

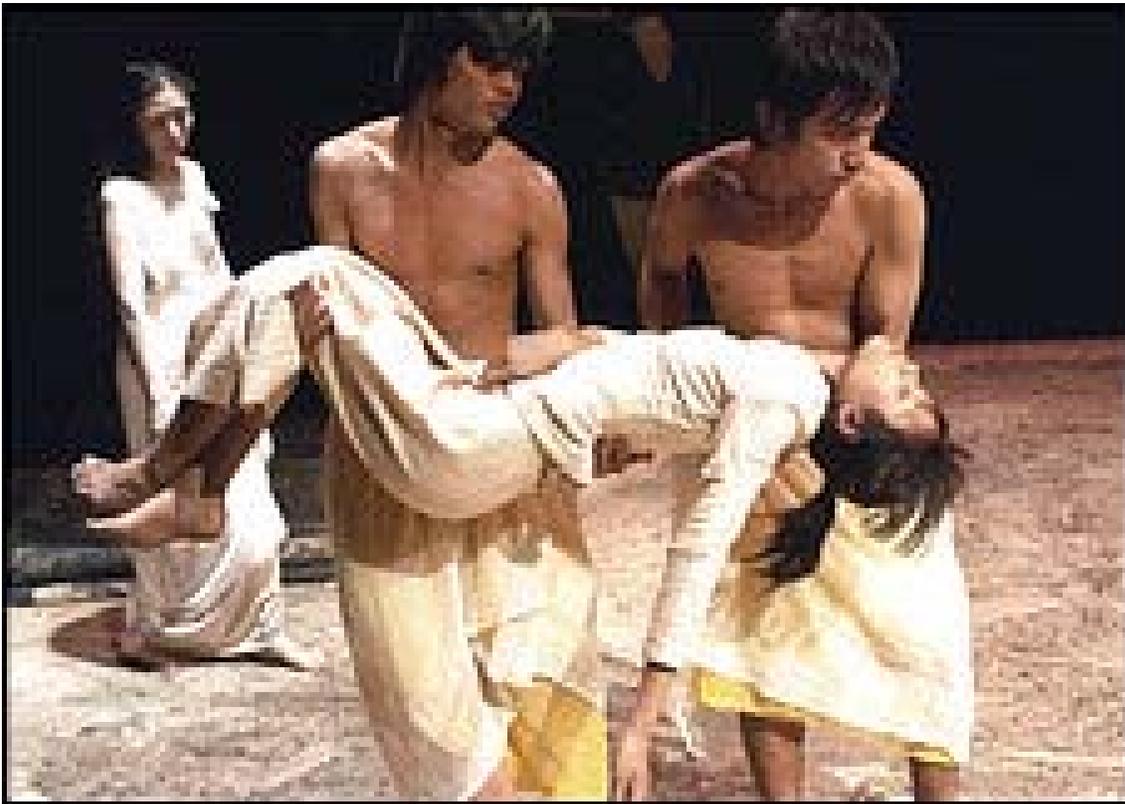
## A Moving Portrait of Cambodia

Eiko & Koma Evoke Disturbing Images in the Premiere of 'Stories'

By Pamela Squires  
Special to The Washington Post  
Saturday, April 1, 2006; C05

For more than three decades, Eiko & Koma -- now in their fifties -- have awakened our senses, tested our patience and widened our experience.

They have invaded our heads with their peculiar sensibilities, and we are the better for it. Like it or not, their snail-paced work gives our eyes, ears and minds time to wander and capture details. The muffled scratching of bare feet on sand. The tilt of a head. Shadows in the folds of a cloth.



Eiko, from left, and students Sotha Kun and Oeun Nimit, carrying Chakreya So, in the world premiere performance at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. (By Stan Barouh -- Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center)

Thursday at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, this Japanese-born, New York-based duo premiered their latest unsettling work, "Cambodian Stories: An Offering of Painting and Dance." The 80-minute work, which will be performed again today, was created in collaboration with the Reyum Painting Collective, a group of students at the Reyum Institute of Arts and Culture in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, which Eiko & Koma have visited since 2003.

This is a departure for the pair, who usually dance alone and rarely choreograph for others. The result is a work that evokes disturbing emotional landscapes from the war-ravaged country. The mood is dark. Actions are ceremonial. The experience for the dancers is cathartic.

Eiko & Koma purposely recede into the work's background. Like ghostly parents, they guide the performers, at times literally. Their role has been to fire up their students' zeal for performing. (None had any experience with dance.) That zeal lights up the work from the inside.

Giant paintings of mother-goddess figures collapse in heaps, leaving the performers vulnerable and unprotected. The students glide ecstatically across a sand-strewn stage, eyes unfocused and eyelids fluttering. They wriggle like worms through heaps of sand. Outside noises with crickets chirping alternate with pop-style Cambodian music composed by Washington-based ethnomusicologist Sam-Ang Sam.

During the performance, the Cambodian art students produce two large paintings. Both are of women and evoke a mother-goddess-nurture theme. They are created, raised into upright position, collapse into oblivion and rise again. Dressed in persimmon-colored sarongs and draped across the scaffolding, the performers form a picture while they create one.

From the work's first moments, when the curtain is unexpectedly yanked down in a cloud of dust and the clatter of falling metal clips, we are periodically startled. Figures slither out from beneath collapsed canvases. Blocks of color become a reclining female, back arched and mouth open, rising out of the water. It is Cambodia rising from war-torn misery. It is each student's personal hopes and dreams. The ambiguity feeds the imagination.

Ultimately, it is the work's detail that keeps us engaged and extremely busy trying to capture it all. Blue paint smeared on an eyebrow. A rope swaying. Paint dripping. Flesh creasing. One is easily overwhelmed. It is impossible not to feel affected. Eiko & Koma have done it again.