

Changing States: Mina Nishimura



Photo: Yu-Ting Feng.

I'm watching Mina Nishimura dance and thinking of poet Stanley Kunitz's admiring reference to a clever lover's "lightfoot genius." For both her intellect—which shines through as Nishimura performs and in her own choreography—and for the often impish, always supremely precise way in which she moves, the description suits her.

By nature, as well as by circumstance, Mina Nishimura plays many parts: from dancer to choreographer, student to wife, translator to visual artist. As one discovers looking at her notebooks or speaking with her, this fluidity plays out in the very way Nishimura's mind moves: she has a synesthete's blurring of perceptual lines, with sounds carrying colors and phrases conjuring physical forms. Her influences, too, are varied, drawing on an early education in her native Japan and on her experiences of New York's contemporary dance world since her immigration in 2001.

Nishimura's first evening-length commissioned work, the two-part *Quiet House, Ash Daughter and Princess Cabbage*, premiered at Mount Tremper Arts in August. Since then, the dancer-choreographer performed in Neil Greenberg's *This* in November and is now in rehearsals for husband Kota Yamazaki's spring premiere of *OQ*, in which she'll be dancing. A second commission from Danspace Project will have Nishimura back at the helm as choreographer in the fall, making this a crucial time of reflecting on last summer's debut as well as projecting forward.

Born and raised in Tokyo, Nishimura came to New York to study at the Merce Cunningham Studio at the age of twenty. Her dance education up to that

point had been diverse and self-directed, guided in large part by an intrinsic and fairly unstoppable curiosity. Besides taking classes in ballet, modern, hip-hop, and jazz, this instinct led her, for a time in her teens, to study mime at a studio where she was the only girl among mainly older men. After class, she recalls, they would stay until midnight preparing improvisations on a given theme and discussing them. "It was very strange to me because I was just, I don't know, very girly and I was not so familiar with that kind of atmosphere," she says, smiling. But the teacher, Hiroyasu Sasaki's, emphasis on articulation and abstraction made a strong mark on the young Nishimura, arguably becoming defining features of her movement approach. More than the requisite elements like "pulling a rope or ringing a bell," she explains, Sasaki was interested in challenges such as "how we can describe fire with the body using mime technique—something more abstract or invisible."

A critical figure during her education in Japan was Bonjin Atsugi, with whom Nishimura studied ballet and modern dance. Atsugi had lived in New York and trained at Juilliard in the 1960s, just as Judson blossomed; upon his return to Japan, he became seen as an anchoring point for Western post-modern dance, in contrast to Butoh and its call for a distinctly Japanese movement vocabulary. Coming out of more conventional experiences of dance, this was Nishimura's first introduction to movement as ideology, as a space where philosophical points might be played out. Atsugi was interested in form and shape, not meaning or music, and Nishimura remembers best his teaching that "only shapes could conquer a space." (Interestingly, a very enthusiastic *New York Times* reporter in 1982 described one of his works as "tearing open a new space, both physically and conceptually.") While both his "theory and aesthetics felt a bit extreme," Nishimura wrote me in an email, "I was drawn to them." Later, arriving in New York herself, she would encounter the city's next wave of artists—as well as the initially bewildering divisions of "downtown, uptown, experimental, and commercial dance"—who had taken post-modernism to its full expression.

Concurrent with her studies under Atsugi and continuing in New York, Yamazaki's influential teachings provided an equally rigorous counterpoint for Nishimura. In the fascinating and somewhat squirrely history of Butoh in post-war Japan, Yamazaki is a

"third generation" artist, she explains, having studied under the renowned Akira Kasai in Tokyo. While Butoh has had many iterations and offshoots, one of the original concepts that has lived on in Yamazaki's work (and now Nishimura's) is the notion of the body as an empty, decayed, grotesque form, or as he put it to me last year, "a thing left behind."

Besides Yamazaki's career as a Butoh performer, his choreography has become known worldwide for its integration of starkly contrasting dancers from movement backgrounds ranging from hip-hop to Butoh and ballet. Watching Yamazaki's performances, in which the dancers moved "freely and tirelessly," Nishimura remembers, "it was difficult to know what was really going on onstage. Kota's movements were trying to melt individual forms and boundaries between individual bodies," she continues, "yet dancers' bodies were fighting and almost resisting it." As the two began creating and performing more together, Nishimura joined Yamazaki for two residencies in Senegal in 2003 and 2004, where he was working with native dancers from Germaine Acogny's Jant-bi company. There, while unable to speak a common language, the group worked to "exchange" through movement; several Senegalese dancers later appeared alongside Nishimura and American dancers in Yamazaki's 2012 piece (*glowing*).

Nishimura has performed in most all of Yamazaki's works since the founding of his current company, Fluid hug-hug, in 2002, and the two married in 2006. It is notable and perhaps surprising that she refers to him, even in present-day reflections, as her mentor, given how highly collaborative and mutually valuing their partnership seems. However, this seems less a reflection of their actual way of being than of values surrounding teaching and learning in Japanese culture (indeed, a slightly untranslatable set of terms, *kōhai* and *senpai*, define this kind of seniority relationship in Japanese). Nishimura and Yamazaki describe how, throughout the past year, their focus collectively shifted from first her work (with Yamazaki a quiet but meaningful presence at numerous rehearsals) to his upcoming premiere, and this alternating of supporting and leading roles is likely to continue as both increasingly create.

In Yamazaki's approach, then, it is the inner experience that seems to transcend outer limits, rather than the embodiment of certain formal concepts (as Atsugi would have it). Over time, out of this

recurring dichotomy of inner and outer, form and formlessness, emerged the question that seems now to be guiding Nishimura's own work: what's happening in the dance that is visible, and what's happening that is invisible?

The Merce Cunningham Studio, where Nishimura spent four years training, and the choreographers that she has danced for since (among them RoseAnne Spradlin, David Gordon, DD Dorvillier, Yoshiko Chuma, Daria Fain, Moriah Evans, and Cori Olinghouse) have all had their own take on this question, inherent as it no doubt is to contemporary dance-making. Each emphasized to a different extent, in practice if not explicitly, the interior and exterior manifestations of dance. Their approaches have run the gamut from Spradlin's unvarnished, informal performances — in which Nishimura remembers doing "a lot of tasks in the work, like carrying boxes, moving around Christmas trees," as well as dancers "finishing their phrase and just walking offstage" — to Olinghouse's more performative, "bendy and jointy" style, coming out of the Trisha Brown company and influenced by "clown style and vaudeville."

As an emerging choreographer, Nishimura will have to calibrate this for herself, which she began doing while at work on her solo, *Princess Cabbage*, and group piece, *Quiet House*, *Ash Daughter*. The process began with the written texts (called scores) of Butoh pioneer Tatsumi Hijikata, which Nishimura had been reading and translating for an essay in Mårten Spånberg's *The Swedish Dance History*. The scores are full of evocative and visceral language — phrases like "a thunder-haired woman" or "a tumor in my imagined scenery" — that she worked to embody using drawings and, subsequently, movement. These words, while at times so abstract as to seem nonsensical, conjure up strong internal states for Nishimura, states which can then translate to external forms.

In addition to the borrowed imagery, there is something of Hijikata's imagined body — that empty, falling away exterior — in the way Nishimura relates to dancing. (I found it difficult initially to understand how someone so alive, so animated as a performer could conceive of her physical presence this way, until it became clear that this was more a mental motif than one physically enacted.) "It's really important to me to empty my body," Nishimura told me recently. "Running is my daily practice... [it] is a way of

emptying my body." The same state, she finds, can be experienced while dancing, and in this way her body "becomes a medium with other things going through it, coming and going," she says. "I feel more expanded."

There is a deep receptivity to this approach, which, perhaps above all, characterizes her work. The intention behind both *Princess Cabbage* and *QHAD* was, she remarked last summer, "to bridge internal expressions and external forms," but always with the former as a starting point. The resulting movement was extremely subtle, coming through most strongly in changes of face, head, and hands, and also in the proximity of the dancers' bodies in *QHAD*, which included an interior circle of audience members. "It was not so much about movement itself," Nishimura says, "it was more about dancers' experiences." (The piece was performed by Jon Burklund, Li Cata, Lydia Chrisman, and Nana Tsuda Misko.) Siobhan Burke, reviewing the two pieces in the *New York Times* in August, remarked on Nishimura's passage through "radical states" and continual "metamorphosis" during her solo performance, and also opined that this was less successful in the ensemble piece. One of the challenges of this delicate, self-observing work is no doubt to bring other dancers — bodies and minds — into it fully, to transpose a sort of invisible experience onto them.

And then there is the question of what the audience will get from the work, an admittedly murky (even dangerous?) line of thinking for any artist. I haven't put this to Nishimura directly, but my own take is that the viewer of *Princess Cabbage* and *Quiet House*, *Ash Daughter* must be able to do a lot of feeling with the performer — summoning, much as the choreographer and dancers do, their own powers of receptivity. This is a stretch for some; there are periods of both pieces (but particularly the group one) where the movement is almost imperceptible, just a quiver of the hand here or a heavy-lidded blink there.

One becomes oddly aware of one's own breath, posture, and physical existence while watching; indeed, it's fascinating to watch the encircled audience members in the video recording of *QHAD*, who collectively are in a perpetual, quiet dance of their own: repositioning their limbs, slouching then straightening their backs, and pivoting their positions in order to observe each of the four dancers around them. Contemporary psychoanalysts have

written about body countertransference, a physical experience the analyst can have when confronted by the patient's body and their particular way of being in it. As I've watched and rewatched Nishimura's two pieces, I've tried adopting this active, embodied approach instead of remaining a passive spectator and noticed how it changed my engagement in the work. I found, for instance, that by allowing a dancer's face, rather than her body, to fill my mental frame, I experienced a greater sense of movement and dynamic change than if I zoomed out and observed the whole form, in a more conventional angle on dance.

If the summer work involved an exploration of movement from the inside out, Nishimura has recently found herself having to approach it from the outside in. For choreographer Neil Greenberg's *This* at New York Live Arts, the dancers had to learn and perform, motion by motion, video-recorded improvisations; "every movement was so specific and so detailed," Nishimura says, with a stronger emphasis being placed on learning exact, pre-existing movements than she is accustomed to at this point (although in its concern with form, this seems an interesting corollary to her experience under Atsugi). Yet, she observes now, "the movement details themselves carried a certain feeling." Through mastering the movements first and then attending to how each one resonated internally — "almost the opposite of my work," as Nishimura notes — she became aware that "the opposite direction was also possible."

When she begins work on her new group piece this fall for Danspace Project, Nishimura says, she expects it will build on the Butoh score material and overall framework for *QHAD*, but will be "more free, with more color and rhythm." It seems like certain doors have been blown open between the models of dance-making she has experienced, allowing her freer passage between them and between their inherent conceptions of where the process should start. As long as synergy is reached in the work between outer and inner, visible and invisible, perhaps it's as John Cage said: "Begin anywhere."

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Photo: Ian Douglas.