



Durham, Chapel Hill and the Research Triangle Region

Subscribe to **The Herald-Sun**
Trusted & Essential

<< save to my clipfile >> | << e-mail this article >> | << printer-friendly version >>

Eiko & Koma teams with Cambodian dancers for first time

By SUSAN BROILI : The Herald-Sun

sbroili@heraldsun.com

Jun 20, 2007 : 11:55 am ET

DURHAM -- A dancer known by the name Peace looks like a carved sculpture from an ancient temple in his native Cambodia as he assumes the pose that begins his solo in "Grain," by Eiko & Koma.

He rests his tilted head in an upturned palm as he braces an elbow on the bottom of his upturned foot, toes angled to the left. He makes this position look easy in a rehearsal earlier this week in Branson Theatre on Duke University's East Campus.

Charian (Chakrya So), 17, and Peace (Setpheap Sorn), 18, are the first people ever to perform a work by Eiko & Koma, the husband and wife modern dance duo, known for their slowed-down sense of time and the way they seem to merge with the elements.

The two young Cambodians will perform "Grain," a 1983 work, at the American Dance Festival. This historic performance will mark the first time Eiko Koma have permitted other dancers to perform their work. The program, Monday through Wednesday, includes another first -- the world premiere of "Quartet," Eiko & Koma's first work for themselves and two other people, in this case Charian and Peace.

It all began in 2004 when Eiko & Koma spent a three-week residency at the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, at the invitation of the institute's director, Daravuth Ly, who had seen them perform in New York.

The institute runs the Reyum Art School, founded by Ly and the late Ingrid Muan, in 1998 to offer a free, four-year program of painting and drawing.

The Asian Cultural Council supported the residency in which the pair performed, gave workshops



The Herald-Sun/Jeyhoun Allebaugh Koma, (from left) Charian, Peace and Eiko rehearse for their American Dance Festival performance. Eiko and Koma have only danced by themselves in the past, but will team up with Cambodian dancers for the piece.

RELATED

EXTERNAL SITES

[Duke University Box Office](#)

and wound up working with some of the students to create "Cambodian Stories, An Offering of Painting and Dance." Eiko Koma and nine students performed the evening-length work last year during a three-month tour that took them to 12 U.S. cities.

This Cambodian experience, and ADF director Charles Reinhart's urging, prompted Eiko & Koma to work with Peace and Charian, who had played key roles in "Cambodian Stories," the couple said.

"I think they have a lot of talent. They're honest. They work hard," Koma said. "Seems like they have a lot of curiosity."

Timing also played a role.

"Ten years ago, we couldn't imagine we're going to give our work," Koma said.

He is 58, she is 55 and they have no intention of retiring from performing. But, at this point in their career, they said it would be strange for them to perform "Grain" and other early work.

"Certain things are outdated for us," Eiko said.

Reinhart is estatic because he likes their work and wants it preserved.

"I want my grandchildren to be able to see it," Reinhart said.

"Grain" had been the very first work Reinhart had seen the couple perform, they said.

After the performance in a small New York loft, Reinhart had invited them to perform it at the 1983 American Dance Festival, they said.

Koma said they had never performed the work on a large stage and were afraid to do so, so they wound up doing "Fur Seal" instead. But in 1984, they did perform "Grain" at the ADF.

"It's a hard piece to perform," Eiko said.

As in all their work, "Grain" requires great mental focus as well as physical stamina and control.

"In one sense, it's easy because it's content driven. They understand the rice. It's their culture," Eiko said of the young Cambodians.

"Without rice, they can't survive. Spaghetti is not their food," Koma said.

Since they grew up in Japan, rice is part of Eiko and Koma's culture, too.

At the rehearsal, Peace enters with an offering of two burning candles in a mound of cooked white rice. He digs in, feeds himself and then helps Charian grab big fistfuls that she hungrily stuffs into her mouth.

"This piece needs a hungry spirit -- mentally hungry and physically hungry," Eiko said.

And, this quality cannot be taught.

"They have to have it inside already," Eiko said.

Eiko & Koma grew up in post-war Japan. Peace, Charian and the other Cambodian children they

met remind them of when they were young, according to the documentary, "The Making of 'Cambodian Stories.' "

Both countries share a history of the horrors of war and its long-lasting effects.

In Cambodia, the four-year reign of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, beginning in 1975, resulted in the death of 2 million people or one-fourth of the population, who "were executed, starved, tortured or worked to death during what came to be known as 'the killing fields,' " according to a PBS "News Hour" report.

Since U.N.-backed elections in 1993, Cambodia has been a constitutional monarchy, led by a coalition government. But the country's current prime minister, Hun Sen, is a former Khmer Rouge officer and many other former officers and soldiers live in the country, according to the report.

"They are learning individual mind with us not often welcomed in their country," Eiko said of Peace and Charian. "They may be the very first modern dancers in Cambodia."

Traditional Cambodian dance is only done in a set way and dancers have to follow that way, Charian said.

She and Peace had only performed traditional dance at festivals and had never seen modern dance until Eiko & Koma came to their school three years ago.

"When I saw them the first time, I wanted to try," Peace said. "Their dance makes us feel about something else and makes me cry."

"Before 'Grain,' I just try to make beautiful movement but now I try to make something different," Charian said. " 'Grain' is very hard because the movement is different from everyday."

Koma tells the young dancers, "Before you make a movement, you have to think about what you're doing there, what do you want to share?"

He and Eiko had not planned to be professional dancers. They had been law and political science students when, in 1971, they met when they joined the Tatsumi Hijikata company in Tokyo. Their collaboration began as an experiment and soon developed into an exclusive partnership. They gave their first U.S. performance, "White Dance," in 1976 and have been U.S. residents ever since. They live in New York.

"We are still learning," Eiko said of teaching "Grain" to Peace and Charian and performing with them in "Quartet."

"For me, I feel this is one family," Peace said.

Both he and Charian have lost their fathers.

"Also, we are becoming artist family. Those are my dancer kids," Eiko said.

If this project is successful and the young people are interested, Eiko and Koma said they'd be willing to pass on other dances to them. They've already planned to create another new dance for themselves and the two Cambodians as part of the Joyce Theatre's 25th anniversary in New York next year, Koma said.

"The investigation continues," Koma said.

"The investment also continues," Eiko said.

WHAT: Eiko & Koma present a revival of "Grain" and a world premiere, "Quartet," at the American Dance Festival

WHEN: 8 p.m. Monday through Wednesday

WHERE: Reynolds Industries Theater, Bryan Center, Duke University

TICKETS: Call (919) 684-4444 or visit www.tickets.duke.edu.

Eiko & Koma offer continued support of Cambodian art school

Paintings by Peace, Charian and other students of the Reyum Art School in Cambodia will be on display and available for purchase at the Eiko & Koma performances Monday through Wednesday at the American Dance Festival.

Proceeds will benefit the school that offers a free, four-year visual arts program.

The sale is part of Eiko & Koma's continuing efforts to support the school and its graduates so they will be self-sustaining as artists and positively affect not only the future of the school but also of Cambodia, according to the Web site www.reyumfriends.org. Eiko & Koma started the organization Friends of the Reyum Art School -- Supporting Young Artists in Cambodia.

Money raised from sales of paintings, artistic fees and contributions during the tour of "Cambodian Stories" in spring 2006 brought much-needed funding that enabled the school to add a computer room and small dance studio, raise teachers' salaries and build a library for art books donated from abroad.

Monetary and in-kind donations are tax-deductible. Checks should be made payable to Inta, Inc., earmarked for Friends of Reyum and sent to: Inta, Inc., 246 W. 38th St. 8th floor, New York, NY 10018.