

JAPAN

dancing about tea

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“We're fools whether we dance or not, so we might as well dance.”

～Japanese Proverb

This paper was for a presentation/lecture demonstration at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island on 12 March 2008. The purpose of my presentation was to focus on my dance history, experiences, and specifically the choreographic process of my dance “*tea with me*”. The title “JAPAN dancing about tea” is the umbrella; beneath is the dance.

Over 500 hundred years ago Sen No Rikyu a Japanese Zen priest explained the tea ceremony as Japanese people striving for recognition of true beauty in plainness and simplicity. Today, not a great deal has changed in the intervening 500 years. Calmness, rusticity, gracefulness, aesthetics, and a religious dimension still define the true spirit of the Japanese tea ceremony.

In the formative years of modern dance Doris Humphrey, one who was instrumental in shaping this new art form, said of dance and dancers that there was no other way other than dancing to express their feelings. She believed bodies and movements were their words and that one single movement held so much more than volumes of words.

Six years ago when I began to choreograph “*tea with me*” it became very clear to me what I needed to do. I should embrace the traditional Japanese tea ceremony as described by Sen No Rikyu and how Doris Humphrey believed modern dance and dancers should express their feelings.

I grew up in New Zealand which was very much a tea drinking culture following traditions inherited from England. In 1882 The New Zealand government realized that tea was becoming the mainstay of a

growing and thirsty colony. To ensure the quality of tea in 1882 the tea Examination Act was enforced. From then on only 100% pure tea could be sold in New Zealand thus quickly eradicating tea diluted with sawdust or other such less than desirable additives.

The Bell Tea Company was established in 1894 and quickly became an icon of New Zealand. An interesting anecdote was that in The First World War 1914 -1918, the New Zealand government made a special concession for those sending food and care packages to soldiers fighting in Europe. The size decided for this special concession fortunately matched that of a one pound tin of Bell Tea. People used this sturdy container to send their care packages to soldiers. The tins were then often found littering battle fields clearly marking that New Zealand troops had been there.

We used tea not only to satisfy thirst and taste buds but having a cup of tea was also a way in which we were able to cope with difficult situations. It was very common that any bad news began with… “Would you like a cup of tea?” This phrase coupled to tea could soften bad news and settle a multitude of difficult situations. Tea had a calming effect upon people and was inevitably accompanied by polite conversation. I realize that these examples hardly match the rhetoric of Sen No Rikyu explaining the Japanese tea ceremony but I do believe tea did and still has a considerable significance to New Zealand culture.

Dance in New Zealand during my early childhood was little as Doris Humphrey described. But I still remember taking part in folk dancing lessons at elementary school, then stumbling through painful opening waltzes of High School dances, before we could twist and shake the night away. Ironically, it was at High School that my dance training actually began.

At fourteen years old, I was faced with either an extra math class or taking ballroom dancing. Math lost the contest very quickly resulting in my stumbling, painful attempts at waltzing becoming a thing of the past.

Leaving High School I also left behind my ballroom dance classes and it was not until I was a High School teacher myself that dance once again entered my life. Thirty years ago in New Zealand we taught “creative movement” or “creative dance” and the term “modern dance” only appeared alongside professional performing dance companies. After six years of teaching dance at a Boy's High school and having my own dance company “Linkz” (1981 – 1986). I was very fortunate to be awarded two Prestigious Queen Elizabeth II Arts Scholarships to study dance education in California. This really whetted my appetite and I decided to study dance fulltime.

The University of Utah Modern dance program began in 1941 under the visionary guidance of Elizabeth Roth Hayes becoming one of the first universities in America to offer a degree in modern dance. In 1986 I was invited to enroll and I completed my BFA in modern dance which was followed by an MA in Modern Dance at the University of Hawaii. Proudly graduating the oldest in both my BFA and MA classes I found myself relatively unemployed other than occasional lowly paid dance workshops. This all led to me walking away from dance moving to Japan and surprisingly joining the Japanese corporate business world to simply make money.

This corporate but lucrative interlude only lasted six years until the economic bubble in Japan burst. I was at a turning point in my life and little did I know that I would soon return to dance once again. However, I would not come back to “modern dance” but “contemporary dance” with an emphasis upon not only the movement but also the philosophy behind movements.

When I first began to choreograph in the 1980's my dances were a series of visual metaphors intricately laced to my own experiences. Twenty plus years later Japan was to provide rich images for my choreography. However, I was not prepared for the absolute visual overload that Japan presented. The richness of so many aspects of this intriguing culture overwhelmed me until I began to focus upon what I perceived to be a fascinating example of visual simplicity...the Japanese

tea ceremony.


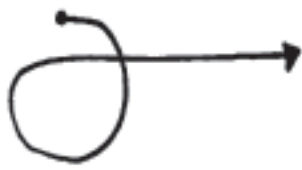




It was during one of my many exploratory walks around the city of Kanazawa Japan that I stumbled upon a Japanese tea ceremony beneath a stand of beautiful flowering cherry blossom trees. This unplanned chance meeting became very significant in the following years.

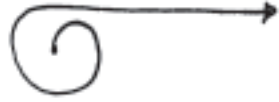





Pic. 1: Kazuemachi, Kanazawa Japan 2001

My naïve “gaijin” impression that the tea ceremony was simple changed that day as I discovered my perceived simplicity was an illusion. I began to notice that carefully hidden within the tea ceremony was an intricate procedure steeped in tradition. But still being the questioning “gaijin” I was both intrigued and spellbound by anyone who could spend so much time making a cup of tea little alone anyone who would wait that long to drink the tea. Now, you must remember in New Zealand making a cup of tea was simply; one spoon of tea for each person, one for the pot let it stand for three minutes and then pour. I was however captivated by the Japanese tea ceremony and soon a dance began to take shape.

The dance which I titled “*tea with me*” began with a series of drawings, simple line drawings which represented pathways as seen from above while tea was being made.


Slow suspend on curves

Speed through the turns

Maintain same speed

Curves slow then speed

Flow evenly, same speed

Constant movement


Same speed in curves

Vary the speed, no pause

Play with speed

Feel the curves...enjoy

Figures. 2-11: Choreography First Designs 2001

The dance began to quickly take shape in my drawings and notes that flowed mixing cultural images within each choreographed movement.

I was slightly concerned about where I would find dancers who had sufficient technique and the ability to share the philosophy within the movement. In the past I have worked with people who have had limited dance training but possessed an aura that I knew would glow during performance. At a local dance studio my auditions uncovered two ladies, Kazue Kimura and Tazuko Wakasugi. They had sufficient technique and a delightful performance quality. I was confident that they would more than meet my expectations but I really needed a strong soloist.



Pic. 12: Ladies Pouring Tea 2002

Chika Utsunomiya, who ran the dance studio where Kazue and Tazuko took class, agreed to be my soloist. Chika was to be the link between the somewhat abstract visual images I was creating and the reality of the Japanese tea ceremony. Chika had extensive training in Japan before living in London where she studied at the Laban Center. Her training, philosophy, performance history contributed in a most pivotal manner.



Pic. 13: Chika Utsunomiya – Dancer 2002

I still had one more vital component, a person to perform a Japanese tea ceremony within my dance. The obvious choice was a Japanese tea master however this as not to be as luck intervened once again. In Kanazawa, Japan where I was living there was only a spattering of foreigners and those you did not know by name you knew by face. One I knew by face, and the fact that he seemed to wear traditional Japanese clothing a great deal, was an American by the name of Scott Drayer.



Pic. 14: R. Scott Drayer – Tea Master 2002

Scott lived in a Japanese tea house where we finally met formally when he was sharing his collection of Japanese antiques. During this first meeting he talked about studying tea making and I mentioned my intention of choreographing a dance about the Japanese tea ceremony. I was intrigued with the idea of further mixing cultures by asking Scott to be my tea master in “*tea with me*” .

We arranged to meet again with my drawings, some movement phrases and a head full of ideas. Between bouts of laughter at my absolute naivety in the rituals of Japanese tea making Scott agreed to be a part of my dance. Walking away from the meeting I had clear outlines that I needed to meet. The dance had to be more than twenty minutes long which would enable Scott to complete all he needed in order to make the tea. Smiling, I thought if this dance had been about making a cup of tea in New Zealand it would have been about three minutes long.

With the choreography completed, the music selected and a rehearsal schedule decided I began to introduce visual elements. These were my metaphors of Japan that added to the dance. Scott was easy, traditional Kimono and his entire tea ceremony box of utensils. He was pleased and then amused that I was going to ask him to not only be a tea maker but also an actor.



Pic. 15: R. Scott Drayer – Tea Master 2002

My fascination with the Japanese Kimono and its multi dimensional design needed to be in my dance. To achieve this I decided upon an opening with Kazue, Tazuko and Scott all wearing Kimono and performing in silence a Japanese dance. Scott may I add was also skilled in Japanese dance and allowed me to shape one of his dances to match my choreography and design. The silence was broken by music as I released the ladies from their Kimonos exposing a simple black leotard clad body. To do this successfully I utilized many meters of fishing twine, endless pulleys to engineer a way in which the ladies assisted by Scott



Pic. 16: Three Japanese Fans 2002

could shed their Kimono. The kimonos and fans were attached by hooks to fishing twine then hoisted above the stage by primitive but effective pulleys. These visual Icons of Japan were then free to mingle with lights gently moving while hovering above the stage.

Having a tea ceremony on stage which included guests being invited to participate was another challenge. But again with fishing twine and pulleys I could lower a kettle in order for Scott to complete his Japanese tea ceremony.



Pic. 17: The Tea Implements 2002

The finale was to be an image I had of tea falling from above to cover the entire stage. But I could not let my imagination run too wild so I settled for hundreds of carefully cut squares of paper. These were held above the stage in a canopy that my trusty fishing twine and pulley system allowed me to unleash as a literal soft snow storm of paper squares.

Scott had told me in our first meeting a philosophy for the tea ceremony, which he explained as the concept of WA-KEI-SEI-JAKU.

WA means harmony.

KEI means respect.

SEI means purity.

JAKU means tranquility

The journey of **WA** plus **KEI** plus **SEI** allows us to reach **JAKU**. With this in mind the challenge was to ensure my dance completed this same journey. The contemporary choreographer now accepted such challenges that intertwined both the movement and philosophy. My dance “*tea with me*” attempted to symbolize harmony, respect, purity and finally tranquility in the closing moments.



Pic. 18: Tea falling – an image 2002

The premier performance in Kanazawa was memorable; the audience which included many of Scott's fellow tea masters poured favorable responses. The twenty four minute journey that began with traditional Japanese dance, unfolding into a contemporary dance, a dream-like mimed tea ceremony then an actual tea ceremony captured the audience. “*Tea with me*” was performed five times in Japan, and six times in New Zealand.

In 2005, Scott tragically died and with him, the dance stopped too. Scott had often said that I should dance his role in my dance but I always realized was impossible without extensive training in the art of tea making. Early in 2006 I had one other option. I would use all the video footage from 2001 and 2002 performances to make a DVD that could be projected onto a full stage screen. I would then have Kazue, Tazuko and Chika dance in front as if Scott was on stage. I had no idea how powerful this would be until the first rehearsal.

Today the only performance of “*Tea with me*” is on DVD as video recorded and edited in Japan during 2001, 2002 and lastly 2006.

“*Tea with me*” is dedicated to the memory of R. Scott Drayer, Japanese Tea Master, and a good friend who is sadly missed.

Tea with me...

Choreographer:

Bruce Wilson, November 2000

Music:

Patrick O'Hearn, Taro Hakase

Dancers:

Kazue Kimura, Tazuko Wakasugi and
Chika Utsunomiya

Tea Master:

R. Scott Drayer

Synopsis...

Invited to tea alone provokes an image of movements being slowly developed. While the tea is poured, turned and gently sipped, the dance becomes a mirror from deep within...or perhaps a shadow outside.

Choreography Concept

The dance was conceptualized from an overhead perspective. From above, I imagined silently watching the tea ceremony unfold in simple flowing patterns much like pouring water upon oil. The images were shaped, set to music, seen not from above but from the front, and then taught to my dancers.

Performances History

April 2001

Premier, Kanazawa, Japan

November 2001

Kanazawa, Japan

March 2002

Auckland, Gisborne, and Whangarei New Zealand

April 2006

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Author: Dr. Karen Barbour, University of Waikato

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Subject: An overview of the development of
contemporary dance in Aotearoa, New Zealand

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