

Strange, Familiar, Prosaic and Erotic Doings From the Butoh Camp

DURHAM, N.C. — Anyone who tells you that dance is a universal language has never been to a Japanese dance sampler. Imagine a Japanese game show as a choreographed number, and you get the idea: strangeness rules.

DANCE REVIEW

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This strangeness, probably best represented by the mid-20th-century avant-garde form known as Butoh, has long fascinated artists and audiences from the United States, and with good reason. At their most successful, the absurdities and fantasies that delight Japanese performers conjure transformative, haunting worlds. But more typically weird for weirdness's sake has become awfully stale.

Both tendencies were on display here last week, when the American Dance Festival wrapped up its 75th-anniversary season with its Japanese Festival, two programs featuring six works. The Thursday program featured two premieres: Akaji Maro's "Secrets of Mankind," performed by the influential Butoh company Dairakudakan and students from the American Dance Festival, and Takuya Muramatsu's "... gosh, I am alive . . .," performed by Dairakudakan and its offshoot, Kochuten. Though originally set out to

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explore Butoh's possibilities, their search seems to have curled into a set of stylistic clichés.

Clichés can still make for satisfying theater, and "... gosh, I am alive . . ." had its moments, including a fabulous opening section in which white-powdered men, with only their genitals covered, tumbled down a steep, central staircase flanked by tall, pocked screens. Once on the ground they were menacing, faces twisted into ugly grimaces, tongues flicking in and out of gaping mouths, hands splayed and vibrating. Even Bob Fosse could never have imagined jazz hands like this.

But then Mr. Muramatsu settled into predictable camp flourishes. Three male performers emerged in geishalike outfits and, later, animalistic masks, and an initially intimidating ruler, Mr. Muramatsu, was made the buffoon in a series of inscrutable rites and power struggles.

"Secrets of Mankind" was even more dispiriting. Masses of powdered, scantily clad performers were struck down, resurrected and commanded by various figures in scenes with portentous names like "Animas" and "Cof-fins-Men." The final, self-serious moments, doubling as bows and featuring one of Mr. Maro's typical cameos (in which he appears like a tarted-up, over-the-hill drag performer), tried vainly to suggest that something momentous had occurred.



SARA D. DAVIS/AMERICAN DANCE FESTIVAL

Kei Takei in her solo piece "Woman Washing Rice," part of a Japanese program at the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C.

Intimations of geishas, everyday labor and dogs.

Real magicians don't need to advertise. On Friday, Kei Takei offered "Woman Washing Rice," a solo as powerful as it was short. Squatting on a low stool, dressed simply in a white, belted shift and shorts and accompanied by a score that built from the thick drone of insect and bird sounds to include chimes and percussion, Ms. Takei slowly worked her way through an increasingly physical loop of gestures. Though ab-

stract, they seemed drawn from everyday labor: washing laundry or preparing food.

With her bare feet planted and her dark hair wild about her face, Ms. Takei was a bewitching woman. She might have been one of those salty old peasants from ancient myths who turn out to be terrible goddesses. When she lifted the stool and staggered to her feet at the work's conclusion, lurching forward as if on moving ground, it was both a beginning and an end.

Ms. Takei has spent many years in the United States, and "Woman Washing Rice" felt grounded in contemporary dance practices as well as the culture of her native Japan. Whatever country she calls home, Ms. Takei

is, happily, a creature of the theater.

Teruko Fujisato's "Shinju Ten no Amijima" ("The Love Suicides at Amijima"), another short solo, based on text from 1720, did not resonate so strongly in its depiction of a betrayed woman's conflicted grief and anger. Ms. Fujisato has a powerful presence, but the slight choreography, full of pathos-laden poses, never felt more than illustrative.

The evening began with Dance Theater Ludens's "Against Newton," an interminable study in crashing and tumbling performed by Yukari Ota, Akiko Kajihara and Takiko Iwabuchi.

Finally, in Natural Dance Theater's "Circus," with the house lights up, a performer

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scrambled onstage, attached his dog collar to a chain and started yammering about needing a job. His problem was solved when he transformed himself into a dog, costumed and scampering about on all fours. I think he was adopted by a homeless man, but at this point the circus was arriving, and things got pretty jumbled.

Here was another example of contemporary Japanese dance that isn't nearly so wild as it strives to be.