing the performance through my entire being.

*Letting things emerge. There is something beautiful about it. Not about showing or explaining. When things are explained to me, my body prepares. I feel the need to understand. When things emerge out of the unfocused, my whole body yields and drops in an intimate exchange with what they really are. They illuminate me and I illuminate them. I soften.*

## Body and Emotion

Working in the field of theatre, the most challenging element for me has been emotion. Having come from a culture where people do not express their emotions so overtly, I was at a loss. I had very little idea how to work with Western materials that demanded strong emotional involvement. At first, I thought emotions were going to come out of the actors naturally if I created the blocking. I quickly realized this was not the case. With a series of visually stimulating moving images, I thought I'd embodied the world of the play successfully. However, the actors just enacted the blocking like puppets without connecting what was happening inside of them with what they were presenting on their outsides. There was no emotional life. I knew what the problem was but didn't know how to solve it. The next thing I did was try to coax emotions using physical actions, since I was taught that emotions were the by-products of these actions. I made sure that the actors were fully physically engaged with their actions. This approach worked somewhat, but also had limitations. The actors expressed their feelings with great passion, but what was expressed often fell into certain stereotypical expressions of anger, sadness, grief, and joy. What they projected outside didn't match the much fuller, richer worlds they had inside them.

Having failed in both approaches, I resorted to stylization. I controlled the environment with precision and rigour. By throwing them into highly disciplined foreign forms, I wanted to stir them and activate their feelings. I was convinced that stylization was a way for us to connect with a realm we couldn't normally reach or connect with. I also felt comfortable in the way emotions arose in stylization, not overtly, but indirectly. If you look at traditional Japanese theatre forms such as *noh*, *kabuki*, and *bunraku*, emotions are expressed indirectly. In *noh* theatre, emotions are felt in the movements—in the way they are carried out in terms of rhythm, timing, force, and pace. Emotions are expressed in an exaggerated manner in *kabuki* through extremely stylized voice and movement. In *bunraku*, emotion is felt in the singing of the narrator who expresses how the puppets feel. This also comes from how the puppets are brought to life by the puppeteers. I worked with my students in various stylizations, drawing from these traditional forms.

My desire to get them off-balance didn't quite happen. Gaining a heightened sense through stylization, students were physically and emotionally active. Vertical force was strongly established. Audiences were in awe, deeply moved. My colleagues sitting next to me expressed amazement at the students' achievement, but I was noticing something else. Students were busy with accomplishing the precision of the form, stopping their breathing and tightening their bodies. The emotions that came out of these bodies were more archetypical than personal. The performance had lost its human quality—the warmth, the amorphousness, and the flesh and blood. The harder I tried, the farther I moved away from emotions.

For the past ten years, I have been attempting to reintegrate the mental, emotional, and muscular aspects of life through somatic education. As I bring this practice into the classroom, I've been gaining a new perspective on emotions. I used to think that emotions would arise when they were called upon. In other words, they are not in us until then. What I'm realizing is that emotions exist inside us even before we are born. They are always there, flowing inside. They are not something to be coaxed. They are not the by-products of something else. They are the central element of a human being. They are not in our heads or only under the surface of the skin. They live in our organs, bones, and muscles. They are the central force for a performance. They bring body and space together. With varying frequency, textures, temperature, colours, and speeds, different emotions move through our bodies, constantly vibrating the inside and the outside. We release them in the form of expressions of communication with others. They drive our actions. Emotion is energy that forms us.

*After one performance of Water Station III, Ōta looked at me and said, "This will be the last Water Station." I sensed the passing of time. Water Station III did not strike a chord with the audience in 1998 in quite the same way as the original 1981 version did. Though the performance was extremely well executed, the actors excellent, and the environment exquisite, the primal energy present in the original seemed to be missing. Actors stayed within the self-contained performance space that lay in front of the audience without extending energy toward them or affecting the entire theatre space. This made me think that the key to activating the space outside us is to activate the space within us first.*

### **Japan/the West in My Body—My Reintegration**

Having moved from Japan to Dallas, back to Japan, to Hawaii, to Washington, DC, and to Maryland, I have adapted to many new environments—responding to the characteristics of each place—its size, temperature, colour, shape, smell, and density: expanding, diffusing, hardening, and diffusing again and again. I have learned to maintain and carry my individuality wherever I go.

However, somehow, when I listen to my inner voice carefully, I notice that it is not quite that simple. My internal world is always in flux. Always in-between.

Inside, my body feels unclear, although my skin is trying to define. The space around me feels equally opaque. I'm in a murky ambiguous place. I'm perpetually searching. There are kinds of deeply ingrained fundamental principles operating inside, making me sense, feel, and think the particular places and invisible physical emotions of my Japanese body. I'm looking for the nuances and the textures, which are hard to find in the focus on clarity and articulation in US academic English. When I'm interacting with another person, I see the contour of her, and I'm waiting for what's lurking inside to spill out slowly. I feel the urge to feel everything on a molecular level. I'm wanting to see small strokes within a big stroke.

*Students have become my mirror. From a murky ambiguous place, I stumble through the unknown within me, trying to connect with the unknown within them.*

*Please feel the chair you are sitting on. Are both of your sitting bones in contact with the chair? How is your right foot touching the ground? Your left foot? As you breathe, which part of your body is moving? Do you feel the space between your ribs?*

*Under your armpit? Allow your tongue to relax and soften your jaw. What's changing now? How do you feel differently from a minute ago?*

*Let the space/object/other actors illuminate you. Let what she just said move your body before you respond so quickly. Delay your response and see what happens in your body. The space behind you. Feel 10, show 7. When in doubt, do not do anything. Just be there until your body wants to move. Yes, stand. No REALLY stand. Let's see how you can minimize what you just did. Smaller, slower, even slower. Breathe into your back. Close-up. Run around three times, no four, five, OK speak now. How did you feel when the driver hit your car? Describe your emotional, physical, and verbal landscape step by step.*

*Listen with the tips of your fingers. Diffuse your focus. Yes, indirect. Trace the energy of your partner. Feel her breath with your back. Yes. Do it again, again, repeat it ten times and see what's in there. What is in the space now? How did it change now? Yes, stay in the place you don't know. Stay in the ambiguity. The place in-between. What are you feeling? What are you feeling? What are you feeling?*

I'm looking for something. I'm looking for the seed of vibrancy starting to release from their inner world. I'm searching for the moment when their skin opens and the boundary between inside and outside starts becoming blurry. Inside becomes outside becomes inside. When they move, the space moves. When they cry, the space changes colour. When they confine their inner emotion, the space converges. Inner cosmos of body in outer cosmos of space—where in the space an actor stands matters great deal. I'm on a quest to get to the depth of the body and its expression as a life force.

I am searching for the maximum potentiality of the body. I want to be IN. I want to be OUT. I want to be IN and OUT at the same time. I want to be free.

Though initially framed as a conflict of living in two cultures—the United States and Japan—the real conflict, I see now, is not that simple. It is the conflict between head and body, because we pay so much attention to the head and not enough to the body. It is the perceived conflict between horizontal and vertical. It is the conflict between individual and collective, our social being and mortal existence. Is potency cultural? Is it personal? Or is that something you can acquire through training? Or is training detrimental? How is the potency or energy on stage connected with the potency of daily life? What is the ethical and social significance of creating the potent body? How does that affect the environment? My head swirls again and I need to breathe.

I'm still in-between. We are conflicted beings torn between bodies and consciousness/ideas. We are different and homogeneous. As the boundary between my body and environment diffuses again, my new self starts appearing, the border between two cultures slowly disappearing. I look into my conflicts, and they are all there—the nature I grew up with, my first American experience, all the spirits, the West in me, the East in me. I see my molecular being expanding, extending, receiving the energy from the earth, following the law of gravity. I see the horizontal axis that connects two cultures converge with the vertical axis of my existence from the far away past to the future ahead. I am starting to remember that I breathe, eat, sleep, live, and die and this is the absolute reality. I look in, I look in, I look out from inside. I'm just Naoko.

## Moving Forward

I wrote the essay above in 2017. Now, five years later, in 2022, immersing myself in nature and continuing somatic education for performers, where do I stand on all these matters? There are three specific points of curiosity I'm currently pursuing: the matter of "mind" (and how we can go around it); the interconnection of space, emotion, and body; and the role of imagination. These points will become the foundation for my forthcoming workbook *Daily Practice for a Potent Body*.

### The Matter of "Mind" (and How We Can Go Around It)

As I continue working in the field of somatic education, my question about the mind persists. The power of the mind always pulls my students back into their old habits. As a result, even if their physical organization improves, their self-image doesn't change, inhibiting the creation of new pathways and new choices. Mind tends to filter what body experiences, but they work as an "inseparable whole while functioning," according to Moshé Feldenkrais ([1964] 1980, 75). So what is the mind doing exactly? Feldenkrais (1981) writes, "The mind gradually develops and begins to program the functioning of the brain" (26). If the mind is governing the body constantly and programming the functioning of the brain, how can we create new habits, new choices, and new pathways? Further research about how mind works would help us understand the intricate relationship between mind, body, and brain, and to reexamine new constructs of body-mind unity.

### Interconnection of Space, Emotion, and Body

As I continue observing the constant shifts of my body senses in nature, I'm realizing how much space affects my emotions. If the sky is grey for many days, I feel a certain heavy energy inside. When I'm driving through a vast field, I sense myself larger and brighter. I start thinking about big ideas. Body is a vessel in which external energy and internal energy meet, a medium through which the connection between space and emotion manifests. Our perception of the interconnection of space, body, and emotion forms our self-image, which all our choices and actions are based on.<sup>9</sup>

### The Role of Imagination

Imagination is the foundation of our creation in performance. And yet I feel that it is underexercised and underpractised. I have seen many productions that lack imagination or were completely devoid of imagination. I'm spoon-fed what I'm supposed to feel and think in every second of the entire production. Some other productions have a hint of imagination, but this type of imagination imitates someone else's imaginative ideas. When the creator's imagination is vast and real, it creates open space for the audience to imagine. When I see a performance with this type of imagination, I feel my own potential grow as well as the potential for performance creation. I want to go into a studio and start creating immediately. I can see that this creator's imagination came out of her daily practice, that it was not just exercised for a particular production. When we live in habitual thinking and habitual responses day in and day out, our imagination gets reduced to a minimum. We follow the same old cause-and-effect logic. We limit our choices and stay within a safe and known territory. Imagination expands our awareness of what we do not know and opens up new options. If we can exercise our imagination to our fullest capacity constantly, our performance in daily life and on stage would exceed what "mind" creates. Imagination is the strong undercurrent for space-emotion-body interconnection as well as the tool to evoke it. As the world develops and technologies advance, imagination is going to become increasingly crucial in our lives and performances in the future.

## Anatomy of Conflict Workbook, Daily Practice for a Potent Body, excerpts

Below are several exercises from my forthcoming book for the student practitioner that are geared to helping them bring their craft to life:

### Minute Speed

*An exercise for waiting: I first learned this exercise of moving extremely slowly while I was studying dance on a farm in Japan, then later discovered that a Japanese dancer of the same origin, Ryuzo Fukuhara, has formulated it in the seven-minute form. When we change the speed of how we move, we change not only how we feel inside but also the relationship between our body and the space around us. When we move slowly, we release our bodies into the universe.*

1. Lie on the floor in any form.
2. Take seven minutes to stand up in any position.
3. Observe what happens inside as you move through this process, your sensations and feelings.

### Falling into the Unknown (Walking)

*Walking is falling. You step into the unknown. Walking is feeling you. Every step opens a new door.*

*I've been doing what I call a "reflective walk." With each step I take, I feel myself differently. I move my head a little this way and my feeling of my feet changes immediately. I move onto a different surface and I can feel my feet and my whole body adjusting. Along with this change, my inner feeling also changes.*

Stand with ten toes facing out. Feel the stability of this position. Slowly move your body forward and step one foot out as if you were falling. Land on that foot. Push the other foot and put that foot in front of the first foot. Repeat. Make sure your body moves forward first before stepping out.

*When we walk, we tend to put our feet out before our body. As a result, our bodies get left behind. Our spines are placed on the back of our bodies, making it functional for us to move our bodies forward, from the upper body. When our feet move out and the torso and the head are left behind, we are not fully walking either forward or backward. We fall into the split between the past (moving backward) and the future (moving forward), the unknown space in-between. When we leave a part of our body in the past and hurriedly try to move other parts toward the future, we are also not in the present. Walking is feeling us in connection with the ground. Each step is an opportunity to reevaluate our relationship with ourselves and our stance toward life.*

### Morphing Space

Start this exercise by standing in one spot inside a room. Gradually expand the space as you continue paying attention to your sensations, feelings, and thoughts. In your imagination, expand the space from the spot to the entire room, the entire apartment, the entire floor of the building, the entire apartment building, the entire area where your apartment building stands, the entire town, city, state, country, world, and so on. Then imagine that the space gradually shrinks back to the spot with which you started. See how your self-image shifts as the space shifts.

*Stand in one spot inside of your room. Bring your awareness to how you are standing. Feet, knees, hip joint, pelvis, ribcage, shoulders, arms hanging from your shoulder joints, spine holding you up, head is at the very top balancing itself. How's your breathing? How are you feeling? Now, bring your awareness to the spot in the room where you are*

*standing. Do you feel light coming in? How's the temperature of that spot? How do you feel? Now expand space. See yourself in your room. How do you feel emotionally in a space this size? What did you sense as the space expanded? What is your emotional landscape like? Expand the space one more time. See yourself standing on this spot in your room in the entire apartment/ house. You are imagining this. Can you become aware of the edge of the space as you sense and feel yourself?*

### Conversation with Vertical Awareness

Practise the following when speaking in public situations such as at a store, a bank, and other places as you engage in a conversation with another person. Vertical awareness is awareness of “I” in any context. Here, we practise this verticality in horizontality with another person. You can focus on one element at a time or gradually add multiple elements and see how the course of your conversation might be affected.

1. (Breathing) Listen to your breathing AS you have a conversation with someone.
2. (Feet) Feel the bottom of your feet on the ground.
3. (Voice) Listen to your own voice as you speak to them. Listen to the tone, the pitch, the colour, the vibration, and the volume. Listen and observe how and when your voice shifts.
4. (Eyes) Rest your eyes on the person you are speaking to. Keep soft focus. Gradually start opening up your peripheral vision with the soft central focus on them. Observe any shift in how you feel and the course of your conversation with them.
5. (Emotion and Body) Sense any shift in the energy flow inside of you during the interaction. See how you hold your body changes along with the change in the feelings.

### Speaking from the Inner Landscape

*This is something I tried in my Movement for Actors class, creating two tracks of speaking (outside) and sensing (inside) when my students did their monologues. Driven by their imagination and sensation, their actions and delivery broke through the usual habitual wall and blossomed into something completely unexpected. Imagination-Creation-Action.*

1. Have the performer give a monologue they prepared.
2. While they go through it, ask them where in their body they are feeling what they are saying at the moment.
3. Ask what sensation and image is coming to them in that body part. Have them feel it. Let the image drive their body. Let them keep visualizing this image as they speak.
4. Call attention to a specific body part you see is blocking their body flow and encourage them to feel that part (e.g., third rib, coccyx, etc.).
5. Continuously ask them what they feel and what they want to do (e.g., stand up, walk around, face certain directions, etc.).

### Notes

1. This essay is based on the text that was performed at the (Re)sounding Bodies symposium held at University of California, Davis on May 11–13, 2017.

2. The use of the word *mind* here refers to the mental aspect of performance life. Though I believe that body (*soma*) and mind (psyche) are merely two aspects of one entity, I am intentionally separating these two here for the purpose of this essay.
3. Intercultural approaches to physicality in performance that draw from Japanese traditions and disciplines include both performance pieces as well as critical writings by several theatre practitioners, most prominently Suzuki Tadashi (1993, 1996, 2015), Terayama Shūji (1984, 1993), and Ōta Shōgo (1988, 1994, 2005, 2006). In my work, however, I am developing a distinct approach based on my own bicultural existence living and working in the United States and Japan and my experiences in performance and somatic education.
4. The Japanese word 感動 *kandō* describes the state of being when we are moved emotionally. The word is written with two Chinese characters 感 (feeling) and 動 (moving). I used to think that the phenomenon *kandō* happens in steps, that feeling is generated inside and then our body moves and vibrates naturally. I think a little differently now—feeling and moving happen at the same time. Feeling itself is the vibration inside. After this experience happens, we put it into words by saying “感動した *kandō shita*” (I was moved).
5. The guardedness of East Coast youth in urban settings with whom I worked might originate from multiple sources: peer pressure in presenting themselves as strong and confident, urban stress, and the challenges of coping with images of an “ideal” body promoted by the media. Students manifested their disconnect in different ways. Some retreated into their bodies and avoided any contact. Others overly asserted their physical presence or limited their bodily contact to a surface level. The acculturation process of adopting the values and practices of a certain culture while trying to retain one’s own distinct nature certainly puts great stress and strain on them.
6. Various theatrical approaches and methods—including Viewpoints, the Suzuki Method, the Rasa Box Technique, theatrical clowning, and the techniques of Jacques Lecoq, Jerzy Grotowski, and Rudolf Laban—have addressed the matter of physicality in stage performance. All are rooted in distinct philosophy, analysis, and physical training for performers. Based on my own experience, Ōta’s theatre, as physical as it was, did not intend to offer any training in a set format. Rather, his actors were asked to practise the “readiness” to expose and reveal their beings on stage at any moment. How they lived their lives daily affected the level of potency they were able to bring to their performance.
7. In drawing these two models, Ōta seemed to associate Westernized, modern Japanese theatre such as Shingeki, with the horizontal “You” connection and traditional Japanese theatre, such as *noh*, with the vertical “I” connection. Ōta’s own theatre followed neither of these models; instead, it encompassed both directionalities, generating a form and an approach birthed out of the tension between the two.
8. *Tense* denotes differences in time (past, present, future); *aspect* denotes changes in the manner in which an event took place (to completion, ongoing, etc.)
9. We act according to our self-image, which is based on our body image. According to Feldenkrais ([1964] 1980, 1981), one of the senses that contributes greatly to self-image formation is proprioception (perception or awareness of the position and movement of the body in space), sometimes referred to as the sixth sense.

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