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Tom Brazil

Koma, left, and Eiko, modern dance choreographers, performing "River," a piece accompanied by nature.

DANCE REVIEW

A Nuanced Production With Nature as Co-Star

By JENNIFER DUNNING

EASTON, Pa., Sept. 9 — Trees and river formed a haze of subtly variegated dark grays and greens as night fell here over the Delaware River. A few reflected lights danced on the water. Birds flew in formation across the slate-colored sky, and somewhere a dog barked. As the audience settled in on a small apron of beach and an overlook, two white-painted heads and upper torsos were motionless in the water near the shore, holding branches between which was stretched a muslin canvas.

There was a timelessness to those figures, so still in the hubbub of the audience arriving to see "River," an outdoor piece by the Japanese modern dance choreographers Eiko and Koma. And that sense of timelessness and silence persisted through a black-and-white film, projected on the muslin, of sharp-edged parts of bodies moving against a sharp black ground and reflected in the water's softer surface. There was a timelessness, too, to the floating heads, the blur of underwater bodies and the simple props that appeared, disappeared into the dark night water and reappeared, along with the drifting sound of flute and shamisen music.

Eiko, the woman in this husband-and-wife duo, looked at times like the Pre-Raphaelite rendering of a water-bound, long-haired Ophelia. Joined with their reflected images, Eiko and Koma at one point looked like netsuke figures perched on

twigs. Later, they might have been drowned sailors. A sculpture of branches and weed-scored reflecting panels was shaped like a fish. But the greatest beauty of this extraordinary piece was that it alluded to nothing but itself.

The carefully set scenic elements seemed part of nature. Muted light shone through the water. Across the river, the shoreline and trees glowed at times in a faint haze of light. And nature and seeming circumstance played roles that looked prescribed.

A swimmer lapped by during the first performance, on Friday night. Tonight, two fisherman sat silently in a canoe out on the river. A small motorized barge crossed several times, its passengers dimly visible as they peered out at this strange assembly and its wake setting the performers rocking gently.

Then, unforgettably, wind billowed, a few falling leaves spun into the light and rain lashed down in torrents, a few minutes before the two heads disappeared finally into the dark. Pocking the river, the rain made a river of the sky above. The audience scattered. And suddenly "River" became the quintessential outdoor art: something come upon unexpectedly, privately, an odd and unfathomable phenomenon of nature.

James Byrne created the film. The visual elements were designed by Judd Weisberg. "River" was presented by Lafayette College and Dancing in the Streets in conjunction with "Environment and the Arts," a two-day conference at the college.