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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Altering Positions Through an Artistic Inquiry of Japanese Dance

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Abstract

Cross-gender acts have saturated Japanese performance history, with men and women using gender as a performative act. This practice-led article investigates gendered embodiment and gendered spaces through the Japanese dance and walking technique suriashi (which translates as sliding foot). It is practiced in traditional Japanese performing arts and in martial arts. Gender in traditional Japanese dance/Nihon Buyō is constructed physically through the positioning and moulding of the body, as well as through costume and cross-dressing. The original suriashi practice is performed in the dance studio or on stage, however my research asks whether suriashi could also be a method to act, as being active, or to activate, in other spaces outside the theatre. I exemplify gendered perspectives through a suriashi walk by myself and the drag queen Bruno the Bad Boy at the yearly Saiin Kasuga Shrine Festival in Kyōto. I propose that the suriashi style created to impersonate women is not only a gender construction, it is also a reminder of the continuous absence of women in Nō and Kabuki theatre, resulting from the 1629-1868 ban of women from stage, the adoption of Confucian cultural values, and teachings of Buddhism. Combining extended practice-based and situated knowledge with historical accounts, I elucidate the act of 'becoming woman' or 'performing as woman' in traditional Japanese dance. This helps to process a global conservatory performer training as well as processing gender issues in the contemporary society, explored through gender theories, performing Hélène Cixoux's sexual difference and Judith Butler's gender trouble.

Keywords

Suriashi, Japanese dance, Nihon Buyō, Kabuki, Nō, Shirabyōshi

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Introduction

My research originates from being a professional dancer and choreographer trained in Europe, U.S. and Japan. It draws from my Nihon Buyō-studies with master Nishikawa Senrei (1945-2012) in Kyōto since 2000 whom I studied with at *Traditional Theatre Training*, and at her dance studio *Senreinokai*, along with other traditional training. It also stems from my PhD thesis *Suriashi as Experimental Pilgrimage in Urban and Other Spaces* (2022) where I propose to experience society from within *suriashi* walking.[1] My research is also affected by concrete experiences of being othered as a foreigner and mother of my then small children in Japanese society between the years 2000-2004. This made me sensitive to the pressures on women and mothers, not only in Japan, but also in Sweden and Australia. In Kyōto, I often biked with my three-year-old on the cargo rack and my one-year-old on the handlebar. I met many Japanese mothers involved in the same activity. As mothers on bicycles, we became foreigners to the people driving cars, and here I also refer to my Western male researcher peers who rarely experienced the very common position 'mother-on-bicycle-with-children'. I experienced the three-fold pressure of being foreign, mother and woman in life and in society, while also performing the ideal 'woman' in the dance studio.

In my teacher Nishikawa Senrei's studio in Kyōto, I encountered important cross-gender acts as part of the Nihon Buyō-lesson. These dance techniques saturated the dance class, with both men and women using gender as a performative act. Each dance lesson began with the walking practice *suriashi* where we practiced gendered movements through the positioning and moulding of the body, and by wearing our kimono in different ways. For example, for male roles we ensured that the collar covered the neck; for female roles, we pulled the collar down; and for 'in-between' roles, the collar was worn in-between male and female mode of attire to perform gender ambiguity. The obi (the belt tied around the kimono) is also worn differently according to the gender portrayed.

The original suriashi practice is performed in the dance studio or on stage, however my research asks whether suriashi could also be a method to act, as being active, or to activate, in other spaces outside the theatre. The practice of suriashi is necessary to the orientation and formation of my research but not as the only output. The original suriashi practice changed focus, and instead developed into a method for experiencing spaces and society in a new way. Suriashi was not performed as a secondary experimentation, but instead served as an overarching strategy. In that sense, suriashi practice is part of the methodological frame itself.

[1] I have studied Nihon Buyō with other masters: Nishikawa Kayorei, Nishikawa Chikage and Ota Emiko from Nishikawa School, Heidi Sakurako Durning and Hakone Yumiko from Fujima school, Nakano Emiko from Hanayagi school and Wakayagi Kayono from Wakayagi School. I have also studied Nō theatre with Takabayashi Shinji, Matsui Akira and Richard Emmert from Kita Nō school, with Katayama Shingo from Kanze Nō school, and with Otomo Jun from Hōshō Nō school.

The suriashi walk with Bruno the Bad Boy was recorded on video but also through a written process journal. The process journal supports the auto-ethnographic narrative that shifted between our own recollected first-person perspective of the events occurring in urban spaces, and contextual information to the purpose of the recollected narrative. This follows a long tradition emerging from common research perspectives in practice-led research and artistic research. The process journal and the video documentation of the suriashi walk and our dialogue was revisited and analysed by me. They functioned as reference for questions asked throughout the investigation and in relation to the suriashi walking.

For this practice-led research, I exemplify gendered perspectives through one particular suriashi walk performed on October 10th, 2015, by myself and the drag queen Bruno the Bad Boy at the yearly Saiin Ka-suga Shrine Festival in Kyōto. I use analytical frames from artistic research, where the subjective experience is considered. I also compare historical representations of women on the Japanese stage with contemporary notions of gendered constructions.

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Constructing The Body for Performing 'The Feminine'

The original agenda for 'feminine' suriashi was an act of 'becoming woman' for male performers. However, when I decided to practice suriashi outside the dance studio, and instead bring suriashi to urban streets, the agenda for performing a gender-stereotype changed. Suriashi instead became a methodology for examining gendered asymmetries in urban spaces. The constant newspaper report on women being murdered when walking the streets, when hitchhiking, when taking the wrong taxi - showed an urgent and continuous need to process the social norms behind violence on women walking in urban spaces. For example, in 2021, the hashtag

#TextMeWhenYouGetHome went viral in support of a global awareness campaign about violence against women.

In Judith Butler's (1990) classic work *Gender troubled*, bifurcated definitions of gender are troubled. Butler argues that both sex and gender are performative, and that physical and sexual differences are constructed in similar ways. Proposing that gender is performative "sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 1990:xv). Suriashi is gendered, and the body alignment is constructed differently with regards to which gender, as well as which social class and age to portray on stage. As such, it very much conforms to Butler's notion of gender being a construction. I have used 'feminine' suriashi in particular, which refers to the body alignment constructed for men to perform as women in Japanese dance/ Nihon Buyō, where theatrical cross-gender practices are normative and part of the tradition. In 'feminine' suriashi, the shoulders are pulled down and back, while the upper chest is pushed forward to portray and construct 'woman'. Suriashi in Nishikawa Senrei's dance studio did not propose a certain fixed sexuality but allowed the embodiment of several genders in the same dance class/okeiko. In 'feminine' suriashi, the shoulders are pulled down and back, while to represent females in traditional Japanese theatre. I thus use a Western feminist lens when working physically and concretely with the 'feminine' body posture in suriashi. This lens supports the practical, embodied investigation of suriashi and gender. Where I combine feminist theoreticians Judith Butler(1990), Hélène Cixous (1975), Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Katherine Mezur (2005), with explanations of embodiment through the Nō playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) - known as father of Nō theatre - and my teacher Nishikawa Senrei.

'Feminine' suriashi was practiced for thirty minutes in Nishikawa Senrei's studio, before studying a piece from the Nihon Buyō-repertoire. This is hard physical work; however, the labour is not visible. The posture itself elucidated the unreasonable demands, usually placed on women, to perform the female gender identity. The 'feminine' performed in suriashi and in Nihon Buyō originally represented an absence. My investigation revealed how the exaggerated feminine suriashi posture found its rationale not only from the Tokugawa banning of women from stage between 1629-1868, but also from the male gaze on 'woman'. 'Feminine' suriashi served as method of 'obscuring maleness' for male actors in the Kabuki tradition as well as a method for female roles performed by both women and men in Nihon Buyō -schools.

There are many variations of suriashi, and all of them are gendered. Initially, I found this both intriguing and problematic. In dance class, the body was used for 12th century narratives about Japan both as a military government and an Imperial nation-state, where I studied the embodiment of the roles of the samurai Satō Tadanobu as

well as the female dancer and cross-dresser Shizuka Gozen. However, these historical accounts are not processed in the dance studio, and therefore rarely discussed. It was not until I engaged with historical research of Japanese theatre, particularly with the work of performance scholar Katherine Mezur (2005), that I understood the issues with these postures. This connection reinforced the importance of engaging with theoretical accounts also in rigorous dance practices. Mezur explained why the female bodily construction of suriashi (and other gestures) was more extreme than the male bodily construction – simply because the female construction was created for male performers as a cross-gender-act. My own reflection on historical and contemporary genedered violence was fuelled by the fact that 'feminine suriashi' was developed as a consequence of the banning of women from stage by Tokugawa shogunate in the 17th century. Historical facts were actualized and processed through my own body, which generated other questions and gave other results rather than just working for the physical perfection of a 'correct' gendered performance. It also deepened my understanding and interest in Japanese culture.

Tending to the tradition and the problem with reiterating a historical representation of 'woman', major Japanese Kabuki companies continue to exclude women from the stage. On the one hand women are being excluded, which means there is an absence. On the other, there is a stereotyping of women in performance, which Peggy Phelan (2013:64) would call excessive presence. Independent scholar Frank Episale (2012) is critical of how kabuki itself has been essentialized in much the same way that gender and culture have too often been essentialized. He refers to scholars who continue to employ "torturous arguments to assert, for example, that the return of women to the kabuki stage would rob kabuki of its 'essence'" (2012:91). I therefore hope that my research can support the continuation of struggle for gender equality and recognition in the Japanese professional performance cultures as well as in the study field Asian Theatre.

A Reluctance to Perform 'Woman'

Encountering my own reluctance to perform 'woman' or a feminine stereotype in my teacher Nishikawa Senrei's dance studio put me right in the middle of contemporary feminism, which conveys that gender is fluid however still often presented in a fixed manner. In the beginning of my Nihon Buyō-studies, I struggled with the fiction and reality of certain body postures and sensed how the more painful 'woman's' body alignment was problematic. My own perception of the pain became an allegory to misogyny and oppression. Therefore, performing suriashi as a feminine stereotype, as a sexual difference, and as *marche féminine* with reference to Hélène Cixous (1988 [1975]) *écriture feminine,* was helpful for bringing forward the ambiguity and complexity of gender. The theatrical postures, repeating the body alignment, and the lived

experiences of performing on streets provided a solution to my problem. Beginning my *marche féminine* in Paris in 2014, and then continuing in many cities and places for years, I was able to collect plural experiences of proceeding through space. The practice continues, and also attracts other walkers, researchers and performers who are eager to practice together with me. In order to draw a line between what theatrical dance postures and actual lived experiences reinforce in relation to gender, I however focus on one specific suriashi walk performed with Bruno the Bad Boy, which I analyse with the help of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), Katherine Mezur (2005), the Nō playwright Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1443) - known as father of Nō theatre - and my teacher Nishikawa Senrei.

What is a Woman?

In the 18th century, Mary Wollstonecraft demanded that women were given the possibility to become equal citizens of the emerging democracy. In the 21st century, we still work for the inclusion of more female-identifying political and business leaders. Here is where gendered structures are still at play. Therefore, 'What is a woman?' is still a relevant question. Johanna Sjöstedt writes that "while the feminist movement has strived to make gender irrelevant", it seems that "the differences and injustices between the sexes are what gives feminism and gender studies its raison d'être" (Sjöstedt in Johansson Wilén and Sjöstedt 2021:8-9). Growing up as a girl in 1970s Sweden, making gender irrelevant was indeed processed and performed seriously, however never fully achieved. I agree to the question of 'sameness' as it was an attempt to process hierarchies between the sexes. The strive to make gender irrelevant proposed a 'sameness', which however failed to process differences. For example, I played soccer with the boys at school, but the boys did not come to dance class with me. A value system where boys' activities were ranked higher than girls' activities prevailed. Who wants to be a girl, throw like a girl, dance like a girl? For my first job as a professional dancer in the play *Peter Pan* at Nationalteatern 1987, I experienced more agency performing the role as a pirate, than the role of Wendy's daughter. Encountering Japanese dance in 2000, I preferred the male roles or the divine roles that enabled a more ambiguous performance. This confirms that the hierarchical value system between genders was difficult to get rid of. What is also problematic is that the girl's position in society still cannot be used as a strong position for agency.

Using 'drag' as a practice-led response to historical gender stereotypes, I appropriated the feminine posture of suriashi together with Bruno the Bad Boy, who is a professional performer based in Kyōto, Japan. On October 10th, 2015, he agreed to perform a slow suriashi walk with me for my doctoral research in Kyōto. We dressed up in our individual drag personas, me as an androgynous drag-king-queen, Bruno the Bad Boy as a drag queen. He dressed in a Western style long dress and high heels,

and I was wearing a men's shirt, pants, worker men's split sole shoes (*jikatabi*) with a female *obi* (kimono belt). We both wore fake eyelashes and exaggerated stage make up. The art of drag disturbs our preconceptions of what is natural or not, revealing and parodying the artificial gender construction. Parody can be a sign of appreciation, it can be ironic, but it can also be used for a patriarchal ridicule. My aim, however, was not to perform gendered positions as a parodic entertainment show. I aimed at something more complex; problematizing the passing as 'woman' or 'man' both on stage and in society. My objective was to further explore my own visibility in the city, and to process my reluctance to perform the 'woman'. We were both also curious to experience performing our drag personas on the streets, using drag personas originally created for the theatrical stage. Butler explained that "drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman" (1999 [1990]: xxiii). Walking slowly as drag-king-queen and drag queen together, we set out to test something we could not decide the outcome beforehand. The borders between theatrical performance and everyday performance were about to dissolve.

Feminine suriashi was practiced as the most important and central suriashi at my teacher's studio *Senreinokai*. My research found that it is also the grounding for the cross-gender technique of the *onnagata,* a male actor who impersonates the ultra-feminine characters in the Japanese Kabuki theatre. The extreme body construction was originally created by male Kabuki actors/dancers to train to become onnagata. It was however not until 2012, when engaging with theoretical explanations of the onnagata body, that I began to explore the gendered suriashi fully. As Mezur notes:

> All the physical actions used to shape the intentional body, such as pressing the shoulder blades down and together, are onnagata gender acts, [and to] appear small and to create the postural line designated for onnagata gender roles, onnagata shape their standing postures by keeping their knees bent, turned inward, and pressed together (2005:177).

Mezur explained how several male performers used the phrase *karada o korosu* (killing the body), about "the painful physical reshaping and disciplined strength necessary for onnagata gender performance" (2005:280). The feminine dance roles were originally created to hide the male, and to so to speak, 'kill the body'. This is where the performance of the ideal 'woman' disturbed me the most, which I knew not only through my Nihon Buyō-studies but also through my extensive studies of classical ballet, as well as lived experiences of being a 'girl' and a 'woman'. In the ballet studio, there was a similar striving to erase the physical body for the sake of 'ideal aesthetics', where critical discussions about gender did not exist. Classical ballet was as physically challenging as soccer, however not perceived as such. When

I had my first surgery of my achilles tendon in 1991, the doctor refused to understand the injury was caused by performing in pointe shoes, and not by soccer games. Learning the 'feminine' Nihon Buyō-pieces *Kuro Kami* and *Fuji Musume*, I had to lean back in space, with shoulder blades down and together, instead of pushing myself forward through space. This physical labour to make the body smaller affected how the movements were composed from an internal contraction of muscles, never really unfolding fully in space because of the contraction. Trained as a professional dancer, the studying of stereotypically 'feminine' positionings and beings in space was difficult. When I understood however, the historical background of the practice, my reluctance to perform 'woman' instead transformed into a research situation. Understanding what certain movements were supposed to achieve made 'woman' into an intriguing research frame. Repressing physical energy, withdrawing shoulders, kneeling down and performing tiny gestures demanded a lot of effort. The *onnagata* performers explained that the reason they found the 'feminine' postures so difficult was because they are men. The 'feminine' posture "requires enormous energy to even approach that ideal" (Mezur, 2005:180). However, as a female performer, I found it just as difficult.

I also realized how the feminine suriashi actually represented the absence of live women in traditional Japanese theatre since it was created for men to 'become women', a fact I was unaware of during my initial years studying Nihon Buyō. Engaging with an absence, and performing and ideal fictive 'woman', creatively brought forward new findings that were both critical and parodic. For example, when a participant of my research workshop at *The Archives, Art and Activism* Conference at University College London in 2015 compared feminine suriashi with examples from the real world, she explained that she liked the leaning back since it differed from the 'leaning forward', which is what women have been instructed to do to make it in the corporate world.

The Business of Becoming Woman

Nishikawa Senrei explained in an interview that her grandmother had quickly taken her to dance class, because as a child she "was like a boy" (Tsurumi, 2003:19). The Nihon Buyō-lesson should help her conform to the appropriate social codes for being a girl. Nishikawa Senrei's grandmother believed the Japanese dance lesson would make her grandchild more feminine, with more restricted and restrained movements deemed to be appropriate gendered behavior. The story exemplifies Simone de Beauvoir's statement: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman", which referred to living as a woman in the everyday world, not of consciously performing a theatricalised version of one (de Beauvoir, 1949:301). De Beauvoir questioned the processes behind 'becoming woman' and showed how our notions of the essentialist concept 'feminine' limit and oppress women. It is intriguing to compare Beauvoir's statement with

Nō-theatre playwright and actor Zeami Motokiyo's 14th century instructions for male actors to become women on stage:

> First Truly Become the Thing You Are Performing; Then Find the Skill to Imitate Its Actions as Well. When performing a woman's role, the actor should slightly bend the hips, hold his hands high, sustain the whole body in a graceful manner, feel a softness in his whole manner of being, and use his physique in a pliant manner (Zeami, 1984:77)

Zeami, considered to be the Father of Nō, and therefore still pursued and reconsidered in contemporary times, urged the actors to truly become the 'Thing You are Performing'. This is related to the theatrical posture and the mind of the performer. I argue that it also resonates well with Beauvoir's problematisation of how 'becoming woman' reproduced gender inequalities. Both Zeami and Beauvoir confirmed that " 'woman,' and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact" (de Beauvoir, 1949:38). Beauvoir's critique of acts forced upon women and Zeami's theatrical rules for becoming woman were shaped for different reasons and purposes. They both recognize the difference of biological sex and the performativity of gender. They both discuss the act of 'becoming woman' but disagree on what is considered a successful act. The women presented in Nō and Kabuki-theatre are idealized and romanticized, which should be understood in relation to the continuous absence of female performers in these traditional theatre forms. Japan's most famous *onnagata* Bandō Tamasaburō V explained in an interview that his own sense of romance was one reason he became an *onnagata*, and that he thinks of women as "wonderful things which are beyond our reach", but he has no intention of ever marrying one (cited in Lohr, 1982). Bandō Tamasaburō continued: "Most men would try to make their ideal woman into their wife. But I have made the ideal woman into my business'' (1982). Indeed, Tamasaburō's statements on becoming not only woman – but an ideal woman – elucidates the problem at stake. For example, Wollstonecraft, Beauvoir and Butler all ask in different ways if 'becoming woman' could be a successful, emancipated act also for women, where appropriating the lives of men has been one possible strategy.

Indeed, Beauvoir's statement that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" was not used as an action for success, quite the opposite. Instead, she showed how the female body was limited, shaped and set in motion in a patriarchal structure, where she became the subordinate, the Other. Butler (1988) further explained how Beauvoir, appropriating and reinterpreting the doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition, showed how gender is in no way a stable identity. Gender as identity is constituted, she argues "through a stylized repetition of acts",[ ], through "bodily gestures, movements, and enactments" (1988:519). Compared to a Western theatrical context, there was indeed something subversive with the cross-gender acts in Japanese dance, particularly when men study and perform feminine pieces - which is however

part of the tradition, and not an act of parody. In relation to the patriarchal interventions at stake in traditional Japanese (Nō and Kabuki) theatre, which historically pushed and banned women from stage, I have struggled to process this absence of women. My investigation of the 'feminine' suriashi was yet an attempt to process this fact. Zeami's instructions for male actors to portray women and Tamasaburō's statement that he has made the ideal woman into his business showed that male performers in Japanese theatre historically have been praised for performing the female gender, and could make this their profession. In order to be successful, both Zeami and Tamasaburō strived to perform the 'ideal woman', where the lineage from Nō-theatre to Kabuki became more stereotypical. However, female performers in Japan historically have struggled for visibility and professional recognition, showing that 'becoming woman' was not a successful practice for everyone (Kawashima 2001; Klein 1991: Meeks 2011; Nakahara 1999). Also, in many dance studios, in Japan as well as in Sweden, the 'ideal' dancer's behavior is practiced, where patriarchal authority is not questioned.

Beauvoir's statement about becoming woman has gained new traction through Butler and through juxtaposing queer theories where 'femininity' and 'becoming woman' also includes cross-dressing, trans, non-heteronormativity, and anything at odds with 'the normal' (Butler 1993; Danbolt 2010; de Lauretis 1991).The feminist movement continues to arise from the category 'woman' as its landmark but asks new questions about who could be included in the category. Contemporary feminism is not about abolishing the difference between the sexes. Instead, it is a matter of "counteracting a fixation of differences in hierarchical binary pairs based on an affirmation of differences" (Johansson Wilén and Sjöstedt, 2021:13). This is how I have appropriated Beauvoir's statement and applied it in my research. I perform 'the ideal' woman through my choice of suriashi, not as a gender-confirming act, but as a critical and creative response to Beauvoir, Butler, Tamasaburō and Zeami.

Shirabyōshi

I continue to give a historical background to gendered issues in Japanese performance cultures. I walk back in time to find out more about the history of walking steps, dance and the cross-gender-acts. The absence of women in traditional Japanese performance is also manifested in the Nō-theatre, hence why cross-gender constructions have become the norm also in Nō. The historian Eric C. Rath (2004) has investigated the development of the key traditions that constituted the "ethos of Nō", for example the mythologizing of bloodlines as the primary vehicle for transmission of secret information in the Nō-theatre. The misuse of fabricated scripts reinforced gender gaps between professional performers, still experienced today in Japan. My own findings show how in Nō-plays, women are present as spirits, which also finally became their role (of absence), since all roles were played by males (Brazell and Araki, 1986).

The position of women in Japan can be seen as having been affected by the adoption of Chinese (especially Confucian) cultural values, and also by the teachings of Buddhism (Tokita and Hughes, 2007:14). The religious and cultural change decreased female professionals in religious ceremonies and on stage. This change in society is reflected in this song created by the female performers, such as the Shirabyōshi in the Heian (781-1192) and Kamakura (1185-1333) eras:

In the Eastlands are there no women There are only male mediums so the gods take possession of men (Ryōjin hishō 556, Nakahara, 1999:394).

The cross dressers Shirabyōshi were female professional performers with ambulatory lifestyles, who performed secular poems as well as Buddhist and Shintoist prayers and rituals (Kawashima 2016; Klein 1991; Nakahara 1999; Ortolani 1984). I embody the movements of Shirabyōshi since 2011 when Nishikawa Senrei taught me the piece *Shizu no Odamaki*, as well as for my own 2012 performance *Dust Falling, Rain Falling*, which engaged with the situation of the female performer through history. The Shirabyōshi were called upon to bring forward beneficial weather, luck and fortune, which I interpret as an important societal engagement through the performing arts. They held strong positions in society, but there are historical scripts attempting to denounce and ridicule them through prejudices about women with itinerant lifestyles (Kawashima, 2001, Strippoli, 2006).

Sakurai Makiko, *Shōmyō* (Buddhist chanting) expert, performs as a contemporary Shirabyōshi on independent stages in Tokyo. She confirmed that there was a strong sacred female culture in Japan, however since the 8th century, male rulers were favoured to manage the government with China as a role model (Sakurai, 2013 - 2014). This had an effect for female professionals like Shirabyōshi. However, the fact that they dressed up like men and used Buddhist names helped their art to survive for another two hundred years before they were preserved as good or evil spirits in the Nō-plays (Brazell and Araki, 1986; Klein, 1991; Sakurai, 2013-2014). They wore robes consisting of layers of flamboyant fabric on top of oversized trousers, *nagabakama*. Other than *nagabakama* and long-sleeved tunic, they carried a sword and a men's hat for their dancing. They invented a special step – *ranbyōshi* which is the ancestor to suriashi. The myths shaping traditional Nō-theatre tell how Shirabyōshi teach their steps to the originators of the all-male Nō-ensemble before male performers became the norm and before female dancers became ambiguous characters; either good or evil spirits in the Nō-theatre plays. The myths also reveal an early discussion of authority to perform and of immaterial properties, as well as present an obscure positioning of the female dancer of the past, where she can return only as a spirit. These myths were central in the formation of government approved theatre forms and schools in the 14th century. Thus, the absence of women in Nō theatre, and later Kabuki, was also government approved.

Becoming Shirabyōshi

Nō theatre playwright Zeami wrote the following instructions on how male actors should portray the female crossdressers Shirabyōshi:

> As for the look of a dancer or shirabyōshi or, again, a "madwoman," she should hold a fan or a branch of leaves or flowers ever so gently. She is to wear her robe and trousers very long, even stepping on them, and her bearing should be gentle. (Zeami, 2008, 32)

Zeami wrote the above instruction for 'becoming dancer' or 'becoming Shirabyōshi' after the Shirabyōshi had lost their popularity. There is a similarity to how Zeami instructs male actors to become women, as written further above, with how he instructs male actors to become Shirabyōshi. There is the similar 'feminine' code about a gentle bearing but there is no clear instruction of how to perform the gender ambiguity. I also lack the fact that Shirabyōshi were cross-dressers for a specific reason – that female performers were pushed out caused by a change in society. Instead, Zeami presents them as 'madwomen'. Calling Shirabyōshi a 'madwoman' was an efficient way to dehumanize her and dismiss her position as a professional. In the Nō-theatre plays, the Shirabyoshi-characters always wear the *Hannya* mask at some point in the play. The *Hannya* mask wears horns and shows a (betrayed) female character with fully developed madness and demonic tendencies, which shows that her cross-gender act was not considered successful or not even mentioned as such. The powerful cross-gender acts by the Shirabyōshi, which I consider being serious struggles for gender equality, were instead lost in mythology. The aesthetic choices of movement and rhythm in choreography, the theatricalization of mythological steps, and the absence of living female performers formed the creation narrative in Nō-theatre, which has continued to affect traditional Japanese performing arts.

Later in the17th century, the successful shrine maiden and performer Izumo no Okuni entered the historical narrative of Japanese performance. She is now celebrated as the founder of Kabuki, performing on the riverbeds of Kyōto (Hartley 2018; Leiter 1998; Rumánek 2015). Okuni wore unusual costumes (often male), carried a sword, and danced a wild and unusual dance, which was called *kabuki* (Hahn, 2007). However, as I have explained previously, the patriarchal intervention by the Tokugawa regime in 1629 prohibited women from performing in public (Klens 1995; Yamazaki 2001). All female roles were instead replaced by male performers. One reason for the ban was that the women who originally controlled Kabuki received a source of income and power that challenged the rules of Japan's patriarchal society. The ban was reinforced with the motive to uphold public morality, since Kabuki attracted such large audiences and it was therefore difficult to control the mixing of social classes and genders (Klens, 1995:13).

After the ban, boys took over the female roles, however they were also banned from stage in 1652, with the result that only adult men could perform in public. Since all female roles were replaced by male dancers, it became necessary to authorize embodied gestures for males impersonating females on the Kabuki stage. The art of the *onnagata* was essentialized as a central part of Kabuki. During the period of the ban, women would continue to perform in shrines, and on smaller stages owned by wealthy families, and in private associations such as the matriarchal society - however dependant on male audiences - administering the art of the Geisha/Geiko and the Maiko (Downer, 2002)[2]. Thus, women learned performative styles for rounding out etiquette, but they did not have access to main audiences. They were domesticated. Studying dance, tea ceremony and flower arrangement"'were considered a means of developing a woman's social graces" (Hahn, 2007:26). These acts of everyday life also served as examples of what Beauvoir described as activities for "becoming woman" (1949:301). When Nihon Buyō entered the stage in the beginning of the 20th century, women could perform in public again (Yamazaki, 2001). However, both in Nō and Kabuki theatre, then and now, male performers were made the norm on stage. In addition, female masters can run their own dance studios, but all Nihon Buyō-schools must have male headmasters.

The pleasure of theatrical cross-gender acts

The performance artist Bruno the Bad Boy, based in Kyōto, appeared in my 2013 documentary film *The Dance of the Sun*. He compared himself with *onnagata* and male actors impersonating females in early Shakespeare dramas, but he clarified that he was neither an *onnagata* nor a female impersonator. He explained that he was a man celebrating women, which he thought was more aligned to the Western style drag queen than the traditional Japanese performance styles. His drag queen corresponded with my own investigations of a drag-king-queen, created specifically for my own stage performances.

There is something pleasurable in theatrical cross-gender acts. When a woman dresses in man's clothes on stage, there is a vision of a more flexible approach to gender and sexuality. Women dressing in men's clothing avoid a traditional women's lives (Rosenberg, 2000). My research showed that the brave woman walker drifting safely through urban space existed merely in fiction and in-between-spaces. In the real world, the female walker needed strategies that did not shy away from the fact that space was not equally accessible. The author George Sand (1804-1876), aware and frustrated about the streetwalking problem in bigger cities tried a new strategy in an attempt for change: dressing up as a man, walking the streets of Paris (Wolff, 1985). This cross-dressing strategy granted her a fictive invisibility. Wearing men's clothes

2 Geisha (芸者) - 'arts person' - are educated in Japanese traditional arts. Geiko (芸子) refers to geisha from Kyoto. Maiko（舞妓）-'dancing child' - refers to apprentice geiko.

made her invisible, and she could thus move without being stopped and looked at. Through her cross-dressing act, she took a huge risk, since it was technically illegal for a woman to wear trousers in Paris without a police permit. Any woman wearing slacks, a trouser suit or jeans could, in theory, be "arrested and taken to police headquarters", a law that prevailed until 2013 (Lichfield, 2013:n.p.).

I have adopted similar strategies myself, creating stage personas with an indefinable gendered expression, particularly in my own performances *20xLamentation* (2013) and *The Laugh of the Medusa* (2017). The strategy was not at first directed to being able to walk safely in urban spaces, but to be able to escape the male gaze. Thus, I did not make myself invisible, but I found strategies to escape the stereotypical demands of the female dancer having to be youthful and graceful. I allowed my theatrical stage persona to be my strategic drag-persona – a drag-king-queen - investigating issues with gender and gendered spaces in the suriashi walk with Bruno the Bad Boy. The choice to focus on 'feminine' suriashi was more precisely the adult male-to-female variation of suriashi for the theatrical stage.

Walking in 'feminine' suriashi with Bruno the Bad Boy at Saiin Kasuga Shrine Festival

On October 10th, 2015, our suriashi walk took place at the yearly Saiin Kasuga Shrine Festival, which is a large and popular Fall festival with traditional parades and performances held on the second weekend in October. It is a religious Shinto festival and therefore we decided not to walk near the shrine, to avoid hijacking the purpose of the festival. We moved in the marketplace outside the shrine area (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1: Bruno – the Bad Boy and Ami Skånberg Dahlstedt (photograph by Kenjiro Ishibashi, 2015)

Walking together with drag queen Bruno the Bad Boy in Kyōto showed how suriashi - when leaving the studio or the theatre – was able to engage with lived experiences of gender and gendered spaces. It showed how theatricality from fictive spaces can affect the reality, and the real world. As we began to walk through a rather crowded area, framed by market stalls and food stalls, we realized that our suriashi walk became quite an event for people. This was a surprise. Since the beginning of my suriashi research in 2014, I had become used to walking alone in suriashi without notice. This fact showed how suriashi performed on the street made me invisible and unnoticed, which I think worked as a safe practice for women walking alone on the streets. At the shrine festival, however, people made loud comments about me and Bruno the Bad Boy, laughed, came up close to take selfies, walked next to us to discuss who and what we were. We did not respond to the questions; we directed our gaze to the horizon – which is part of the theatrical technique - and continued walking for two hours.

While relocating suriashi to the festival, we still performed the 'feminine' as a formal dance technique. Bruno the Bad Boy afterwards praised my instructions on how to perform the feminine suriashi, which helped him not to get too distracted by the turmoil our presence created. For example, the directing of the eyes to the horizon enabled him to have his own protected space. An auto-ethnographic journal excerpt appears below, based on our experience of the suriashi walk, written immediately after the walk. Bruno the Bad Boy and I were both still in drag to remain in the experience that the suriashi walk had provided.

Process journal from the experience of walking in 'feminine' suriashi with Bruno the Bad Boy

Bruno the Bad Boy explained his inner voice during the walk: 'I am going over the mountains. There are many things along the way, but I am focusing on the horizon and that is where I am going'. We both noticed how a boy wearing a Pikachu mask walked with us almost the whole time, trying to follow the suriashi technique. The festival has many parades, where people walk, run, and wave portable shrines wildly from side to side to amuse the gods. I experienced how Bruno the Bad Boy and I were able to create a firm rhythm in an unruly and exuberant space as if we had created our own parade, however not announced. Those other high-spirited festival rhythms fed our slow parade and made it distinct and noticeable. I felt empowered and positive after our performance. I also felt a bit sad when people laughed and screamed at us, reflecting the concern that whoever differs from the norm could be ridiculed at some point.

I told Bruno the Bad Boy that it was unusual for my research to walk in suriashi in public space wearing full costume. Bruno the Bad Boy laughed and asked: 'Which costume? No one is wearing a costume here!' He explained that for him, drag is itself the costume. Not only the glamourous female drag but also the distinguished gentleman drag, the Doctor drag, the English teacher drag. Drag works like a façade that we put on to fit into our role for the day. Bruno the Bad Boy thought that our façade worked well with the suriashi walking since we were able to address what gender, or any kind of social construct, is. He meant that 'When you receive that façade, when you receive that role - you decide to follow it. Even if we were breaking with something, we were also following something, only put in a new context. We did not put up a drag queen show. We moved slowly enough and passively enough so that people were invited to observe'. Bruno the Bad Boy heard many people asking Why? What is happening? However, we were just walking, which was our reply. Bruno continued: 'And it was almost to say OK, you asked a question - now you can answer it as well'.

Bruno the Bad Boy explained that even though I had not provided a goal on what to achieve through suriashi, our conversation on gender role models was there as an underlying theme. He shared his reflections on the 'seen' and 'unseen'. He meant that when people see something different there is always the idea of looking, even though we are taught that we should not stare. Bruno the Bad Boy believed our suriashi walk in drag gave people the permission to look. Since we were moving very slowly, we allowed people to acknowledge the uniqueness or the difference. At the same time, people admired our presence. Bruno the Bad Boy explained: 'I heard how people said Sugoi! Sugoi! (wow!), which is not a positive or negative, it means "This is beyond the norm!" And life is more interesting when you experience "beyond norm". Especially when it's non-threatening. They looked at our feet and understood we were doing suriashi, which probably not would have been noticed in Europe or the United States'. Bruno the Bad Boy thought that our suriashi act was something extraordinary, simply because it was not extraordinary, we both felt that we managed to create a space-in-between where we could process each other's views and prejudices. Ending the interview, Bruno asked: "Is this your normal academic drag? Do your professors dress like this?" I replied that I do defend the right to lecture wearing fake eyelashes in an academic context. Bruno advised: "I think you must say that the panel must wear fake eyelashes. Then they must

be barefoot, they must expose body hair – and from there we have started.” (Bruno the Bad Boy, 2015)

I pondered: Our slow moving through space as performers with a huge audience made me think of the history of the performer, and the role of the performer. This is how you had to perform without a stage. Right there in the crowd. Trying to find something that would attract people's attention. To call for laughter and to accept to be laughed at, to question what society believes in, to question what you do in a festival and what you don't do in a festival, how you dress, how you don't dress, how you buy things… Suriashi provided something different; an in-between-space.

Our suriashi walk was a constructionist strategy, where suriashi is not natural walking, but artificial walking. By choosing the artificial, we manifested the performing arts' love of the fabricated and the esoteric. We proposed to move artificially and slowly for everything that is considered strange and against anything that goes too fast, celebrating what was considered exaggerated and deviating. (Dahlstedt, 2014-2019)

Comparing gendered walks at Kasuga Saiin Shrine and Kitano Tenmangu Shrine

Our suriashi walk at Kasuga Saiin Shrine Festival lasted for two hours, which was documented on camera and witnessed by our friends Takewaka Mori and Ishibashi Kenjiro. When watching the video, I noticed that there was a clear difference from the other suriashi walks that I usually performed on my own, wearing instead an everyday drag, and without the golden *obi* and the fake eyelashes. Ten days after our suriashi at Kasuga Saiin Shrine Festival, I walked alone in order to compare my experience walking with Bruno the Bad Boy. As I expected, nobody took notice of my solitary presence at Kitano Tenmangu Shrine. I regained my invisible and safe space as I walked alone again. I remained invisible and safe. Being invisible is however not an ideal position in society.

Performing suriashi with drag queen Bruno the Bad Boy revealed that it was possible to make gender visible as a drag show, also in this slow and silent manner. We were able to create a slow, demanding and political act. The 'feminine' posture provided focus and seemed to protect us from questions and comments. The focus created through the locked gaze, paired with the slow time scale of suriashi, provided both a shield and an observer's distance to the onlookers. However, even though we both directed our horizon, we managed to hear and sense rather intensely what was happening around us. This showed how the embodied logic of suriashi supported a different engagement with space than just the visual register. When we analysed the video afterwards, we considered just how much suriashi affected the space around us. Suriashi in this case did not work as a tool for fictive invisibility; our gendered walking received attention and created a stir. Still, we both felt that we managed to create a space-in-between where people could process their own expectations and prejudices. I also considered the fact that for our feminine suriashi on the streets, we paraded like constructed women.

This was a small shift in comparison with how women historically have walked like constructed men. I believe that our act confirmed the becoming of the non-binary rather than becoming woman.

Butler explained that "drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman" (1999:xxii). This fact provoked people around us. However, since our gendered suriashi parade was understood as non-violent, Bruno the Bad Boy pointed to the fact that people's reactions were positive. In addition, I heard positive comments on how I wore my golden *obi*, outside my black shirt and pants, without the traditional kimono. Dance practitioners might have noticed that I was holding a Japanese dance fan.

The initial intention of our performance was to practice the idea of parading gender as a serious statement. This provided a silent space where we initially did not invite laughter and ridicule. The performative space that we were able to create around us was based on our long experiences from dancing and performing on stage, where we have become experts to even ignore audiences despite sharing the same space. Thus, the suriashi walk at the crowded shrine festival added an extra focal point for us as performers, where we could reach a contemplative state by directing our focus and gaze inwards. We could imagine other presences inside our own presence. I do not expect anyone to perform the same drag performance as ours without experience or practice, since I cannot guarantee that suriashi performed in urban spaces can offer a secure space for everyone at any time.

Conclusion

I propose that the suriashi style created to impersonate women is not only a gender construction, it is also a reminder of the continuous absence of women in Nō and Kabuki theatre, and as a result of the 1629-1868 ban (Klens, 1995:13). My own repeated acts performing suriashi in urban space enabled uncertain encounters with history - encounters that were painful and unsettling. They "draw attention to how we are touched by the past, whether we want to be or not" (Danbolt, 2010:42). Touched by the past, my own move from the studio to the streets forced me to repeat questions about the absences and presences of women in urban spaces.

Combining extended practice-based knowledge with historical accounts, I have elucidated the act of 'becoming woman' or 'performing as woman' in traditional Japanese dance (Hahn 2007; Klens 1995; Zeami 1984; Mezur 2005). This helps to process a global conservatory performer training. We could intensely hear and sense what was happening around us, showing how the embodied logic of suriashi supported an expanded engagement with space, beyond the visual. Still, our suriashi walk deeply

affected the space around us, and was far from invisible in this case. Rather, we created a stir, but we also provided a possibility for projection of expectation and prejudice.

My research showed how suriashi performed on the streets could protect the performer in two almost contradictory ways: First, by being a deeply concentrated performance in a different time scale, distanced the performer from the onlookers, while still providing a reflective surface for their reactions, and a heightened awareness of the surroundings for the performers. Second, by shielding the single performer from attention, by the same time scale difference working in reverse, provided a distance from the surrounding people to the performer, who thus goes unnoticed. As such, 'feminine' suriashi performed on the streets work as a peaceful and slow, but still confrontative, method to ask our society about gender.

Since I was able to compare both walks with regards to my own position as performer, I consider how these experimental suriashi walks were able to also problematize the position that the female performer has taken on - often taken for granted - where it seems that she welcomes any gaze to scrutinize and judge her. This position made her vulnerable, even more so if her performance did not correspond to stereotypical expectations of beauty, and the dance field's repeatedly obsession of youth and athleticism. Allowing the suriashi walks to ask specific questions about gender has shown itself to be a viable part of my personal strategy towards sustainability. My research shows that one personal strategy also can become a collective one. The history of walking steps and cross-gender acts are neither determinant nor conclusive, and therefore allow for a creative interpretation of how to proceed with various professional walking styles. I argue that these performative mythical cross-gender acts in Japanese theatre and dance could be used successfully for a contemporary discussion of gender equality, and for global performer training.Dance scholar Emily Wilcox stated that dance in East Asia has eluded the attention of text-based scholars since dance was considered difficult to engage with because of its embodied expression (Wilcox&Mezur, 2020:1). Wilcox argued that scholars of dance studies 'often lacked the kinesthetic, linguistic, and contextual knowledge to carry out primary research on these dance forms (2020:1). It is important to reflect on how we as researchers and dance educators decide to interpret historical accounts, and for the benefit of whom. Japanese as well as Swedish dance educators rarely relate to the historical background when teaching technique classes. Thus, it is urgent to include discussions on gender also in dance class, otherwise gender inequality continues to thrive through the dance practice itself. Bringing dance/acting techniques from the studio, the theatre, and out to society is a possible start.

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