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**DANCE**

Yumi Umiumare's *Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni* 2022 gives the traditional Japanese tea ceremony a 21st-century feminist spin. By *Philipa Rothfield*.

# *Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni 2022*



Yumi Umiumare performing *Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni 2022*.

CREDIT: VIKK SHAYEN

The Japanese tea ceremony emerged in the 16th century, derived from Zen Buddhist practices of meditation and hospitality. Its practitioners undergo many years of dedicated training and, as with many Japanese cultural practices, the art is often handed down through family members for generations.

Were you to experience the ceremonial making and serving of tea today, you would observe a set choreography of actions and objects, with tightly scripted postures and gestures that include how the tea is measured out, the napkin folded and tucked away and the hot water poured.

Cultural practices are live events. Not only are they adapted over time, they also contain within themselves the germ of improvisation. Consider the equally longstanding tradition of making tea ceremony bowls. Raku ceramics, currently boasting its 15th-generation master maker, plays between well-established techniques of manufacture and an ethos of individual artistry and improvisation. Each master is expected to create a distinctive tea bowl style, which is proudly exhibited as a form of national treasure. The technique itself is considered a nuance of chance, an alchemy of manual labour, earth and fire.

*This is a work of buried history, repeatedly invoked as “lost past/past lost”. It is also memorial, weaving historical memory into Umiumare’s recent loss of her father.*

Yumi Umiumare’s solo performance, *Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni 2022*, straddles these contrasting elements: tight cultural scripting on the one hand and elastic reinterpretation on the other. In the BlackCat Gallery, a small venue in inner-city Melbourne, Umiumare greets her audience, acknowledges Country, then strips off her hoodie and trackpants to don a floral housecoat and slippers. She wheels a tea trolley around, pausing to perceptually register the space, the artworks on the walls and her audience and casually waves to curious passers-by. These gestures are devices, techniques of Butoh dance that Umiumare has made her own over many decades of living and performing in Australia.

Over the years Umiumare’s work has featured a great variety of people, bodies and skills. She has created wild cabaret personas with Moira Finucane, solo dances, collaborative works with Tony Yap and installations such as *PopUp Tearoom*. Her yearly group show, *ButohOUT!*, matches professional Butoh artists and cabaret performers with a diverse array of performers to challenge ideas around who ought to perform and what they should look like. During *ButohOUT!* cameo performances, Umiumare will appear, typically channelling a wild power of supernatural proportions.

Her personas are Japanese in flavour, drawing on traditional costume and make-up, but always with a twist. Her work is transgressive, like much Butoh dance, but underneath runs a recognisable but distorted current of tradition. For example, her assumption of kabuki make-up in *Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni* is half-drawn. She traces half her face in kabuki style and puts on a traditional headdress with a white paper cutout. Looking like Japan’s Phantom of the Opera, her gleeful prancing about in traditional dress seems to bear little resemblance to kabuki. But the cultural references remain – all Umiumare’s costumes and personas are avatars of Japanese culture.

*Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni* is a feminist reassessment of kabuki’s founder, Izumo no Okuni, exhumed and reinvigorated for a contemporary sensibility. This is a work of buried history, repeatedly invoked as “lost past/past lost”. It is also memorial, weaving historical memory into Umiumare’s recent loss of her father. She stands behind her tea trolley, sipping tea and scoffing a madeleine, recalling Proust’s adage that simple objects are a portal into the past. Later she unpacks her father’s tea bowl, showing us the repairs she made in honour of his memory.

Takeshi Kondo’s films and installed projections complement the many outfit changes and scenarios featured in this work. Virtual motion alongside Umiumare’s live dancing facilitates a duet between a pair of period dresses, black and white, offering a binary yin and yang, good and bad, then and now. Kondo captures Kayo Tamura and Kyoko Amara performing their wacky take on kabuki, his films variously providing atmosphere for Umiumare’s mobile performance.

*Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni* takes tea ceremony and Okuni into the 21st century. Sitting in an open tea pavilion constructed by Masahiko Kumai, Umiumare goes through the motions of tea ceremony while narrating her father's funeral story. Dan West's sound design foregrounds the repeated sounds of pouring water as we are asked to consider the nature of ritual.

Umiumare wants to perform tea ceremony at her father's funeral. Her brother says this sounds like a traditional idea, which provokes Umiumare to explore what tradition might mean today. She has been faithfully learning tea ceremony for five years – we observe the precise folding of the tea cloth, the careful motions of her hands, the embrace of the tea bowl – but it doesn't take long for Umiumare to shake things up.

This transgression doesn't just belong to Butoh. According to scholar Katherine Mezur, Izumo no Okuni (1590-1613) exhibited a transgressive and "flamboyant sensuality", taking the piss out of male authority with props such as men's trousers, a dangling crucifix, male kimonos and samurai swords. In doing so, she embodied "the supernatural, the dramatic and the erotic". Unsurprisingly, professional female performers were promptly banned from the stage until the 20th century.

Making up for lost time, Umiumare empties plastic bottles of tea all over her face and body: "Plastic...tea!" She strips and dresses in sparkling street garb ready for haiku rap and a collective singalong, flashing her bum along the way. More outrageous is her catsuit, karaoke microphone and red patent leather boots. This is Okuni today, sassy and in your face. She scratches at her genitals with a plaster cast hand and screams lyrics into our quivering ears.

A stand-out film supplements Umiumare's contemporary reworking of Okuni, played out in these two modalities, street girl and sexy diva. It cites Nina Paley's fabulous GIFs ([blog.ninapaley.com](http://blog.ninapaley.com)) of Venus figurines. Full-breasted prehistoric stone figures rhythmically bop to Dan West's hip-hop. Add a multicultural mix of Hindu and Christian goddess images and this irreverent feminist project takes shape. Who was Okuni? Why don't we know more about her? What would she be like today? Why is kabuki still all male?

Any pretence of an answer goes up in flames as we file into a room full of twigs and virtual fire. We are exhorted to breathe in, breathe out: the bread and butter of Buddhist meditation. Clear the mind, still the waves of attachment and what do you have? A Proustian, unruly one-woman show, a work of pleasure and bite.

*Buried Tea Bowl – Okuni 2022 is at BlackCat Gallery, Melbourne, until May 15.*

*This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on May 14, 2022 as "Serving the tea".*

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