

# Dance: Eiko and Koma In a Durham Premiere

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DURHAM, N.C., June 22 — The American Dance Festival is celebrating its 50th birthday this summer, and it has dedicated its anniversary season to Martha Hill, Louis Horst, John Martin and Balarasawati.

Miss Hill, now chairman of the Juilliard School's dance division, co-founded the festival when she established the Bennington School of the Dance in 1934 at Bennington College in Vermont and invited Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Hanya Holm and others to teach and create works for the performances that grew into the festival. In 1948, the festival moved to Connecticut College, and in 1978, under the leadership of Charles Reinhart, moved to Duke University in Durham.

In the 1930's, modern dance as seen in the work of its pioneers, was still a new art form that required some explaining to the American public. Mr. Horst, the late composer and Miss Graham's music director, was one of its major theorists. Another was Mr. Martin, dance critic of The New York Times from 1927 to 1962, who taught at the Bennington Festival and whose books and writings promoted modern dance and gave it a strong analytical framework.

Balarasawati, who died this year, was one of India's great classical dancers, and her performances and classes at the festival were typical of the more varied idioms — especially from Asia — that Mr. Reinhart has introduced to the festival.

This year, the festival has invited choreographers from India, Indonesia and the Philippines as well as from France and the United States. The cross-fertilization in contemporary dance was exemplified by the festival-commissioned premiere presented Wednesday night in Duke's Reynolds Theater by two Japanese dancers now resident in New York — Eiko and Koma.

Eiko, a young woman of porcelain delicacy who can transform herself into a grotesque shape of demonlike intensity, and Koma, her male partner, whose theatrical presence projects a contained and distilled power, have presented their work in the United States since 1976.

Their premiere, "Elegy," continues the sharp turn toward the dark side of the moon that was signaled by "Grain," which opened the program.

With sustained and slowly changing images of inexorable pain on the threshold of ecstasy, a strange ability to identify the grotesque with the beautiful, their startling sexuality and nudity and the use of allegories identified with nature, both pieces now reveal the origin of Eiko's and Koma's esthetic.

This is the Japanese Butoh movement in dance, exemplified recently in Toronto by the Sankii Juku group. Tatsumi Hijikata, the father of the movement, headed a company in which Eiko and Koma once performed.

There is a refinement about Eiko and Koma's work, however, that is not found among the others. This is disturbingly true even when their sexual images are brutal, as in "Grain," seen previously in New York, and whose rice-planting fertility rite finds a counterpart in a violent sexual encounter. In "Elegy," even the title has a genteel connotation that is ironically belied by the action on stage.

Both works have lighting designs that are works of art in themselves, created by the American lighting designer who calls himself Blu.

"Elegy" opens with each dancer nude, standing behind a separate and glistening large pool of water on a black rubber floor. The lighting creates a chiaroscuro effect, accent-

ing shapes and shadows. Eiko's head, bent and weighted by her hair, drips with water, as does Koma's. Cringing and seemingly crushed, the two figures recall Adam and Eve after the fall, in a Flemish painting.

Yet such imagery would seem too narrow for Eiko and Koma, who are able to suggest in a less specific way a more universal allegory about the human condition. Their time frame as usual here is evolutionary. Bodies change positions imperceptibly and flow seemingly into a new shape. There is a strong feeling of dramatic progression.

It is clear that some cataclysm has preceded the curtain's rise. The two figures — never identical and never coming into contact — each eventually collapses into its own puddle. Only Eiko makes one more futile attempt to rise, only to sink back.

Far from being an existential image, "Elegy" suggests little possibility for free will within a predestined fate. It is a heavy work, but — with its reflections in glistening pools and El Greco bodies — an artistic entity.

With their arms that retract after they reach, and the sense of surge, strain and struggle to avoid the ooze into which they sink, Eiko and Koma use simplicity to great power.

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Steven Caras

Karin von Aroldingen in last performance with City Ballet in "Stravinsky Violin Concerto."