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DANCE REVIEW

A primal 'Mourning' and hope for rebirth

By Thea Singer, Globe Correspondent | July 18, 2008

Eiko and Koma's "Mourning" (2007) takes the couple's signature preoccupations and method of operating - movements so slow you lose sight of how the two get from here to there - and evolves them into another dimension.

For decades, the Japanese-born husband-and-wife team have plumbed nothing less than the evolution and interconnectedness of life as revealed through the demise and regeneration of nature. Human bodies, as much as anything else - mountains, the desert, a snowfall - have made up that now craggy, now arid, now cleansing landscape. But last night, in an hourlong meditation presented by Summer Stages Dance at Concord Academy, Eiko and Koma directed their attention much closer to flesh and bone.

"Mourning," with its players cloaked in what look like bear skins, constitutes a grieving - it's an audible lament for our cruelty to one another, to the earth, to all living things. To get the message across, the pair's pace has measurably quickened since works like "Night Tide" (1984) and "Land" (1991). Here the primal relationship is a human one, with an almost apocalyptic violence at its core.

There's little that's imperceptible about the body shifts in the piece. From the get-go you see Eiko's sternum lift as she lies supine, as her head arcs back, as her spine curves into a U-shape. At one point Koma shoves his head between her thighs as she hovers on all fours. At another they haul their torsos along the set - a raked stage covered in dirt and dried leaves, with a thick gnarled tree structure at its top - as if their spinal cords had been severed, and they have only cracked-apart arms for locomotion. Throughout the piece they could be lovers, or sadists; it's unclear from moment to moment whether they're set to make love to each other or to devour each other's parts. When Eiko lets loose a scream as Koma hovers over her, you jump.

Driving the piece like a thrumming heart is the performance of avant-garde pianist Margaret Leng Tan. She is, in a word, remarkable. Even when Tan is sitting silently, draped in brown, at either the grand piano alongside the set or the toy piano to its left, she electrifies the air. The musical selections are hers: John Cage's "In the Name of the Holocaust," Bunita Marcus's "Merry Christmas, Mrs. Whiting," Someisatoh's "Litania" and "A Gate Into the Stars." She shakes the entire stage space as she bangs the grand piano's keys with her forearms. She stands suspended before the piano, like a caught breath, before reaching in to pluck its strings. Her legs fold up like an accordion as she sits on the tiny bench of the toy piano, the notes falling like raindrops.

Her cool yet thunderous presence complements the heated blood, sweat, and dirt of Eiko and Koma. Together the three could give you nightmares even as they offer hope for rejuvenation in the future.

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