



Profile

Ryohei Kondo

Ryohei Kondo grew up in Peru, Chile, and Argentina. He first attracted notice as the principal dancer in one of YAMAZAKI Kota's works, and since appearing as a finalist in the Bagnolet International Choreography Competition, he has also performed in works by KASAI Akira and KISANUKI Kuniko. In 1996, he launched the dance company Condors and was involved in the composition, images, and choreography of all the works. The members of this all-male troupe all have unique personalities, and the work "Gakuran," in which the dancers performed wearing junior and senior high school uniforms created a sensation during the group's earliest days. His richly varied stagings, which contain a rapid succession of scenes and skillfully interspersed dance, images, live music, puppetry, and storytelling, have become extremely popular. Among dance companies, they are unusually motivated to travel, having toured all of Japan, as well as the United States and East Asia.

Condors: <http://www.condors.jp/>

Artist Interview

アーティストインタビュー
Talking with Ryohei Kondo, leader of the highly popular all-male dance group Condors

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男ばかりの超人気ダンスグループ コンドルズを率いる近藤良平に聞く

Artist Interview Ryohei Kondo Contemporary dance in Japan today encompasses a number of movements, including dance that has developed out of the butoh movement, dance rooted in classical ballet, the dance forms that have emerged from the collaborative production approach of college dance circles and the so-called expression school that pursues original forms expressive body movement. The group Condors led by Ryohei Kondo is representative of the dance groups emerging from the college dance circle category. The Condors are a group of individuals, each of unique character, who met during their university years and have continued to use the collaborative approach in creating works of expressive body movement in productions that bring together a mix of dance, comedy, motion picture and music with a strong element of entertainment that has succeeded in capturing a new, younger audience. In this interview we speak to Ryohei Kondo about the Condors and their increasingly active schedule of overseas performance, as well as his own activities as a choreographer and dancer. (Interviewed by Yoko Shioya)

(Interviewer: Yoko Shioya)

I started dancing when I was 20, at university. I was studying in the Education Department at Yokohama National University and one of the general curriculum courses available was Creative Dance. That was how I got started. People told me I was going well, and when I was invited to join the school's creative dance club, I made the mistake of joining (laughs). It was the typical college dance club of those days. All the members were girls doing so-called "modern dance." When I realized that, I thought I had made a mistake (laughs).

It is hard to believe that the body of someone who started as late as the age of 20 could learn to move like yours does. Did you start from the basics with bar lessons and all?

Yes, I did. I took lessons outside of school too, in both ballet and modern dance.

So, you were dancing every day?

That isn't how it was. I wasn't a dance freak. I was playing in a band at the same time as well. I was so into musical instruments that you might say I was a bit of an instrument freak. I got into playing a lot of instruments. Since I had lived in South America, I had some South American instruments. So, dance was really just one of a number of things I was doing.

Anyway, that is how I got started in dance. But it just happened to be a time, around 1988, 89, when Maimi Sato was in Yokohama (involved in programming for the dance department of the Kanagawa Prefectural Community Center). Of course, I was just a college student at the time and I didn't know anything about Ms. Sato, but she was bringing international contemporary dance companies like Rosas to Yokohama. Artists like that were coming to Japan often, and since my university was in Yokohama I often went to see the performances. I saw Pina Bausch's

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Carnation. I also saw Jorge Donn for the first time back then and remember thinking "He's from Argentina, too." Of course, for a student the tickets were expensive, so I didn't see a whole lot. But, what I did see really opened my eyes. I was amazed to see how many different types of dance there are. In short, I had joined the dance club not knowing anything about dance, but once I started it became not only an encounter with dance but also an encounter with "creating." That is why "dancing" and "creating" became one and the same motivating force inside me.

Since your university dance club was all women, does that mean your "creating" at that time involved creating dance for women dancers? That would certainly be different from what you are doing with your all-male group Condors now.

No. Even when I started dancing at university I wasn't actually dancing with the women. In fact, the members of the Condors are all men like me who encountered dance for the first time at university. Mr. Ishibuchi was at Waseda University, Mr. Fujita was at Gunma University; they were all guys like me who got into dance by mistake (laughs). It was a time when the Kobe High School and University Dance Festival had just begun which still exists today and this was a dance festival organized by the Association of Women's Physical Education Colleges. The women would have one dressing room for each university, but because there were so few men, we would be put together in one dressing room, so we all got to know each other before long. So, regardless of what university we were from, we would all end up together backstage. Though we were from all parts of the country, we became friends right away. Also, none of us were the kind who had been doing ballet since we were kids. We were all guys who had discovered dance at university. But, even if we say we had "discovered" dance, none of us were so into dance that you could call us dance freaks. In Japan at that time "dance" was still a women's world. And, the Kobe High School and University Dance Festival had been started by the Association of Women's Physical Education Colleges (laughs). But, none of my fellow [male] dancers were there because they wanted to do dance productions with the women. We were dancing but we weren't into it in a way where that was all we were doing. We were all what you might call "expression oriented," we all wanted to find our own means of "expression." That approach was completely different from the other people involved in the college dance world at the time. Especially when you have a competition like the Kanto (Eastern Japan) Dance Competition that gathers only dancers from the Kanto region, the world tends to get localized and limited, and there are few men, so they naturally banded together. That is how we began to work together as a group that transcended the boundaries of our individual universities.

In the Japanese environment at that time, most university students begin the job-hunting process as soon as they enter their senior year, and there is usually a lot of pressure from the parents, saying, "get serious and find a proper job."

I was told that [by my parents] over and over (laughs). Until I entered university, I was an average kid raised in an "upper middle class" family with all the normal Japanese sensibilities and values. But I guess I changed a lot at university. I began to lose interest in the other students around me and the things they were doing. But when I went to the dance competitions, there would be this really interesting group of people I have been talking about. And I thought, "None of these guys are going to go through the 'serious' job hunting routine and become just another suit in the crowd" (laughs).

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What's more, I took some time off from university to wander around Europe for a while, which bent me farther off course and put some even crazier ideas in my head, I guess (laughs). Before I left for Europe, Japan was at the height of its so-called "Bubble Economy" and we could easily earn as much as we wanted just with part-time jobs. It was with money saved from part-time jobs that I went to Europe, and since I was young and healthy I had the feeling that even if I didn't get a serious full-time job I could still earn enough money to live on not necessarily in dance that kind of lifestyle seemed all right to me. I guess that is part of being young. But, after I came back from a year in Europe, the "Bubble" had burst completely. Places like the office I had worked part-time at were going out of business one after another. I was amazed to see how much things could change in the course of just one year. So I decided, if this is the way things are, I might as well choose my own path to walk with confidence and create the things I wanted to create as boldly as I pleased. I decided to live that kind of creative life.

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When and where did the Condors debut?

It was at the Session House in Kagurazaka in 1996. Looking back, I think it was a rather carelessly put together production. But, after about three performances, we were drawing the largest audiences of any of the acts at the Session House at the time. That was when we were told by some of the "adults" working there the pros like the lighting people that our act was interesting, so we should get serious and try to create the kind of professional work that people would actually pay to come and see. They told us that we needed to create the kind of work that was really worthy of presenting to an audience. We didn't really know what that involved, but we decided to give it a try.

In 1999 we applied to the "Spring Festival" that was being held at that time at the Tokyo Globe Theater. It had the image of being mainly a theater venue, but it was also one of the largest festivals in the Tokyo area. We were accepted, but as we began to prepare our production, we discovered something we hadn't expected. We learned how much money it takes to put on a professional stage production. Until then we hadn't realized that we would need lighting and sound staff. That was also the first time we had ever applied for support funding. In terms of style and direction, that production wasn't much different from what we are doing now, but that was the first time that one of our performances won us some critical acclaim and we came to be recognized somewhat by both the dance and theater worlds.

The following year, in January of 2000, the Condors made their American debut at the annual New Year's "Japanese Contemporary Dance Showcase" at the Japan Society in New York. The next year, 2001, they made a tour across East Asia. After a return performance at the Japan Society in New York at the beginning of that year, the *Village Voice* newspaper hailed the Condors as "Japan's Monty Python." Then in 2002 the group toured South Korea and in 2003 an impressive schedule of overseas performances took the group to Australia and the Pacific Rim countries of Asia. In March of this year their amazing popularity was proven once again when tickets for their performances at the Hibiya Park hall in Tokyo sold out in 14 minutes after the start of advanced sales. This was something unheard of in the Japanese contemporary dance field.

It is ten years since the Condors group was formed, and you are now 36. I believe your group members now range in age from their mid-30s up to about 40. Until now your works have always had a "full throttle, explosive energy, Let's go!" type of style. How long do you expect to continue with this kind of work?

For example, everyone naturally changes in mentality as they get older. Isn't it natural that the kind of full-throttle work that felt fruitful when you were younger might begin to change? Are you thinking about a change of direction anytime soon?

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You mean aging, right? No, I think most men have a stubborn drive to go out "do their thing" as long as they can. And that "drive" can be something satisfying in itself (laughs). I think the Condors will have the stubborn drive to continue doing our thing in the same style. Speaking purely from a physical standpoint and I don't want to sound like I am running from the challenge I can see the possibility of what has been 40 minutes of all-out dancing might eventually drop back to 20 minutes, with the musical component growing longer. But, we have also gained

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experience over the years and I think we have the skills to perhaps shorten the dancing time without giving the audience the impression that we are holding back.

I see. For example, Mick Jagger is over 60 now but he hasn't changed at all. He still keeps the same bad boy image he has always had. Having come this far there must be some struggle to keep it up, but he doesn't let the audience feel that at all. And, even if we think he must be struggling, he still looks great doing his thing. Is that the image you want to project?

Yes, that's exactly the how I feel. The Rolling Stones are definitely cool, and that's the way I'd like to be seen. Though compared to the Rolling Stones were just everyday folks (laughs), I want to hang in their doing our thing as long as we can. Almost all of the original members of the Condors are still with us (plus a few more), so we are still mostly the same group. I don't even think about taking in new young members to make the group younger. Because the important thing is continuing to work with these members we have now.

Among the members of the Condors, you are the only one who is working exclusively in dance. The others have work in other fields of "expression," which means that to them the Condors isn't the first job in their lives but the second or maybe even the third. As you all get older, besides the physical aspects of aging, aren't there problems of a social nature that make it hard to keep going. Especially since you are all men, and especially in Japanese society, don't you think that as the members get married and become fathers it will be harder to keep going like you have been?

Yes, it already is getting hard. But we keep cajoling each other into carrying on (laughs). Actually, this is one of the important aspects that makes the Condors different. We were never dance freaks who think of nothing else, but when we get together as the Condors we work hard and well at it. All of the Condors members have balanced their lives in a way that being a Condor is one part of their lives. When you focus your life on just one thing, I think you gradually begin to see the limits of that pursuit. I think it is exactly because we are not making dance the only thing in our lives that we are able to continue like we have, and we can put a lot into it when we do. This may be the unique aspect of the Condors.

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I would like to ask you about your activities apart from the Condors. In your first overseas performance at the Japan Society Showcase in 1996, you participated as a dancer with the now defunct group "Company Resonance" I believe. After that you performed as a dancer in the work *Need* by Doug Barone and as a dancer with Kota Yamazaki's company, and in the process you won a reputation as the dancer Ryohei Kondo. In recent years you have expanded your activities to include dancing in collaborations with female dancer/choreographers, haven't you?

These are all interesting for me because they are so different from what we do in the Condors. It may be due to the difference in working in a man-woman context. Stated simply, I guess it is the quest for new possibilities. With the Condors, I am "participating" in the parent group that is the Condors, but with a duet the relationship between the two dancers is much more intense than when choreographing for a company. For that reason I want to continue to do duets with a number of different partners, and not limiting that to only women.

How do you choose a collaboration partner?

The duet with Ms. Nowada resulted from a plan that originated from the Session House, but she is also a person who didn't come to dance until she was over 20. And she also grew up in South America, so it was a perfect fit. Sometime soon I would like to do another work with her.

How about your duet with Ikuyo Kuroda, the leader of the BATIK company?

She invited me to do a collaboration with her. It wasn't a case of interest in her work so much as an interested in Kuroda as a person. The approach to dance for a person like her who had been involved in ballet since she was a child is completely different from that of me and the Condors members who came to dance for the first time in college. Taking advantage of this difference, I wanted to use the opportunity of dancing with her to break down the image that the general audience and the people in the dance world had of me. At the same time I was interested to see if I could break apart some of the things she had as a dancer. If that process enabled her to find new dance language, I thought it might be worthwhile.

What about the collaboration with the butoh artist Sengiku Bando?

It seems that she was interested in creating male contemporary dance, and since Condors is an all male group, the invitation came to me as its representative (laughs). I knew nothing about butoh, and since Sengiku is older than me, I also knew nothing about the people around her and their world. More than in terms of the creative process or the stage itself, it was getting to know that world that was very stimulating for me intellectually.

Are there any other things you want to do from now on?

Another thing that I am interested in now is holding workshops in different regional cities around Japan. I go to cities I know nothing about in places like Oita prefecture and Tottori prefecture. In Japan, where almost everything is centered in Tokyo, there is virtually no contemporary dance scene in these regional cities. When I go to these places I find two types of people coming to participate in the workshops. One type is people who have been studying ballet since they were little but, because of the lack of information or opportunities, they have never been able to get into new types of dance. So they want to try working with me. The second type is people who have never had any formal training in dance but they are artist or creative types and are interested in dance as a form of expression. But again, have

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never had an opportunity to pursue that interest because they live in a city where there is no dance going on. Both of these types are quite pure in their approach and that makes the work very interesting. There are a lot of people like this in the regional cities of Japan. So, I want to find forms of activities where I can work with these people.

When I want to explain to Americans who have never seen the Condors what your work is like, I say it is sort of like a TV variety show. There is a famous comedy variety show on US television called "Saturday Night Live" that everyone knows. It is a 90-minute program composed of a succession of short comedy skits, and there are often music acts between the skits. So, when I say that the Condors' stage works are a lot like Saturday Night Live the image comes across clearly. TV variety shows are a universal standard anywhere in the world. Do you ever think in terms of TV variety shows when you are composing your works?

To tell you the truth, I hate TV comedy shows. It may just be that I had too good an upbringing (laughs), but when I was a kid my parents never let us watch shows like that. The Condors' stages all originate purely from dance, and we definitely work within the context of "contemporary dance." It is certainly not TV variety and it is not theater either. In our works there may be an element of things born of forms of expression that originated in a theatrical background. But what we are doing is dance. In my mind, the stages I create have to be "dance" in the sense that dance is a performance art that is shown live. For the very reason that the contents of the Condors' stages are this kind of free-for-all mix, I believe it is important that it be guided by a solid artistic consciousness.

For example, I go to do workshops for junior or senior high school students. There are kids there who are highly skilled in sports like baseball or basketball, but when I try to get them to do "movements that have no specific purpose," they can't move at all. I think this is where the point is. There are no win-or-lose objectives involved in the things the Condors do. And, although that may not connect directly to "art," it seems to me that there is some kind of thread here that can lead to dance as art. You can't move without using the mind, but there is no direct purpose that you are given. I think we have to present that kind of world, and I think the children have to be shown that such a world exists.