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Dance of Light and Loss

Clark Lunberry

Fool (in Japanese, *Dō-Ké*; 道化), a dance/theatre performance directed, choreographed and designed by Saburo Teshigawara at Karas Apparatus, Tokyo, Japan, January 16–21, 2015.

Where's my fool, ho? I think the world's asleep.
William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

On a bright and sunny Sunday afternoon in the Ogikubo district of western Tokyo, in the dark basement of Saburo Teshigawara's dance studio and performance space known as Karas Apparatus, an audience gathered to see the dancer's newest solo performance, *Fool*. The uncurtained stage in the small theatre was empty and unlit, the stage itself far larger, perhaps three times larger than that tight space reserved for those attending the event. What lights there were faintly illuminated only the slightly raised rows of cushions upon which the forty of us in the audience took our seats, waiting for the performance to begin.

Moments later, the doors of the theatre were closed and the remaining lights turned off, the room becoming completely dark. Then, suddenly, a burst of bright light came from the back of the stage, like a floodlight from above that shone directly out into the eyes of the audience, a nearly blinding glare that did not so much illuminate the empty stage as assault those of us who were trying to see it, anticipating the dancer's arrival.

Saburo Teshigawara has been creating dance and performance events for more than thirty years with his company Karas (which he formed in 1985, with Kei Miyata), giving performances often in Europe but less frequently in the U.S. Recognized as one of Japan's finest and most adventurous dancers and choreographers, he has built a formally and conceptually ambitious body of work, one that fits effectively on stages as varied as the grand and ornate Opéra de Paris, or as intimate and austere as his own small space in Tokyo.

Having begun his career as a painter and performance artist, as well as a circus performer touring all around Japan in his twenties, Teshigawara's work often defies expectation and clear categorization, developing alongside the dance of Pina Bausch and Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and after the more native developments of Japanese Butoh. It emerged in part from his own earlier engagements in performance and body art (e.g., a piece in 1985 where he was buried up to his neck for eight hours in a mound of soil out in the Japanese countryside, *à la* Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*), as well his own interest in the Japanese noise music scene of that period, known as *Onkyo*. Teshigawara's early work would continue to inform his later productions, blurring the boundaries between dance, theatre, and performance.

In Teshigawara's dance, however, there has always been a distinct focus upon bodies in time, bodies in motion, bodies coming into view and vanishing within the illuminated spaces shaped upon his stage. Indeed, his applications of light, which at times bring to mind the work of Robert Wilson, James Turrell, and Ann Hamilton, very often appear almost sculpturally carved upon the stage, as if physically forming a space within which the dancer is then contained or confined, but beyond which little can be seen, where appearance itself disappears.

Such compelling spatial effects of light and darkness were present in Teshigawara's most recent piece, *Fool*. Following those opening moments of blinding light, the theatre then abruptly went dark, all lights switched off. Moments later, Teshigawara appeared to the side of the stage, a light now cast brightly upon him, one that formed the shape of a door or a small room in which the dancer stood. Leaning there against the wall of the stage, he was dressed, more like a theatrical character than a dancer, wearing an old-fashioned black jacket and pants (of the kind seen in the silent films of Lon Chaney and Buster Keaton) and a layer of white makeup that created a pallid, haunted air about him. Suddenly observed by the audience, Teshigawara remained silent (as he would throughout this one-hour performance), unnervingly in place, with his body barely moving. Instead, he awkwardly adjusted himself, shifting uncomfortably his mouth, his eyes darting about distractedly, giving the distinct impression of someone reluctantly present and uncertain of how to proceed.

And the dancer's uncertainty engendered something of our own, those of us watching in the audience (already on edge after that opening flash of light), as we waited for the promised dance to begin, while seeing in its place a man alone to the side of the stage who appeared to be waiting as well, as if for instructions, as if for a script (as if for *Godot*). Seen instead of the anticipated dance was a character in search of an author, a dancer who seemed puzzled by his own presence, his body forcibly constricted by his uncertain status there in the theatre.

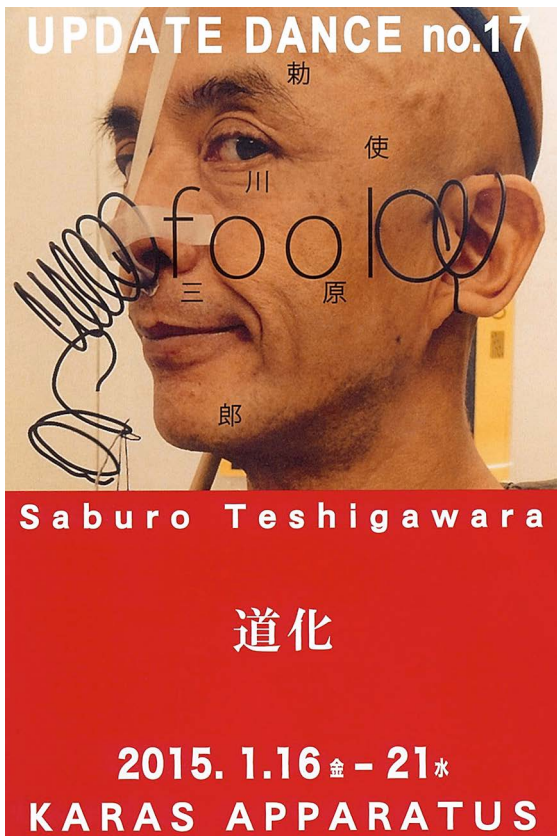
For only slowly did he move about the stage, rarely lifting a leg or an arm, and when he did, it was only to shuffle hesitantly, grimacing awkwardly, the dance limited to the various contorted movements upon his troubled face. For those who know something of Teshigawara's richly gestural work, it may have come as a surprise to see a dancer known for such grace and agility suddenly immobilized, so gesturally constrained, so gracelessly present.

Accompanying the dancer, and exacerbating his (and our) disorientations, was the loud, shifting music that suggested soundtracks to forgotten films, a recurring music that seemed, at moments, like rambunctious circus or cabaret tunes, or the symphonic strains of a slow, romantic dance, sounds at odds with that anxious man alone on the stage. Several times, though, the music shifted to the gentle sound of a piano melody that would briefly coincide with the poignancy of the dancer's dilemma, offering a more fitting soundtrack to the solitude of the scene. But those more comforting melodies always gave way to the earlier, high-spirited music, sounds intended to accompany lives more alive than the dancer's.

As the performance unfolded, the bright lights on the stage incrementally shifted and, with each adjustment, the dancer also slowly moved, inching forward, as if limited by the light's spatial formations, controlled by the sharp lines of its demarcations. In fact, the light projected throughout Teshigawara's piece was used less to illuminate, and more to define a dividing line distinguishing appearance from disappearance, presence from absence, life from its opposite. Theatrically, this light operated even as a kind of supplemental proscenium within the proscenium, its illuminating lines an additional telescoping force that contributed to the creation of that space of performance, outside of which there was nothing to be seen. Upon the illuminated stage, we saw what the light allowed us to see, where its limits extended, and what its accompanying darkness denied, or annulled.

In addition, the clear lines of division created by the lights on the stage suggested also something of a blinking eye at the moment of its own perceiving, its illuminations opening and closing like thick eyelids onto a scene, bringing to mind the many prying eyes in Samuel Beckett's *Film* (1965). Teshigawara's stage functioned in *Fool* much like an apparatus of perception itself, by which the play of light and darkness cast upon it acted as a kind of replacement for the absent curtain on the stage, its teasing and tormenting concealments now exposing sight's own tenuous formation.

Very gradually, over the space of twenty or thirty minutes, these slow shifts of enabling light brought the dancer to the very front of the stage, as if the light itself had nudged or shoved him forward. Finally, though, he arrived right at the very lip of the proscenium itself. And to the astonishment of all, the dancer then



Left: Fool (in Japanese, Dō-Ké; 道化); event flier. © KARAS. Right: Saburo Teshigawara. © Norifumi Inagaki.

abruptly leapt from the low stage and landed, unilluminated, alongside us in the audience. There, Teshigawara could now only be seen in silhouette, having left the light that had otherwise accompanied or contained him up to that stage's very limit, that light which had allowed him to be seen at all.

It was as though, in the dark, the dancer had suddenly become one of us, as a member of the audience attending his own event. The center of the stage was brightly illuminated, a wide circle of white light upon the floor, clearly defining the now abandoned stage. With the music still blaring, the dancer glanced back onto that stage for several moments, a space both dazzling and demanding, a circle of light that nonetheless seemed to require that something be done to it. He shifted about, squirmed a bit, as if registering some reluctant obligation to return, to go back onstage and back to the dance from which he had briefly departed.

Suddenly, that dazzling light in the stage's center went out, and the entire room again went completely black. It was the second moment of blindness confronted in this performance, the first caused by too much light, the second, by too little. Moments later, a new light abruptly appeared to the side of the stage, one that was again shaped like that original doorway or small room by which we had first seen Teshigawara. And, amazingly, there he was, leaning again against the wall, right back where he'd begun. For a moment, one might have wondered if a second dancer had entered the stage, the dancer's double, and whether the original one was still in the audience alongside us. (I actually turned to look, only to confirm that he was gone.) For somehow, in no more than a couple of seconds, Teshigawara had soundlessly returned through the dark to the illuminated stage, returned to the place of his performance where, whether he liked it or not, he was obliged to reside.

Once more, just as before, the dancer was then positioned to start again from the beginning (*not* as if Act II of the performance were now underway, but instead, Act I being done all over again, a repetition of the same). And so, still shifting and squirming, he continued to stand there uncomfortably, timidly, perhaps knowing that, illuminated and returned, he was once more required to perform, required to dance. After all, aside from those of us in the audience watching in the dark, no one else was present to take up that task, as the burden to perform was upon the dancer alone, the light illuminating only him.

However, the man before us again seemed either reluctant or incapable of giving us that performance, of offering the dance that we'd come for, paid for, and been promised. In fact, the dancer seemed once again as needy and demanding as we were, unprepared to perform in an event that had already begun, the loud soundtrack signaling still that something someplace was happening, happening

to someone (but not to him, not to us). So, with little choice in the matter, he continued to hem and haw, wiggle and writhe, barely moving upon the stage, the dance still limited to those spare movements alone.

Or, what we saw with the dancer's return was much like what we'd always already seen, as he tried on one awkward expression after another, from a sad frown, to a goofy grin, to a strained grimace, as if attempting to settle upon a face that would fit and function for him. But none ever did, and so he kept adjusting his head, knitting his brow, contorting his mouth—offering in the place of performance the moving image of a man unmoving, a dancer un-dancing, and one who, to all appearances, seemed profoundly uncomfortable both in his own skin and in the theatre as well. For his every small gesture indicated that he desired nothing more than to be granted a reprieve from all of the eyes upon him, all of us that sat silently in the dark expecting the one in the light to perform for us, to dance, to entertain (as the entertaining music so incongruously persisted). Indeed, bringing to mind Bishop Berkeley, who insisted that “to be is to be seen” (*esse est percipi*), it appeared as though the dancer before us wanted more than anything to *cease* being seen, for the lights to go out so that he could simply disappear.

In his immobilizing discomfort, however, he would occasionally cast a furtive glance to us in the audience, looking out, squinting into the darkness, perhaps trying to make out who we were, what we wanted, and why we were there in the first place. At moments, he appeared even annoyed or overwhelmed by the many eyes cast upon him, by the responsibility placed upon him by our collective gaze. So, in response to our silent demands, having nowhere to hide, nowhere to go, the dancer would, in place of the dance, abruptly make a silly or foolish face directly at us, as if to mock us, to reject our advances; or suddenly, several times, he'd appear to scream grotesquely, but silently, no sound coming from his gaping mouth, his eyes briefly beaming out to us, eyes onto eyes, the loud soundtrack the only thing to be heard.

John Cage and Merce Cunningham pioneered over the years a collaborative technique in which Cunningham's dance and Cage's chance-determined music were separate but equal, each of them happily happening at the same time, while freely going their own way (“Just like in life,” Cunningham was to say). With the musical accompaniment of *Fool*, though, there was, in the design of the dance's disorientations, little sense of a joyful simultaneity shared between what was seen and what was heard, no liberating pleasures to be had in the incongruity of sight and sound, or of their coincidental alignments. Instead, appearing more the victim of chance (just like in life) than its playful collaborator, the dancer and the music remained jarringly in conflict; or rather, the music played, while the

dancer was made even more troublingly isolated by the loud sounds and bright lights that seemed to belong elsewhere and to someone else.

Teshigawara's *Fool* offered a more discordant and diffused image of alienation and hesitation, a theatrical event in which something of the theatre's own point and purpose had become an integral part of this self-reflexive performance, as if he (and we) had suddenly been made uncomfortably aware of the game being played, of the form's own foolishness. For in the dancer's refusal to dance, in his clear discomfort in being on the stage, what was *there* to be seen at all, and what were we expecting to happen in the basement of that darkened theatre on that bright afternoon in Tokyo? Who, we were made to wonder, was fooling whom? Having perhaps anticipated a dancer's body bounding dramatically, gracefully upon the stage, what was to be made of a body so undramatically, so laboriously immobilized, so resistant to his expectant audience? A body buffeted or pummeled by the soundtrack, nearly always out of sync with its insistent rhythms? *Fool* amounted to a dance of dissonance and disunification, or a kind of anti-dance of doubt and denial, of pained beauty and indeterminate longing for something otherwise unseen, perhaps unseeable.

Teshigawara's performance finally came to a close with the dancer standing at the center of the stage, looking directly out toward the audience, his hands held upward, his palms turned toward us. As if disarmed, perhaps beseeching, he maintained this strained position for several moments, unmoving, his face fixed, its features now frozen in place. The bright light directly above him then began to dim, but in the gradual darkening, a kind of granular glow reflected from the dancer's exposed hands and head, poignantly reflecting the fleeting dispersions of a life whose light was effervescently vanishing. Manifested by that failing light was the sense that, all along, it had been the light alone that, as long as it lasted, had allowed that life to be seen at all. Finally, though, the diminishing light upon the dancer's body faded entirely away and nothing remained to be seen; the room, like a tightly closed eye, was returned to the absolute blackness from which it had begun, the dancer and the dance now indistinguishable in the darkness.

CLARK LUNBERRY is associate professor of English at the University of North Florida and the author of *Sites of Performance—Of Time and Memory*.