

Peaceful Offering

For the movement rituals of Eiko & Koma, the life force shines through, even in death **By Gia Kourlas**

Before the devastation of September 11, the husband-and-wife team of Eiko and Koma were in the process of working out the conceptual design of a new piece exploring the pull between life and death. Their working title was *Coffin Dance*.

"We were thinking about dancing bodies going in and out of a coffin," Eiko says on a recent morning in the Hell's Kitchen apartment where she and her husband live. "It was about the conflict of someone who doesn't want to go in—or wants to, but then wants to come back. So we'd been working on that, and of course, after September 11, it was a very hard time in the city. We changed the title to *Offering*."

Even though the resulting dance is similar to their initial concept—without the coffins—the pair, revered for their slowly evolving and haunting installation dances, have created a world in which movement and stillness, or life and death, exist side by side. "We don't mean to dance about death," Eiko says. "We mean to include death as a part of life. So we didn't want to make a piece about September 11, and we were very clear about that—it's *not*. But we didn't mind that people

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would inevitably feel the connection. Of course they would."

While *Offering*, which the choreographers consider to be a ritual of regeneration after loss, was performed last summer at six New York City parks, it has been reconceived from a trio to a duet for the yard at St. Mark's Church. (The performances, which are free, begin Wednesday 18.) The wooded setting that surrounds the 18th-century church is filled with tombstones. In a spooky twist, Eiko and Koma will perform on top of those graves. "For this occasion at St. Mark's

Church, we picked up the best site because it is a downtown cultural center," Koma says. "And we have to remember that the church was there before the financial district was built. So it's a good time to think



NATURE STORY Eiko & Koma present a new version of their site-specific dance.

about not just 2001, but what happened 100 years ago."

The choreographers, who have lived and worked in New York since 1976, are amused by the prospect of cars honking on busy Second Avenue during their performance, but for both, nature is nature. "Two days ago, Koma and I

did a little work-in-progress in the countryside, where we danced by a tree," Eiko says. "Dancing under a tree in the beautiful countryside is a pleasure. I was thinking, Two weeks from now, I will be in New York with all the horns and noise! But that still is a site. That place has a voice. Not the church—rather, the graves, the spirits. It's almost like we're giving not a legend, but a story to the place."

Eiko and Koma have performed versions of *Offering* in New England and Eastern Europe (Estonia, Lithuania and

Poland), and that experience has taught the Japanese collaborators much about how to deal with their own cultural baggage.

"I used to have a hard time responding when people brought up Hiroshima," Eiko says. "After September 11, I started to realize it's a natural feeling that you can't really wipe out something so catastrophic from your consciousness. This is similar to how the world responds when people find out you are from New York. It's not about trying to put you in a stereotype. It is much more naive. As an artist, I used to say, 'Let's talk about something else.' But now I feel like if that's what people see and if that's profound, why not? Because it is in us."

From the beginning, Eiko and Koma's intention was that *Offering* would be free to the public. "Another reason we changed the title was because it was a good chance for people to think about what they could offer to friends or family," Koma says.

"A free event totally entitles our usual audience to bring friends and neighbors," Eiko adds. "It is easy to share. Last summer in the parks, there were some homeless people in the audience and artistic people who have seen us at BAM many times. And they were all mingling, which is quite profound."

For that reason, the audience is integral to the work. "I think that's part of the ritual," Eiko says. "We as choreographers have less of a role in movement making. We make the format, yes we *do* design the piece—this is a movement-based ritual! But it's not so much about people looking at choreography. It really is feeling it together."

Eiko & Koma perform *Offering* (reconceived) at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church Wednesday 18 through June 22.

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