



Posted: Oct. 19, 2008

<http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=807693>

## “Hunger” feeds on themes of decay, desire

By TOM STRINI

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Exquisite decay and endless desire are the themes of Eiko and Koma’s “Hunger,” danced Saturday at Alverno College’s Pitman Theater.

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The solemn dance began with the partners inverted, heads on the floor and necks bent at sharp angles. Their toes clung to a chain-link curtain. It took a moment to read their nude, distorted bodies in the half-light. Eiko (she) was on the right, with Koma (he) on the left, to form a rough symmetry.

Their motion was so slow that it was hard to detect at first. Ever so gradually, they unwound, rolled and slithered to exchange places. Over perhaps seven minutes they covered perhaps six feet, assume roughly the same inverted poses as in the beginning.

Eiko and Koma are of a certain age. They have performed and created as a team since 1976. He is thick and well-muscled; she is so slender as to appear frail. Nothing about their nudity was erotic. Their paleness and distortion suggested, rather, a cold detail from an open mass grave.

Charian and Peace, Eiko and Koma’s teenaged, Cambodian collaborators on “Hunger,” appeared in the second vignette. They were upstage, painting details onto a beautiful black-on-sepia drop. It depicted, in a minimum of ink strokes, a tropical island village. Nature sounds filled the air. Downstage, Eiko, covered now, lay still on sacks of rice and flour. Koma entered and made his way to her in slow, tightly bound steps that suggested great weight and effort.

Meaning, elusive and dreamlike at first, became more specific as “Hunger” made its way through seven episodes. In one, Charian (she) twisted her arms into grotesque wings and mounted the “sleeping” Peace (he) like a feeding vulture. In another, set to keening, clanging Javanese court music, Eiko and Koma enacted a desperate conflation of feeding and sexual frenzy. It was all the more intense for being so very slow. They ended up covered with flour and grains of rice.

Even in the bleak world of “Hunger,” redemption is possible through tenderness and art. At intervals through the 70-minute piece, Charian and Peace painted, sometimes on drops, sometimes on fabric laid out on the floor and invisible to us. At the end, they traded angry, painterly gestures on a central, hanging panel. Their combined fury resulted in a graceful, avian figure that rose to the sky as the panel flew up. Eiko and Koma approached from opposite wings for a long-delayed and very gentle embrace. Paintings of birds rose surprisingly from the floor to flank the central one. Charian and Peace knelt at opposite sides of the stage to complete a perfect symmetry, with Eiko and Koma at the center.

For at least one cleansing moment, hungers were satisfied in a calm, focused present that made decay irrelevant.