

Fusion of Australian Contemporary Dance and Mobius Kiryuho

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Introduction

In recent years, Australian dancers and choreographers have been influenced by various movement and martial art practices from the Asia-Pacific region. Long interested in Buddhism and other Eastern philosophies, I too have been drawn to investigate such practices. Mobius Kiryuho, the Japanese Art of Flowing Movement, founded by Master Kajo Tsuboi, has inspired me the most. What fascinates me about Mobius Kiryuho is the philosophy behind it, and Master Kajo's continual references to nature, universal laws and the principles or 'grammar'¹ of movement. Although there are many cultural and dance practice differences between Japan and Australia, I have found that the Mobius Kiryuho philosophy and practice resonates in many ways in an Australian context.

My first experience of Mobius Kiryuho was in the mid 1990s when a Mobius Kiryuho practitioner, Teruomi Kuchina, came to Mirramu Creative Arts Centre in regional New South Wales, to lead a four-day 'intensive' in the practice. In 1999, I went to Japan for a two-month intensive training course with Master Kajo, where I immersed myself in the practice and experienced the cultural significance and symbolism of many of its principles. Through my connection to the Mobius Kiryuho Institute I met Kyoko Sato, a performer, trained practitioner and teacher with Master Kajo.

When Vivienne Rogis and I founded Mirramu Dance Company in 2000, we decided to complement and enrich the company's Australian contemporary dance training by including the practice of Mobius Kiryuho. In discussing the

fusion of Australian contemporary dance and Mobius Kiryuho I refer in particular to the work of this contemporary dance company, which is significant in the dance theatre community of the Australian Capital Territory. Mirramu Dance Company develops its cross-cultural and interdisciplinary projects at Mirramu Creative Arts Centre, which is situated on the shores of Weereewa/Lake George, where the expansive open landscape inspires and influences the dancers' movement and choreographic practices.

The training practiced by the performers of Mirramu Dance Company is based on and developed out of the philosophies and movement styles of some of the early American modern dance pioneers such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Jose Limon and Lester Horton. Added to these techniques are influences from various traditional and contemporary movement sources.

A training method with a distinctive Australian aesthetic has evolved. This Australian aesthetic has grown out of a conscious acknowledgement of the power of the Australian land and our Australian way of life, to make an imprint on our minds and bodies, and therefore on the way we move and express ourselves. Included in the dancers' training, are studies of Indigenous Australian dance, taught to us by elders from the Pitjantjatjara region in the central desert, and Albert David from the Torres Strait Islands. These studies have taught us about Indigenous Australian ritual, the great mythic Dreaming stories that are connected to Country, and as well, they have introduced us to ancient Australian dance vocabularies.

By applying the philosophies behind the various above-mentioned Western contemporary dance techniques to an Australian context, and through our studies of the Indigenous Australian dances, coupled with our own relationship and movement responses to the Australian land and way of life, I believe that we have been able to find a unique Australian contemporary dance style. For the purposes of this paper, I therefore define our training as Australian contemporary dance.

In 2002 Vivienne Rogis and I invited Kyoko Sato to participate in and be a guest teacher for our *SILK* project. *SILK*, created and premiered in 2002, with further performances in 2004 and 2005, presented both in Canberra and Adelaide, is an example of how Mirramu Dance Company integrated Australian contemporary dance and Mobius Kiryuho. Through the Australian Indigenous land connection, that has given us important links to the nature-centred Shinto influences in the Mobius Kiryuho practice, conscious awareness in different approaches to core movement principles, and subtle changes in thought processes and performance modes, Mirramu Dance Company has developed a new and significant style.

Through my studies of Mobius Kiryuho, with its subtle way of working on the body, and its tapping of invisible energies and forces within the body and the mind, I found a way to explore the idea of silk in movement. I was also interested in investigating the divide, or the bridge, between Eastern and Western modes of thought and behaviour. Just as the silk trade, through the famous Silk Road, had been instrumental in bringing East and West closer

together centuries ago, I believed that a fusion between Australian contemporary dance (with its Western contemporary dance influences) and Mobius Kiryuho (a contemporary Eastern movement art steeped in the ancient practice of Aikido) could produce a contemporary 'Silk Road' through dance.

The silk story itself – the basic and simple beginnings of the silkworm, through the cocoon stage, to the spinning of the silk and finally to its sophisticated and complex outcome in fashion houses around the world – became an allegory for the choreography.



Kyoko Sato as the Worm and Vivienne Rogis as a Model in *SILK*

Photo: Robert Guth

The juxta-positioning of simplicity with sophisticated complexity, as in the silk story, became a key for the creative process. Simple movements were developed into complex movement patterns, layered choreographed sections were included with dances that were improvised, and movement variations were danced in partnership with the silk material itself. The principles of breath, gravity and the flow of energy through the body were consciously crafted into a multifaceted cross-cultural choreographic work – a 'Silk Road' in dance.

I will now discuss these three movement principles, core principles to both practices, highlighting similarities and differences of approach within the two practices, and give examples of how, through our choreographic development and presentations of *SILK*, we found a fusion of the two practices.

Breath

The principle of the awareness of breath was paramount to, and addressed very particularly by many of the early Western contemporary/modern dance pioneers.

Isadora Duncan (1977, p. 55) in her search for a more 'natural' way of dancing devised sequences of movement with very precise breathing patterns. The movement shapes and forms coupled with a sense of abandonment and freedom were based on dancing poses she found on the friezes, buildings and art works of ancient Greece, while the breathing patterns were based on her practice of Hatha Yoga.

'For Martha Graham, it all began with the act of breath – the start of life itself' (Cohen, 1966, p. 8). Graham watched the natural flow of the breath through the body and then intensified the dramatics of that action. She gradually developed her technique of 'contraction and release' from this research, linking these actions of the breath to her psychological interest in dance and drama.

Doris Humphrey (1959) believed that following every action there is a reaction. This led her to create many exercises involving the awareness of the passage of breath through the body. She also developed specific sequential movement phrases initiated by changes in breathing patterns. Her technique of 'fall and recovery' was linked not only to the power of the pull of gravity but also to the rising and the falling of the breath. The excitement in movement she found to be in the extension of the spaces between the inhalation and the exhalation – the suspension. By controlling the breath patterns she could extend her movement dynamics, qualities and vocabulary, giving special attention to this surprise element of suspension.

Margaret Morris, a modern dance pioneer in England, had incorporated some of Isadora Duncan's exercises into her own methodology of dance training. My experience of studying the Margaret Morris technique with Nora Stewart when I was a child gave me an introduction to the conscious awareness of the movement of the breath and the importance of incorporating it with dance.

The Graham and Humphrey techniques and philosophies were the basis of my later training in contemporary dance, and I therefore refer often to their theories and exercises, noting both the internal focus on the breath moving through the body, and the importance of the breath in the external relationship of the dancer to the space, particularly in the moments of suspension.

This internal concentration of movement inside the body is indeed similar to the practice of Mobius Kiryuho. However in Mobius Kiryuho, conscious control of the breath is not encouraged. The practice is more concerned with changing the frame of mind and with the opening of the awareness to the breathing function of the body. The practitioner is advised to merely observe the changes in the breath as the body moves with a variety of different dynamics.

During the *SILK* project, we played with both theories, deepening our conscious awareness in the moments of controlled breathing and in the moments of more meditative movement patterns. In choreographing the *Moth* solo in *SILK* I leaned more towards the Mobius Kiryuho theory, watching

intensely the movement of the breath through my body. I was also acutely aware of the changes of the air outside my body as it moved the huge silk wings that I carried. It was a challenge to NOT choreograph. Instead I had to initiate a movement for the silk and then let it indicate the next movement. In order to keep the wings still moving, I had to 'let the dance, dance the dancer' as Master Kajo reminded us.²



Elizabeth Cameron Dalman as the Moth in *SILK*

Photo: Robert Guth

After much coaching from Kyoko during the rehearsals of *SILK*, and several performances of the *Moth* solo, I understood what Master Kajo was teaching in respect of the 'dance dancing the dancer'. The material of silk has its own life. It breathes and moves in its own way. Like another body, it became my teacher. My challenge was to learn to listen to the silk as I danced, to feel its every movement, no matter how slight, and to respond accordingly to both the material and to the movement of the air between us. This air between, and around us, was constantly changing through our subtle or sometimes dynamic conversations.

***Ma* – as suspension**

Ma is a classic word that is associated with Japanese philosophy and spiritual practices, and also referred to in Indo-European literature. Although the Japanese concept of *ma* is more abstract, there are some parallel meanings to the Indo-European ones especially in the sense of 'fluidity', 'birth', 'beginning' and 'connection'.

Master Kajo speaks often of *ma* as a space of 'pregnant emptiness', or as a golden ball of energy similar to the depiction of the Chinese characters, which Stock (2005, p. 30), (informed by a discussion with Maria Adriana Verdaasdonk), in describing *ma* refers to 'a gate or door (*mon*) with the

character for sun (*hi*) or moon (*tsuki*) passing through.’ My understanding of the Japanese meaning of *ma* came in the dancing of the *Moth* solo. I experienced it like the suspension between an inhalation and an exhalation of the breath – a state of no movement. However, in that moment of no movement I experienced a great deal of suspended energy. There was a living, breathing connection and a strong relationship between my body and the space around it, thus intensified in the stillness, or the *ma* concept of space/time.

The Mobius Kiryuho practice of the figure eight walking in pairs helped the dancers of Mirramu Dance Company to embody the space/time quality of *ma*. We are facing our partner directly, both with knees relaxed and bent; arms relaxed, but curved in a circle in front of our navels; chest relaxed; eyes connecting to our partner’s eyes. There is a second of emptiness, or *ma*, and then as if walking through the centre of our partner, we begin an inhalation. To avoid touching our partner, the shoulders and upper body turn slightly at the point of passing. We then carry on walking the second half of the figure eight finishing that inhalation. From the peak of the outer circle we begin another exhalation, which brings us back to face our partner again at the point of *ma* – relaxed, empty, but with energy.

As a part of the *SILK* production we included a scene called *MA*. In creating a state of ‘emptiness’ or no movement I decided to build movement phrases interrupted by moments of stillness. I was reminded of José Limon’s solo for *Silence* in *There is a Time*, and realised the importance of opposites. Before the *Silence* soloist entered, Jose had a male dancer perform a dynamic and energetic solo, while other dancers played complex stick rhythms at the side of the stage. The sound suddenly stops. The audience is then aware of the silence and the floating solo female figure circling the space. She pauses, holding the silence, as the last echoes of the rhythm disappear. She continues her dance – in silence.

I believed that to show NO movement through movement, we needed movement contrasted with stillness. We therefore explored stillness with aliveness – a kind of suspended energy waiting to be let out. We questioned how long to hold this stillness in order to create the sensation of *ma*. Our next challenge was whether to let out that energy suddenly or with control. Let out suddenly, although breaking the dream-like meditative state, it was effective in some instances. Controlled, it came out in a slow steady stream like a hum. In the latter case we explored the Japanese way of walking flat-footed, with knees bent and soft, and moved continuously in an uninterrupted line, as if we were skimming the surface of the stage. When coming to a stop we found a position and held that position, not with tension but with energy. We held the position, not for the sake of the shape we were creating, or because it was the end of a phrase, but rather for the sense of holding energy. Although this was similar to an exercise we practice in improvisational sessions where we allow the space around us to move the body and do the shape-changing, the creative development of *MA* was a new choreographic challenge in the process of the fusion we were attempting.

Gravity

In *The Art of Making Dances* Doris Humphrey (1959, p. 106) states that 'All life fluctuates between resistance to and yielding to gravity' and with this in the forefront of her mind she created her theory and practice of fall and recovery.

As part of their breaking away from the classical ballet form, where dancers constantly resisted the force of gravity to create illusions of flight, of leaving the earth both physically and metaphorically, the modern dance pioneers made analytical and theoretical inroads into researching how gravity reacts on the body. They experimented with movements in and out of the floor, working with or against the force of gravity, both in a conscious and a creative way. This research into how gravity impacts on the dancing body continues today. In current contemporary dance trends dancers use the force of gravity as a source of energy. The pull of gravity into the ground, for example, gives energy to rebound out of the ground, a fall in off-balance moments, gives surprise in dance and can generate new movements, such as a twist, a turn, a leap or another fall, thus helping to build a greater movement vocabulary.

In the Mobius Kiryuho practice there is a much more subtle approach to the understanding of gravity. From his research and experience of the ancient Japanese sword practice, where there is great attention given to the vertical line, and of the body's relationship to this line, Master Kajo created a series of exercises, many of which are similar to full plies. With concentration focussed internally on the spinal column as a pure vertical line, the plie begins with a relaxed body and a soft surrendering to the ground.

In contrast, I am reminded of José Limón's theory of energy radiating out from the centre of the body through the five external points of the body – the crown of the head to the universe, outstretched arms to the space outside and widely spaced legs to the ground below. In order to sense the vertical line the dancer must imagine and feel, while executing his series of plies for example, the oppositional pull of the earth and the sky. This is a very different concept to the more subtle approach found in Mobius Kiryuho.

There are several exercises in Mobius Kiryuho where we are asked to feel the force of gravity acting upon us. Having raised the arms high above the head we are then asked to feel the force of gravity lowering them. We then surrender the whole body to this force, in a spiralling action of the Mobius loop movement through the spinal column. With a relaxed body, heavy like water, we descend to the ground. This must be done with consciousness, so that at a specific moment we can rise out of the squat position and reach up to the peak of the vertical line again, but with no oppositional pull. Another Mobius Kiryuho exercise illustrating this subtle surrendering to the earth, involves us emulating the movement of a piece of rice paper as it floats from above, to the ground.

Kazuo Ohno (1999), the Father of Butoh, speaks in a similar way:

We come to class to fine-tune the body, to get in touch with the inner body. Imagine a fine sheet of hand made paper, almost transparent, fluttering in the air. The body needs to be like this.³

After our training in Western contemporary dance-based work, we were challenged now by Eastern theories of relaxation and softness, by a constant inner focus on movement rather than an outer one. Working with such a relaxed body as in Mobius Kiryuho, we had to make several adjustments both physically and mentally. Our relationship to gravity and to the way we executed our movements was now different.

Flow of energy through the body

Buddhists aspire to the 'subtle body', constructed through meditation and philosophy; a body which can reflect the essence of things and which is mapped by *ch'i* or energy flows.

(Stock, (with reference to Solomon), 2005, p. 28)

In his lectures on Mobius Kiryuho Master Kajo talks about the 'subtle' body. However his term for it is the 'invisible body' and perhaps differs slightly in meaning from the one to which Stock and Solomon refer in the above quotation. While always referring to the essence of things and the mapping of the energy flows through the body, Master Kajo gives many exercises that he has developed from Aikido, focussing on various points in the body (not pressure points, but what he terms 'vulnerable' points), where the body very easily surrenders to pressure. This is one of the ways that he demonstrates how the dance of the body has its own movement pathways and its own way over the mind/body control that we think we have. He is interested in this *subtle* body and trains his practitioners to be aware of the dance between the controlled and the 'invisible/subtle' body. In awakening the 'subtle' body he is always encouraging his students to let the dance, (the movement of the figure eight – *yawaraghe*, for example) dance them.

In an exercise called the three R's we learn to follow energy through the body. The first R is *Relaxation*. Always in Mobius Kiryuho we are asked to move like a water bag – heavily, with fluidity, and with relaxation, watching internally as movement travels from one relaxed part of the body to the next. The second R is *Relationship*. As the energy moves through the body, we are asked to notice the relationship between one body part and the next. For example, a movement from one body part can be the initiator for another movement and/or another body part. The third R is *Realisation*. In understanding *Realisation* we are awakened to a conscious understanding and an awareness of an integrated body, of the body/mind relationship and of the body moving through space, both from an internal and an external point of view. In practising all three R's together, we must be moving in a relaxed way, conscious of the relationship of body part to body part and with realisation of an integrated body moving in the world.

Doris Humphrey (in Stodelle, 1978, p. 18) talked about the importance of the kinetics of dance. 'Since dance is kinetic, not primarily literary, dramatic or musical... training should aim first at feeling for movement in design, in

rhythm, in quality.' This 'feeling for movement' was a key to the development of contemporary dance during the 20th century. Even after the generation of choreographers to which Humphrey belonged had passed on, and as new techniques and philosophies developed and many theories changed, the idea of 'the feeling for movement' never died; in fact it became more intensified.

Rather than putting attention on watching the form of the dance from the outside, I have always encouraged dancers to work without mirrors, to 'feel' movement from inside, and be aware of successional movement through the body. The Humphrey/Limon techniques, which we practice, emphasise successional movement through the body. For example, movement is initiated as a result of the breath travelling through the torso, or a rebound occurs after a falling movement, and so on. So in practising the three R's exercise we could relate to this concentration on the internal observation of energy through the body. However the Mobius Kiryuho training helped us to deepen our visualisations and develop more subtle and sensual ways of moving.

Choreographic challenges

Although he emphasises the dance aspect of the Mobius Kiryuho practice, Master Kajo rarely directs dance productions and performances. He teaches the practice primarily as a martial art, moving meditation and/or a healing practice. The dance presentations of Mobius Kiryuho are improvisational, based on the organic flow of movement through the body and may follow a preconceived map or idea depending upon the occasion or event.

Kent de Spain (2003, p. 27) defines improvisation as:

... a way of being present in the moment, and your awareness of that moment challenges and refines your presence in each subsequent moment.

De Spain's definition is, I feel most relevant to the improvisational way of moving encouraged in the practice of Mobius Kiryuho, where Master Kajo refers constantly to being conscious in every moment.

In spite of the powerful performative appearance of Mobius Kiryuho presentations, where the practitioners move as if they are performers, there is little or no attention given to choreographic shape or theatrical design. This in no way lessens its power and potential as dance. Kyoko Sato, who has given many solo performances in Europe and Japan, for example, is an improviser with a powerful presence on stage performing exquisite movements that evoke highly emotional responses.

Apart from the form of the Mobius loop itself, which is drawn in the space by different parts of the body, Mobius Kiryuho is a formless technique. There are no fixed positions. There is only movement. Mobius Kiryuho uses improvisation as an end in itself mainly for practitioners to discover and experience the 'grammar' of movement, rather than as a vehicle for creative expression.

Mirramu Dance Company on the other hand uses improvisation as a means to an end. As a resident choreographer, I incorporate various improvisation methodologies into the dancers' training, and run improvisation sessions as a part of the creative development phase of a new choreography. I believe, like Victoria Marks (2003, p. 135), that beautiful dance phrases are found as dancers improvise together:

...improvisation is the place for things to happen between people, or between the dancers and the dance. . . . The dance is found in between the people, in the moment, and often in places where I least expect to find it...

From a choreographic point of view, I am mostly interested in shape and form. For me dance is like moving sculpture. I like to 'sculpt' the stage space with the dancers' moving bodies, creating designs and patterns both for visual and dramatic effect. I choreograph and craft many sections. However my fascination with improvisation prompts me to use movement motifs and phrases that have been developed from remembered movement pathways discovered in the improvisation sessions. These 'improvised' movements are then developed into the body of the choreography. The fact that these movement shapes, designs and patterns have evolved not simply from an intellectual or external approach, but from the internal landscape of the body, the feeling of the movement or the energy generated by a movement, emotion or idea, gives authenticity and strength to the work at hand. The training in Mobius Kiryuho therefore helps us to refine our improvisation skills, and so leads us into more experimentation of and exploration into a wider movement vocabulary.

In the *SILK* project we challenged ourselves by combining both improvisational and structured choreographic processes. The *Worm and Models* section is a good example illustrating the integration and fusion of form with formlessness. As choreographer/conductor for the work I juxtapositioned a choreographed duet with an improvised solo. Kyoko Sato as the *Worm* was elevated and spot lit centre stage above the *Models* who moved in corridors of light on either side of the platform. Using the technique from the three R's exercise of following the energy flow through her body Kyoko worked from the internal feeling of the movement improvising movements that simulated a silkworm – the eating of mulberry leaves or the spinning of the cocoon around her body. Sometimes I asked her to freeze a position for a while, both to counterpoint and compliment what the *Models* were doing. However having her internal concentration interrupted in this way, did not always feel right for Kyoko and having to pick up the movement again at a particular moment in time (the Western way of counting was also confusing for her) added to her specific challenges in the project.

The *Models* were also working with the feeling of the movement, but from a choreographed, dynamic and controlled way. I looked for the drama that emerged from the movements the *Models* were doing and in order to build dramatic tensions between them and the *Worm*, I often asked them to highlight various moments by accenting, quickening or slowing movements down. Conscious of contrasting the different dance forms, I worked with the

feel of the movement on two levels in the bigger space of the stage, crafting the overall design, rhythm and dynamic of the choreography.

There were variations in every performance mainly due to the improvisatory nature of Kyoko's solo. However there was enough visual, dramatic and movement contrast, to always produce the impact that I wanted in this scene. In the end it was the contrasting movement qualities, the layering of movement techniques and dramatic tensions that counted in this scene and it was exciting to witness how choreographically these two dance disciplines could work together.

Summary

The fusion between Australian contemporary dance and Mobius Kiryuho that occurred during the choreographic processes for, and the performances of *SILK*, highlighted and deepened our awareness of the principles of movement. As well, we found a more flowing, lyrical quality to our work, and a greater expressiveness and precision to silences and pauses. For Kyoko it was an intensive choreographic and theatrical learning experience.

SILK also involved a meeting of our differing cultures - the dancers of Mirramu Dance Company representing Australia's eclectic mix of cultures, while Kyoko represented the Japanese culture with its long unbroken connection to ancient sources. By finding the universal links between us, in particular through the exploration of the core principles behind the two different cultural dance histories, a harmonious and layered fusion could be made.

I believe the fusion worked because of the dancers' Australian contemporary dance training, their prior understanding and experience of various improvisation methodologies, their interest and immersion in the Mobius Kiryuho practice and their readiness to break new ground choreographically. Kyoko's enthusiasm and openness to new challenges and her thirst for knowledge of Western contemporary dance/theatre choreographic practice and presentation, gave her enormous incentive to make the project work.

An Assessors' Report by the Australia Council in 2004 acknowledged the success of the fusion in the following statement:

This relationship (between Mirramu Dance Company and the Mobius Kiryuho Institute in Japan) has obviously influenced the style, content and processes of the Mirramu Dance Company and creates an interesting mix, providing challenges in how two different cultural dance histories can converge and create new performance. . . . With further cross cultural exploration and time, this company has the potential to break new ground in Australian dance.⁴

Notes

¹ Mobius Kiruyo, printed booklet, handed out in workshops given at Mirramu Creative Arts Centre, 2002.

² Quotation from Master Kajo, personal journal notes of a course undertaken in Tokyo 1999.

³ Kazuo Ohno, personal notes taken in class in Japan, 1999.

⁴ Australia Council's Assessment Report after having seen *Silk and Sun*, November, 2004.

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