



Dance for a dead child

Description

A daily butoh ritual brings peace to the bereaved

By **Stephen Chin**

On a chilly morning in early January, Kazujio is fast asleep, snug in his futon. Soon after he had dozed off, Mitsuko left him to join their son Hikari in the corner alcove. Just as exhausted as her husband, she is soon asleep, with a protective arm over her son.

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On arrival home just before midnight from their long weekend skiing in the Japanese Alps, the young family is greeted by their Persian kitten, Yumiko. She had been left alone with the radio playing and enough food and water to last the weekend. Restive, her purring and leg rubs are incessant. Bringing in the luggage and ski equipment and preparing for bed, Mitsuko and Kazujio are unaware that during one of their trips to the car, Yumiko had run out of the house through a door left open.

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Hikari could hardly contain his excitement and joy when Kazujio helps him tie the laces of his ski boots. Last year on television, he had watched his father win the National Ski Championships. And now he finds himself in this Alpine wonderland with fresh snow around and the cold air tingling his face and nostrils! As though the long skis with the tapering up curling front ends were a natural extension of his feet, the young skier displays a skill that would have taken a less gifted child at least a couple of seasons to acquire. A true ski prodigy, he seems to have by osmosis learned how to ski... and expertly, simply by having watched his father's performances.

Falling once, he jumps up and with a smile he brushes off the snow from his jacket. Neither parent is aware when he gradually edges away towards the main ski run. Then, jabbing his ski poles deep into the snow, he cups his hands and shouts, "Look, Papa! Look, Mama!" and, grabbing the poles, drops out of sight. Fearful, they rush forward, but the boy's superb performance soon calms their fears. With other astonished skiers they watch their son execute clever curves to control his speed. Mitsuko quickly moves into the run speeding after him. Kazujio beams



as he watches her catch up. He had chosen the boy's bright red jacket for its visibility. And now, as it stands out in the snow among those of other skiers, an unwelcome thought flits through his mind that he immediately brushes off.

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The next day is spent in a valley, cross-country skiing and picnicking in a ski hut. In the evening at the hotel, as Hikari watches his mother pack up things for their return trip, he is tearful, unwilling to leave. He pleads to stay another day. But the promised bribe of another weekend at another resort in mid February soon brings back the smiles. After lunch they begin their long drive home, arriving at their house in Nagoya just before midnight. Dating back at least a hundred years, the wood house was bequeathed to Kazujio by his grandfather Koji. It has wood pillars and round red beams in the ceiling. Wrapped in a woolen blanket, Hikari is carried into the house. He sleeps through a change of clothes and being tucked into his futon before Mitsuko and Kazujio retire to the adjacent room.

* * *

The clock tower in the square where the house stands chimes each passing hour. On this freezing dawn, there seems an edge to the pealing of the bells that only Yumiko, now perched high on the branch of a tree some distance from the house, understands. Soon after striking four, the earthquake strikes and the tower comes crashing down. The huge bell hits the ground with a brassy death rattle. The ground heaves like a gentle swell in a calm sea. Fires break out over Nagoya city. Houses are brought down and the inhabitants rush out in the relative safety of the open ground.

In the late evening when a rescue team finally reaches the house, they find Kazujio lying on the floor, face down, with hands on a beam that had fallen from the ceiling. He had been trying to move it until overcome by exhaustion. When the men succeed in removing the beam they find Mitsuko with her arms locked around Hikari. With much coaxing and difficulty the men eventually lead Kazujio away.

In the emergency shelter at a temple left still standing, Kazujio sits, silent, accepting neither the food nor drink being passed around. The next morning, as his numbed state and feelings begin to thaw, he hallucinates...

Cold winds blowing down the mountain sear my face... in the distance I see the receding figures of Mitsuko and Hikari... my boy's jacket seems like a drop of blood coursing down the white slope... why had I not chosen another colour for his jacket? Why had I not heeded his plea to stay another day in the mountains? I could easily have done so... why did I bring him to the mountains? Because I wanted him to become a champion skier like me?

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Mitsuko and I are strolling hand in hand under the cherry blossoms of Higashiyama Park... I was too shy when I am about to propose to even look her in the eye... but when I finally did ask the question, why is her grip on my hand tightening? Why is her pace quickening? And why do I take a deep breath when she pulls me to a halt and buries her face in my chest... my shirt is tear-soaked... warm at first then cool... passers by stare... but why should we care? The air is sweet... it is spring... and our hearts are full!



* * *

Then came... the exciting preparations for the wedding... our honeymoon in the mountains... and when after a year, Mitsuko hands me our first-born, he cries... what music is more thrilling? What sounds sweeter than my son's first cry? And later, his first attempt to smile... the lob-sided grimace that closes half an eyelid! But now... who is singing?

*“Sakura... Sakura... tender blossoms of spring
Sired by winter's snow.
Once again you bless my eyes.
Would love thus renew itself?
Sakura... Sakura... tender blossoms of spring!
Would love thus... would love?”*

* * *

Keening in unison with Mitsuko's voice humming – heard only in his mind – their favourite melody, now tragic... is healing and peaceful. It purifies the dark fog of sorrow in his soul... and in its place, the peace of acceptance. Kazujio's keening mesmerizes every one of the survivors in the room. It is late evening – his face is now tightened to a soft ivory sheen.

Kazujio's grandfather Koji, a survivor of Hiroshima, had performed a daily ritual of a dark dance that arose from the ashes in an early morning of August 1945. The dance, which becomes known as butoh, is deadly slow. Over one hundred thousand human beings about to start a new day in their city, are turned to ashes in a few seconds.

Decades after Hiroshima, Koji still performs his daily ritual of butoh... the dance of darkness and death... the black flower which blossomed from the blasted earth.

As a sensitive lad of five, Kazujio, watching his grandfather's performances, senses the energy emanating from the old man, moving his still nimble limbs at the pace of a watch's seconds hand, like a song with no words being transfigured into poetry. The flashback of that distant memory enables him to understand his grandfather's spirit, courage, wisdom, strength and resilience in the face of unspeakable tragedy.

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Kazujio now recreates the ritual he had observed as a child. He moves in a private dream, every moment affirming the healing power of slow movement and the quiet peace and pace of natural breathing. One after another the survivors join him: some on their knees, others seated in lotus position, a few standing by, taking small slow steps. Their limbs and bodies seeming to swim in a sea of air sway like underwater plants being caressed by flowing liquid. Each evening, each morning, the ritual is repeated: slow, powerful, bitter, relentless energies fuelled by the interacting of their bodies, by their feeling and breathing together, by their combined will never to be overcome by tragedy, by their courage to believe once again in Life: as when slow movement and breath, triggered the return of courage in the hearts of the stricken survivors of two cities blown into the blue skies of an early August morning.

Led by the spirit, courage and resilience of grandfather Koji through his son Kazujio, the survivors perform the Dance of Death, their tear-stained faces looking like masks on which the lashing surf may beat at and pound on, but



never wash away. Heads and bodies bent low, now rise as despairing eyes looking into the dim evening light now see the light of a peaceful dawn... growing splendidous like the sun of their courage rising unvanquished by the monster that leapt from the bowels of the earth to run amok amongst them and snatch away their loved ones. The cauterizing rays now bestow a kiss upon each dancer... dancing The Dance of Life – a kiss that consoles and heals as its energy and warmth enfolds them in a tight embrace.

Om... Ma... Pad... Ma... Hum.....!
Om... Ma... Pad... Ma.....!
Om... Ma... Pad.....!
Om... Ma.....!
Om.....!

(The above mantra is associated with a ship carrying a man across the sea of suffering to an island of peace.)

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Stephen Chin was born in Singapore in 1930. His early schooling was interrupted for five years by the Japanese occupation of South East Asia. After the war he completed his schooling and left for Germany to study at the Hochschule fuer Musik in Stuttgart. After three years he obtained a scholarship to continue his studies in Poland at the Warsaw Conservatory of Music He lived in Paris for four years and four in London before settling in Canada where he taught piano from 1967 to his retirement in 1995. He writes as one of his hobbies.



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