

Dave's Rave

No. 2

July, 1992

Meet My New Housemate

The Main Scoop

Otsubo International

In March I got a new job at a place called Otsubo International. It has an ambitious-sounding name, but actually the company only occupies one very small room in the apartment of a fellow American who lives about fifteen minutes from my house by bicycle. It's a pretty good job, though, because I get to do a variety of work.

One thing I do a lot of is grading English correspondence course tapes. The course is offered by a company which administers a government-approved English test. This course is a big deal to many Japanese because, if you pass it, it can help you get a job where English proficiency is required. A few million people take the test every year, so there are a lot of tapes to grade.

I usually do this work at home with a double cassette tape recorder. I listen to the student read some sentences and when they screw something up, I pause their tape and correct their pronunciation, grammar, etc. Much of the work I do at Otsubo International is paid by the piece, rather than by the hour. I get

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「白い嘔吐」カルロッタ・池田

"A White Vomitting" Carlotta Ikeda

Dancers Come, Go

Carlotta Ikeda (she's Japanese—her real first name is Sanae) is one of the world's few professional butoh dancers. It's her house I live in (actually the house she's been renting for the last sixteen years). She spends most of her time touring in Europe, either with her seven-member all-female dance company, Ariadone, or performing her current one-woman show, "Utt" (pronounced "oo"). About 42 years old, she has trained with likes of Martha Graham and is one of the leading figures in this art form.

Though I've been living in her house since February 1st, it wasn't until May 30th that I finally met her. She walked over and introduced herself. I asked how Europe was (in Japanese—she doesn't speak English). She replied, "Nothing but work." Though she

stayed at the house for about a month, our conversation didn't go much beyond that. She spent most of her time holed up in her little room, coming out occasionally to help rehearse some of the other dancers just back from abroad.

On the few occasions we crossed paths in the kitchen, she often had the TV on. Once she noticed my electronic dictionary and we had a short conversation about it, and another time I offered her some of my buckwheat pancakes, which she ate part of, mostly in silence, with her traditional Japanese miso soup (not a combination which quickly comes to mind). She left without saying goodbye (to be fair, I was gone to the mountains that weekend), not to return until next December. Still, I guess I respect her; she's got more courage than your typical tea-serving "office lady."

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(OTSUBO) 500 yen (~\$4.-) per tape, and I average about 35 tapes a day on the days I do this.

Some of the advanced students' tapes are interesting to listen to. They have to give speeches on what they would want to do if they visited a foreign country and another speech on English teaching in Japan. Most of them say that when they go abroad they want to get to get to know the native people and culture, rather than just going on one of the famous Japanese whirlwind package tours, which is encouraging to hear. Also, they are in unanimous agreement that English teaching in Japan is in a sorry state because only reading and grammar are taught, and because most English teachers here are Japanese who have never

been abroad and who therefore have terrible pronunciation.

Less monotonous work at Otsubo includes working with their top-of-the-line Macintosh IIfx computer (as opposed to my bottom-of-the-line Mac Classic). I've been studying desktop publishing and I've already gotten to do some simple page layout jobs and have written several articles for a few English language instruction periodicals. They're no huge deal, but it is fun to see something I wrote get published. Every month I write a few news summaries, some sample dialogues, and a study advice and western culture column for two publications with a circulation of a few hundred thousand people.



*"Dancing is rediscovering the life process,
experiencing the intensity of existence with a finer notion of time."*

—Carlotta Ikeda

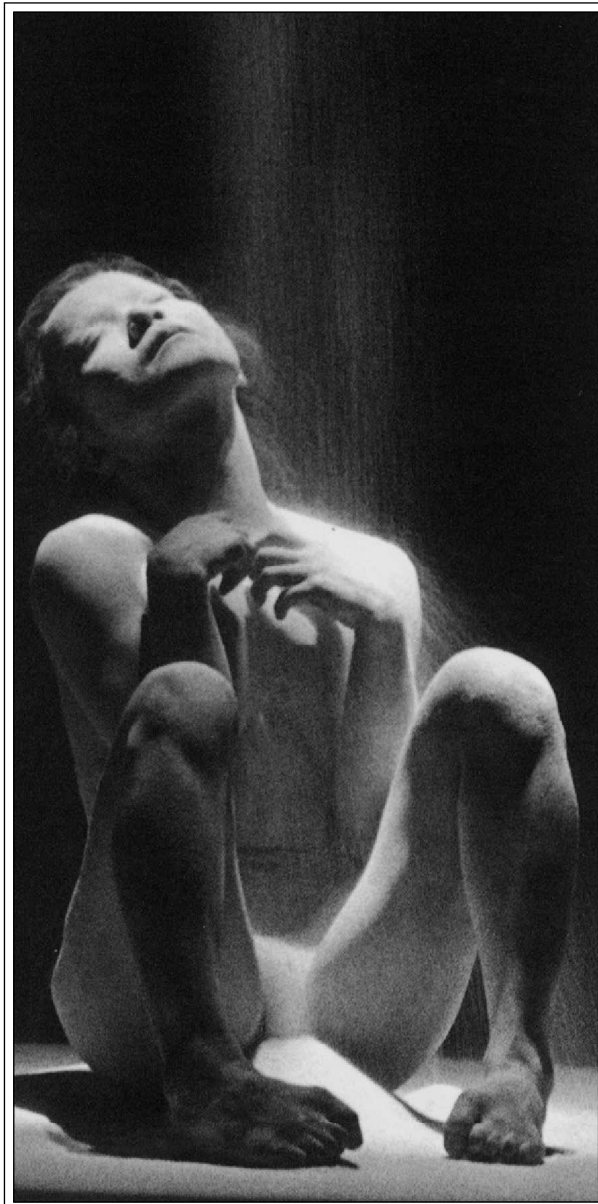
What She Does

What she does is something called *ankoku butoh*, or the "dance of darkness," but to us laymen, it's more like performance art than dance. There are several videos here at the house of Carlotta et al., performing, which I've shown to curious friends. To a man (person?), they thought it very weird (at best), or boring and fearful (at worst).

Watching it, here's what you'd see: First, nothing; but you would hear, perhaps, synthesized human breathing at close range. Underwater soundings. Squeaks and bumps.

The light comes up slowly, dimly, revealing three or four G-string clad, chalk-skinned human mannequins wrapped in cellophane or gossamer fabrics. They appear not to be moving, but with closer inspection motion can be detected.

It goes on like this for five or ten minutes, and then all of a sudden without warning things will speed up, and they may even turn on a few more lights. In the case of the ensemble, forms may start making screeching noises and begin slapping their arms around their own bodies with a *swack*. In one solo performance, Carlotta takes a hand-held electric planer to a twenty-foot plank of mahogany. In another, she barfs up some white plasterous substance which sticks to her hair. At times the music becomes tonal and rhythmic and the dancers approximate "dancing." It's all very artsy-fartsy.



What's it all supposed to express? Well, it's *avant garde*, which means that it's new and experimental. One problem may be that since this style of dance was born in 1959 (just before the student protests of the 60s), it can't really be called "new" anymore. Not surprisingly, like many of the arts born in Japan (Japanese archery, *kendo* sword fighting, tea ceremony, etc.), the aim is to "be" in the moment and (after hours and hours of disciplined practice) just do what you do without thinking too much about it, and in this way to express your universal nature. (No, I didn't just come up with this from watching the videos, I read it in a book I found on the subject on Carlotta's bookshelf.) I get visions of ghosts and unborn beings, suppressed urges, that sort of thing. The nudity and outrageousness is meant to jar you out of your comfortable, habitual way of looking at things. Carlotta was quoted as saying, "Dancing is rediscovering the life process, experiencing the intensity of exist-

tence with a finer notion of time. While dancing, I gradually become aware of an inner world, of another 'me,' and my butoh is enriched by this new universe which I have discovered."

Too bad, I would've liked to have gotten to know her. As for her *ankoku butoh*, I think it's kinda neat.



What Makes the Japanese Jap- anese?

THOUGH I'M NO EXPERT on the subject, I have an avid interest in psychology. I took a few psych classes in college and have read several self-help, or "pop" psychology books since.

The newly evolving global society can only be as healthy as the individuals in it. What does it mean to be healthy? It has to mean both physical and mental health. A deficiency in the one can drag down the other: Without mental motivation, how can you get yourself out of bed to do your jogging? Without a sound body, where will you get the energy to learn a new subject?

Considering the above, being in Japan has thrown me for a loop when it comes to knowing what is up and what is down where human beings are concerned. Indeed, the universe almost seems to operate on different principles here than it does on the other side of the world.

Many foreigners here sometimes wonder if the Japanese aren't dissimilar to the rest of humanity in some basic ways. After some consideration I'd have to say that the answer is yes and no.

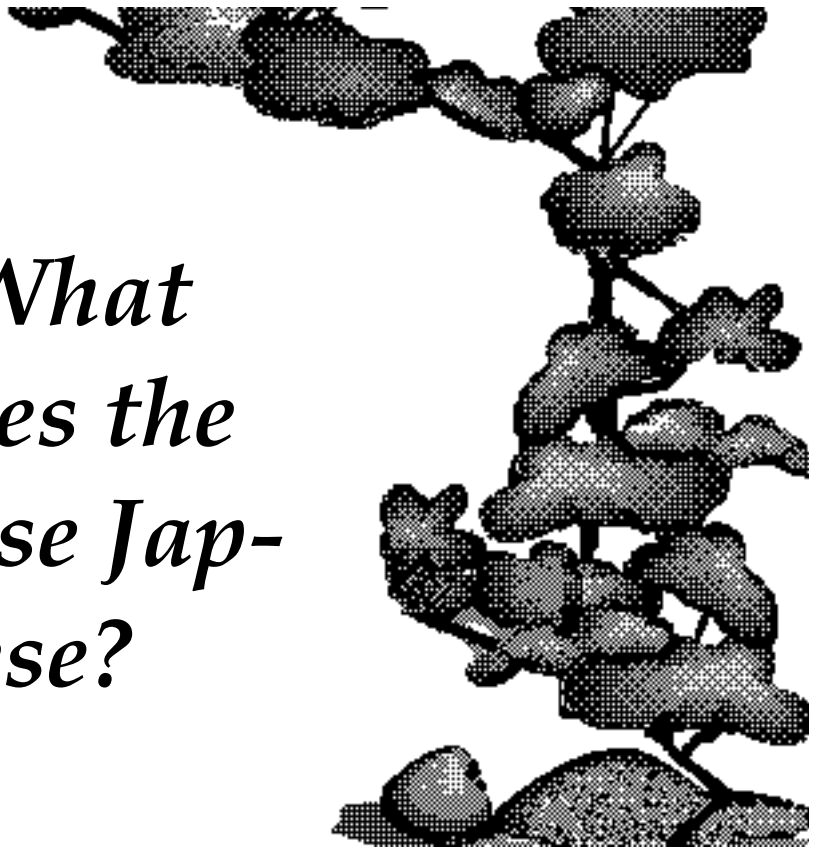
While it is undeniable that some things we are "just born with," I believe that in most cases the things that happen to us have a much greater impact on our lives. This was positively confirmed for me by the behavior of two *nisei* (second generation) Japanese girls in my *gaijin* (foreigner) house, as we were housemates for over a year. They, and other second or third gen-

eration Japanese-Americans I have met here behave exactly as you'd think they would: like Americans. How do Americans act? Well, ask any Brit or Australian. We're bold, brash, brimming with confidence (often to the point of arrogance, in their eyes), gregarious, creative, independent, and sometimes ignorant and rowdy. Though they were both of full-blooded Japanese ancestry, these young women would never titter shyly with one hand over their mouth; run to the cupboard if you said you felt like a glass of water; walk in eight inch strides; or stand right in front of you without acknowledging your presence (all of which are characteristic of young native Japanese women). The only difference is that they were brought up on football and apple pie, not sumo and sushi.

Now let me tell you about a guy I met one night at a bar in Roppongi, Tokyo's big nightlife district. I had gone to this classy little spot to hear some live music performed by what turned out to be an American fellow about my age who was trying to be the next Tom Jones and his band of reasonably talented Japanese musicians. At the bar, even though my Japanese was good enough at that time to order a beer, as usually happens, the waitress was too

freaked out to attempt speech, in any language, with an "outsider" (what *gaijin* literally means in Japanese). A guy came walking over who looked like your typical Midwestern cowboy, a full six foot with brownish-blond locks, and I anticipated the usual exchange about where exactly we both were from, how long we'd been in Japan, etc. Only, as he got closer, I could see that he was as apprehensive and self-conscious as the girl, if not more so. "I was only trying to ask her if you had any dark beer," I told him, but his face only got stranger. He said in badly-broken English, "I'm sorry, could you speak more slowly?" By then I knew he wasn't American, but he certainly wasn't European either. As it turned out, he was something I would never wish on anyone. He was "Japanese."

THAT MAY SOUND LIKE the worst imaginable form of Japan bashing, but I say it just to emphasize my point that what makes someone "Japanese" is not, as most of them would have you think, being born with Japanese blood, but being raised in the Japanese manner. The reason I would never wish it on anyone is because of



the extreme conformity demanded by this social system, and because independence and the freedom to choose your own lifestyle are two things—rights—I value greatly.

HE BROUGHT ME A HEINEKEN (they didn't have any dark beer), and with prompting managed to convey in broken English that his father, an American soldier, had died before he was born and that he'd been raised in a totally Japanese environment and had gone through the full twelve grades of their schooling system. Though his appearance was very Western (you couldn't see much of his mother in him), his behavior was entirely Japanese. I couldn't help feeling tremendous sympathy for the man, who, had he been fortunate enough to be raised in America would have had one hundred times the self-esteem. There is a saying here that "the peg that sticks up gets hammered back down." The sadness etched into this poor guy's face was evidence of the psychological pounding he'd gotten all his life as the oddball among the chosen.

This is all by way of saying that what makes the Japanese different is learned behavior, not inherent tendencies.

One thing behaviorists and psychoanalysts agree on is the importance of early childhood experience. This is the time when the world makes the initial patterns on the "blank slate" of an individual's being, setting the tone for the rest of a person's life.

The life of a Japanese youngster is markedly different from the life of a Western child, if not most of the other children of the world. The Japanese infant stays in almost constant physical contact with the mother for the first three years of life. Not given a crib or bed of its own, the child sleeps in the same bed as the parents. When the mother goes out shopping, the kid is carried in a sling on the back. All this is very different from Western practice in which babies are purposely weaned away from dependence on the mother.

ANOTHER THING which everyone who comes here learns is how spoiled Japanese children are. They order the mother to bring their favorite food and are never made to clean up after themselves. They are allowed to run up and down the aisles in family restaurants. They will be totally supported by the parents until the day they get married.

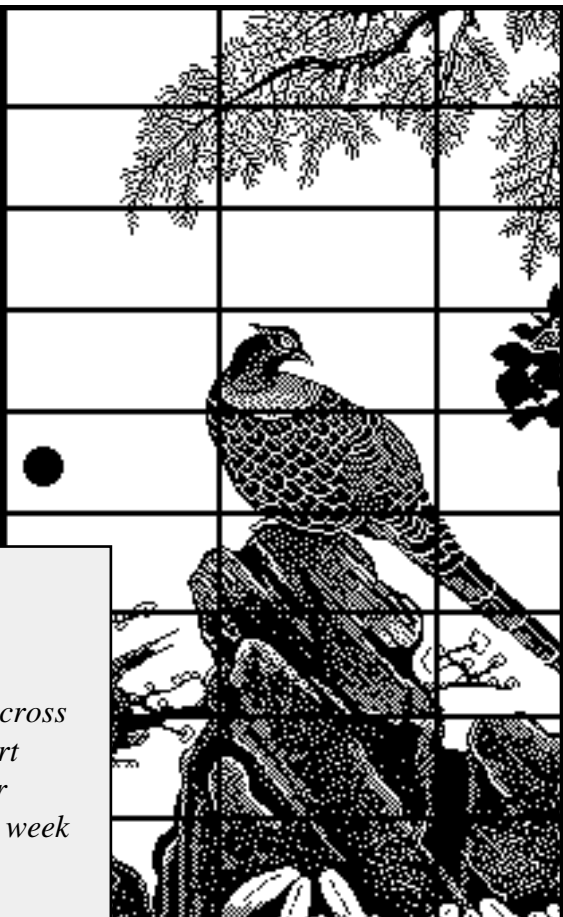
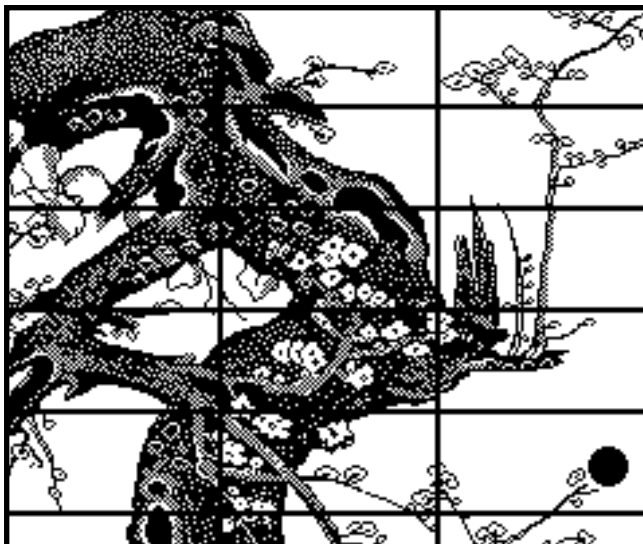
At around age five however, everything changes as the child enters school. I've thought this must be like hitting a brick wall, as now they have to put on identical shirts, shorts, hats, boxy leather backpacks (black for boys and red for girls), and are made to sit upright in front of little

desks which are screwed to the ground. They will be drilled in the "correct" way to do things, from how to carry their little umbrellas to bowing and arithmetic. "You're in the army now, kids," and the rest of their lives will, in most cases, be just as regimental.

They go from an extremely cushy, close lifestyle to an extremely ordered, disciplined one, but one thing isn't left behind: dependency. Where they were dependent on their parents' pampering before, now they are dependent on their instructors, who, though demanding, have also devised a system of education which fills many of the young child's needs.



Early samurai experimented with a diverse array of weaponry. For a short period, giant Oreo cookies were used.



Zenbu 全部

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When I was reading the book on butoh dance, I came across some words of Kazuo Ono, one of the founders of the art form. This reminded me of something written by Master Nishijima at the Zen meditation center I stayed at for a week a few years ago:

In order to dance, I always wonder where to begin. When we think about human life in general, two points of view are possible. On the one hand we have humanism, based on profound love or idealistic feelings; on the other hand, pragmatism, which is directly linked to basic human needs or desires. I think our lives are based on these two ways of looking at life.

—Kazuo Ono

We can say that the idealist would do well to study the world around him through his senses, and the materialist would benefit from becoming a little idealistic. In this way, both of them can find a synthesis between the two states, and this is the Buddhist state.

—Gudo Nishijima

(Zenbu is Japanese for “all” or “total.”)

(The Japanese, cont'd)

Of course, the item which is left off the menu seems like the main course to many American educators: independence and creativity.

Why do I go to all the trouble to tell you this? Well, it's just because there seems to be a lot of people making some pretty nasty comments about the Japanese in America. What I hope you understand now is that if you had been born and raised in Japan, rather than America you would *be* Japanese. I know well how frustrating it can be dealing with them, and how difficult they are to understand because we are raised so differently, but the bottom line is that we are all human beings and we cannot give up trying to understand each other. For as a wise man once said, “The only thing which guarantees failure is to give up.” ♦ ♦ ♦

Mauled by the Mob

The Janome Sewing Machine Company, my beloved employer for the last three years (and a major source of liquid funds) is hit hard by bad fellows.

ABOUT A YEAR AGO a big scandal was uncovered at my other employer, Janome Sewing Machine Company. What happened was some “investors” called the Koshin Group led by a Mr. Kotani got control of about 30% of Janome’s stock. They used this as leverage to force Janome to guaranty an enormous loan by Janome’s main financier, The Saitama Bank. Actually, what they did was to tell Janome’s directors that unless they guaranteed the loan, they would sell their shares to some yakuza (Japanese mafia) who would make life mighty unpleasant at Janome.

The reason this tactic worked is because the Japanese (including directors of large public companies) are brought up to be deathly afraid of anything which might bring shame to oneself or one’s company, and will do almost anything to avoid these shameful details becoming public. Eventually, however, the Koshin Group—in its wisdom—went bankrupt with the result that there was no way to conceal the coercion any longer. This left Janome having to pay back the equivalent of \$720 million to the bank!

The company had to sell off a big piece of land in the suburbs by their main factory to raise funds. The building I work in, the headquarters, is also located on some prime real estate near Tokyo Station. Next month, all the departments except mine (International Business) will relocate to the site

of the factory out of town so that most of the building can be rented out. Perhaps the most drastic cost cutting measure has been that employees over 47 years of age have been offered an early retirement package. (Five members of my department have opted for it.) This, in a land known for guaranteed life-long employment! (*Hidoi, ne. Severe, isn’t it.*) ♦ ♦ ♦

Oh my!

