



Richard Termine for The New York Times

Eiko in "When Nights Were Dark," at the Harvey Theater in Brooklyn.

NEXT WAVE FESTIVAL REVIEW

An Eerie Beauty Darkly Smolders

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

The set resembles a ghost ship aglow with embers and festooned with sauerkraut. The vocalists sing a lullaby radiating from the ocean's depths. The two dancers, rarely visible below the waist, sink repeatedly into a generic slag heap.

However literally described, all these elements combine thrillingly to form a genuine work of art that the choreographers and dancers Eiko and Koma, have titled "When Nights Were Dark."

To see them as disciples of Samuel Beckett would be misleading. Yet the characters in Beckett's plays who inhabit mounds and trash cans would have an affinity with Eiko and Koma as they are sucked into an earth that buries but also nourishes. Here, too, the image is not of a struggle but of a condition — the human one.

Long familiar to audiences of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Eiko and Koma have never abandoned their signature theme of transformation. "When

Nights Were Dark," which opened on Wednesday night for a run through Sunday afternoon at the academy's Harvey Theater (651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene), is also faithful to their cyclical structure.

Again, life seems to succeed death rather than precede it. But the beauty of this work, commissioned by the American Dance Festival and having its New York premiere, lies in the way the choreographers have extended a formula.

There is a spectacular collaboration with a gospel group, the Praise Choir Singers, for which Joseph Jennings has composed a quiet, sometimes cooing, wordless score of contrasting simplicity and complexity. The waves of lulling sound, sometimes in counterpoint between male and female voices, lap against the shiplike set and push it on a whirlpool course.

The scenery, designed by Eiko and Koma, moves more visibly than they do, and their confinement to a mobile set is also a novel idea. Granted, their minutely slow changes of gesture and shape do not fit everyone's definition

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In Brooklyn: Eiko, right, and Koma in "When Nights Were Dark."

Eerie, Timeless Beauty That Darkly Smolders

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of dance. Yet rarely has choreography demanded such controlled and nuanced movement.

Introduced as archetypal figures in this piece, Eiko stands with her back to the audience, long black hair upon her white jacket, and Koma is in a red robe, equally frozen in his tension. In the next image, they begin the timeless cycle of renewal. The mysterious bier upon which they lie suggests the trunk of a primeval tree associated with a title like "When Nights Were Dark."

As the shiplike structure (part forest, part cave, part mountain) revolves slowly and is pushed toward the audience, a human drama flows past in a natural continuum. The reclining figures revive, but as Eiko slips down out of sight, Koma's sense of loss is vividly expressed. Previously blending his red robe into the red embers, he now arches bare chested against a slope on the set, his head back, mouth open. As the set revolves, Eiko is revealed underground in a cross section of the

trunk's roots. She, too, is topless, and if she is totally nude, the audience does not know it. The dancers' bodies are no longer seen in full.

Slowly but steadily, the two strive instinctually to make contact, if only with their heads. These become dangling geometric forms as Koma slides down, breaking twigs as he descends and Eiko strives upward. Scott Poitras's lighting cleverly conceals as much as it reveals. With customary brilliance, Eiko and Koma transform abstract shape into biomorphic form. As the heads and triangular shapes of shoulders are redefined into human bodies locked in an embrace, the mating cycle leads into the death image of the first scene. The set, like life, comes full circle. In this instance, the metaphor onstage is of the truest kind, one that extends a familiar idea and makes it fresh.

The wonderful a cappella choir, organized by Tunesha Crispell, consisted of Ms. Crispell, Corey Durham, Conway G. Gittens, Clifton Hill and Michelle Hutcherson. Jeff Fontaine collaborated on the ideas for the lighting design.