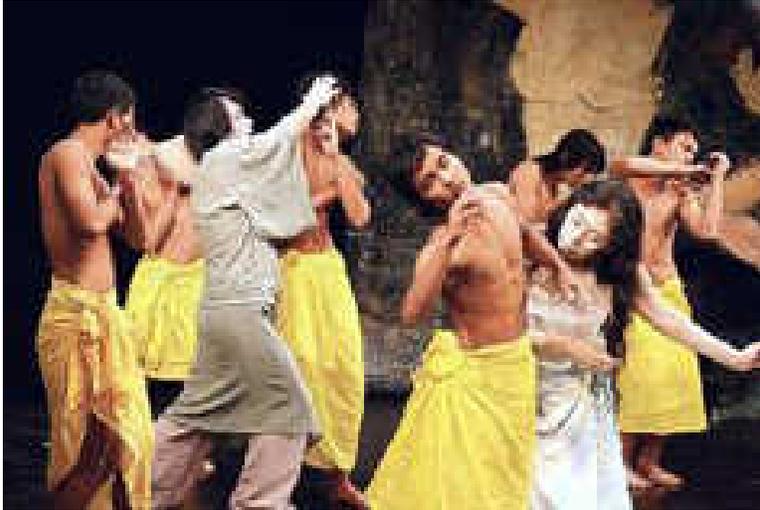


# THE NEWS & OBSERVER

June 27, 2007

## Eiko and Koma: how times have changed

By Linda Belans, Correspondent



These days, Eiko and Koma perform for a full house at the American Dance Festival. Photo by Marc Ray

DURHAM – The dancer lay frozen on the dimly lit stage, her naked body sculpted into an unidentifiable landscape. Her long, loose, black hair was splayed against a platform.

The audience, sparsely scattered through Reynolds Theater, gasped at the sight when Eiko and Koma performed “Grain” at the American Dance Festival in 1984.

Most of us had never seen naked bodies on the stage, and certainly nothing like Eiko’s posture on the floor. Some walked out during the performance.

On Monday, in the same space, the scene at Reynolds was more like an international urban crush — a full house, all caffeined and cell-phoned up. Eiko was once again frozen in her primordial position. Only this time, no one seemed to notice. Until the house lights faded.

How times have changed.

Eiko and Koma have always performed their trademark, glacially slow work as a duo. But at the request of ADF director Charles Reinhart, they set “Grain” on two young Cambodian dancers, Charian (Chakrya So, 17) and Peace (Setpheap Sorn, 18), and set a new work on the four of them.

Throughout the evening, we witnessed fundamental need, generosity and wisdom, carved from cycles of life, enveloped in stunning art.

Eiko and Koma perform the first frame of “Grain”; Charian and Peace, who are costumed, dance the rest. On a red platform punctuated with mounds of rice, Charian stands in an angular lunge, all coltish and young, and begins to drizzle rice from her fist. It’s as breathtaking now as it was 23 years ago.

This is a rugged dance, as it should be. It offers visceral images of hunger and struggle and vying for resources, and what hunger forces people into. In some ways, the piece feels more poignant now against a backdrop of images from Darfur and elsewhere that haunt our consciousness and conscience.

But this “Grain” isn’t as rough as the original. Absent is the violence that simmered then broke loose: Eiko stomping Koma, Koma head-butting Eiko’s buttocks, her yell in the dark.

Set on these adolescents, the dance is appropriate and respectfully re-imagined. It is more an initiation, an awakening to what’s ahead, rather than a reaction to ravaged conditions.

And the two young dancers bring their own morphing bodies to the work: like Eiko, Charian can contort her body, twisting her long thin arm up behind her, her wrist aiming backward, her downward-facing palm parallel to the floor.

Peace brings a strength and maturity to his performance through his birdlike body. He enters the final frame ceremoniously carrying two lighted candles in a bed of rice. He sets the tray down and begins to force feed her.

We can ascribe all kinds of intention here — they all work. And the smell of extinguished candles lingers in the air long after the final blackout.

“Quartet,” a stunningly beautiful dance about children and families and loss, invites us to bring our own lives to the seeing. And it underscores the contrast between the duos. Underneath Eiko and Koma’s fearlessness and fierceness lies a touching vulnerability, a duality they uncannily embody. For Charian and Peace, what echoes in after-images is a touching fragility.

Eiko and Koma appear in their trademark white body wash. Koma is costumed in an orange filmy tunic, Eiko in a blue and orange wrap, Charian in a beautiful yellow classical Cambodian dress, Peace in drapy pants.

The stage is blanketed with sand, and four enormous canvases of figures hang, clothesline-like, across the back. They are from the Reyum Art School in Phnom Penh, where Charian and Peace studied.

With “Quartet,” commissioned by ADF, Eiko and Koma successfully fold others into their work and taking on the mantle of the elders. They drag the two still bodies upstage like animals protecting their young from the elements. Koma places his hand on the grieving Eiko’s head in a gentle, comforting way that holds reams of meaning.

He sets the paintings into a swaying motion. Eventually, the young ones rise and struggle with their parents. It’s time to separate. The final repose brings us back to a beginning.

Is it death or adolescent separation? It doesn’t matter. It’s loss and it’s the cycle of life.

And this time, no one walked out.

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