

Rita Superbi

The Power of the Drum

*I like to strike my drum
The sound
Is life that pulses
Palpitations of the soul
Vibrating throughout the universe
It is not just well played
Oh no!
It is a limitless roar
Distant echoes coming
From East, West
North and South
And the body collides with these vibrations.
Taro Okamoto, Japanese poet*

"Taiko" is the generic term often used for the relatively modern art of Japanese percussion performance. Nowadays, however, the term is used more often to refer to the drums themselves.

Similar to examples found in Western culture, the Taiko was originally used as an instrument of war, to intimidate and frighten the enemy. Beside the military use, the Taiko was played in Japan also in more culturally refined situations and environments, for example in the temples for the openings of Buddhist celebration, in villages for the Shinto rites during the offerings to the gods or for festivities. A great variety of rhythms were developed and these still serve as an infinite source of inspiration for modern musicians.

In 1969 Tagayasu Den founded the group Ondekoza on the island of Sado (where the Kodo group is now based). It was the first group to dedicate itself exclusively to the study of the Taiko turning it into a lifestyle: rigorous training, running kilometres every morning at dawn and communal living.

The training culminated in the creation of the now internationally renowned performances. It is thanks to

Ondekoza that the Taiko is known outside Japan.

TO JAPAN

In 1984, at the Festival of Fools in Amsterdam, I saw the Ondekoza group and was stunned by their work. I spent the next four years searching for people who could teach me this particular percussion technique, in Italy and the rest of Europe, but to no avail. I pursued the Japanese percussion groups who every now and then came to Italy during their tours. In the end I realised that in order to study the Taiko I would have to go to Japan. Finally, in 1988 I met, by chance, far from where I had been searching, the group Ondekoza and they took me giving me the possibility of being their foreign student and guest (perhaps the first) and to learn at last the technique of the Taiko.

SOUND WITHOUT SOUND

Once back in Italy I had so much material that I immediately began to work alone. I closed myself in a room, surrounded by anything that was 'beatable', to deepen my research into all that I had learnt with the Ondekoza.

This solitary time lasted for two years, after which I began to open out the work and to offer it to the outside world through workshops. The work alone helped me not only acquire the Taiko technique, but also find my own (constantly developing) way of interpreting it. I wanted to find a path that would allow two cultures that were so different (the Japanese and my own) to meet, and find a way of communicating with myself and with other people through sound.

BEHIND THE SOUND

In Japan the work with the Ondekoza was organized in the following way: 8 a.m. - a

forty minute run by the sea or towards the mountain; 10 a.m. - physical training to strengthen the arms, shoulders, legs and abdominals; later work on some Japanese dances and then we played the drums.

Based on my previous experience working in theatre and particularly street theatre, I created a physical training that included the strengthening exercises, but left aside the purely gymnastic form of my Japanese teachers and built a training more full of imagination and fun, to reach the same result without being aware of how tiring it was.

After all if I, a Westerner (or rather from the Mediterranean), could try out a Japanese technique, why not then include other techniques that could help achieve my aim? And so I did, taking elements from theatre, modern dance, music in general, circus techniques, Brazilian dance and so on.

So, while we dance the Brazilian Capoeira or Maculelé, our legs strengthen, we work on rhythm and we introduce the sticks, basic for the Taiko technique. Or, while we use the jugglers club-swinging technique, we loosen our wrists and feel the weight and balance of the various types of drum sticks we will use to play the drums. Or, while we enjoy body-percussion, we work on the dissociation of various parts of the body and on singing.

This phase of the work has developed and continues to do so gradually, going beyond the limits of simple physical training, and taking on a fundamental role in learning how to play the Taiko.

THE DRUM'S VOICE

Finally, we can come close to different sizes and shapes of Taiko and, through specific physical scores, approach a kind of martial art dance or *kata* (form). We can play a rhythmical score creating real choreographies of sound and movement, using just the



Rita Superbi and Cristina Colangeli giving a workshop in Italy. Photo: Taiko Group

arms or the whole body.

It takes a lot of energy to play the Taiko, especially the O-daiko, the big drum. But the energy we give the drum is often 'dirty' because we are stressed by daily problems, and we do not go beyond them. The Taiko takes what we give it, 'cleans' it and returns it to us pure and strong. Thus it gives us emotions and in the end we feel "relieved of the old" and recharged with new energy. Many people take part in the Taiko workshops, not so much because they want to become percussionists, but because they feel that what they learn is good for their whole body and therefore for the soul.

This is indeed what happens generally to most people. However, it has to be

said, that not everyone is ready to give, and especially receive, such strong energy and sometimes there are a variety of reactions: tears, exaggerated hilarity or rejection.

OBSERVE, LISTEN, PARTICIPATE

People from the East in general speak little, but even if they had wanted to explain the Taiko technique to me in words while I was in Japan, it would have been difficult for me to understand. So, while a musician from the group led the rhythm exercises on the Taiko, the only thing to do was observe the movements of his arms, hands, and his whole body and to 'simply' imitate him. Thus it is possible to develop, after some initial difficulties, the right way of looking, of observing, and a way

of learning a method that will be useful in daily life as well.

When we work on improvisation in the workshops there is a tendency to do a lot, too much. If it is already full, what else can I fill it with? On the other hand if it is empty, then I can really have fun filling it!

If I listen to myself and enjoy what I am playing without listening to the others, I will always be isolated from the others and also from the spectators. It is therefore necessary to achieve a togetherness that is sometimes powerful, sometimes delicate, that communicates and participates with what each member proposes from time to time in the improvisation: bodies, minds and rhythm that unite in a single breath.

HOW A PIECE IS BORN

Usually I know the point of departure, but never the point of arrival. When I work on a known rhythm, amongst those learned from the Japanese masters, I try to develop variations that bring it closer to my way of working. I never seek to create an exact copy of the rhythm or movement of the Japanese masters.

When I intend to create a new rhythm I seek inspiration in various cultures. I propose some pieces to the group, which are then linked by new rhythms created together through improvisation. Improvisation plays a very important role in the creation of a piece and it normally works as follows.

We choose a very simple rhythmical base on top of which we take turns to propose solos, improvising until something interesting appears, and then we begin to fix. Once the rhythm has been found we work on movement in order to create a harmonious whole, strong or delicate, depending on the rhythm that is being played.

Another method is that someone

shows a sequence of movements (for example Mauro Franceschi who practises Tai Chi) and I select some interesting sections to begin to work on rhythms that can be associated with that physical score.

Once learnt, the technique of the Japanese percussionists can be applied in the most diverse situations, even in those apparently distant from Japanese culture. For example, for *The Wandering Harlequin 2004* at the Experimental School of Actors in Pordenone, I got the Commedia dell'Arte characters to play the Japanese drums. Harlequin played the shime (the small drum), two Zanni and a Brighella played the medium drums and I (Colombine) played the big drum. I did nothing more than create a translation, but instead of working on a text in a foreign language, I worked with movements. So, for example, I put together the traditional movements of Brighella with the codified movements of the Japanese Miyake. Thus I created a new physical score combining the two different ways of moving.

This is my research: once a seed has been sewn, I work the soil until harvest time, then I reap the harvest to plant the same seed again, perhaps with something new and on a different kind of soil.

CONCLUSION

When in 1994 I gave life to my group Taiko Do, it consisted of men and women. Over the years people have come and gone, until I found myself with a group only of women. This happened naturally, and when I realised that we were all women and that the men had 'disappeared', I decided that that which had happened by chance should become a characteristic of the group. So for years Taiko Do was an exclusively female group. Even the participants of the workshops I organise are almost all women. Why?

Observing the approach to the work and the different reactions to it I have

noticed that men tend to immediately prioritise being "macho". They believe that hard and exaggerated energy is needed to play the drums. Women, on the other hand, try to understand how to work on the harmony of the movement, and by repeating it they slowly find the kind of energy that is needed.

In the end however, though following different paths, both men and women get there. At least, those who decide to continue, do so. And generally women, who are more head strong and constant, begin to get to know their own energy, and use it to a precise and efficient end. Men on the other hand need to take one more step. They need to give up their tendency to show themselves off, and then they become powerful but also delicate, using all their male energy.

MUMONKAN POEM

For six long years, Master Mumon studied intensively the Koan enigma "Does a dog have the nature of Buddha?" He underwent the most arduous training and one day, on hearing the beat of a drum, he was suddenly enlightened and wrote one of the most important texts of the Zen school:

*A sudden sound beneath the clear blue sky
All beings on earth open their eyes
Everything beneath the sun
Immediately bows
Mount Sumeru jumps to its feet and dances*

Inspired by this saying, I can thus define my research: before studying the Taiko, for me the Drum was just a Drum. Now that I continue to study it, the Drum is no longer just a Drum. The aim is to arrive at the point at which the Drum will again become the Drum.

Translated from Italian by Leo Sykes

RITA SUPERBI (Italy) started working as an actress in 1979. From 1983 to 1994, Rita worked with Abraxa Teatro, a theatre group of which she was one of the founders. After a period of study in Japan, she started Taiko Do, now called Taiko Group, the first Italian group of Japanese percussion. She is dedicated to the development of this technique in collaboration with musicians, actors, dancers and martial art schools.