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DANCE REVIEW; Travel Companions on Life's Inevitable Journey

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

It is not the what but the how that matters in the mesmerizing slow pieces of the experimental dancers and choreographers Eiko and Koma. Their latest piece, "Be With," is a collaboration with Anna Halprin, a rebel who became the mother to much of the dance avant-garde in the 1960's and at 81 is still a major innovator.

Eiko is 49 and Koma, her husband, is 53. This intergenerational venture was spurred by Stephanie and Charles Reinhart, artistic directors for dance at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, which commissioned "Be With."

The work had its New York premiere on Tuesday night at the Joyce Theater, and the program, to run through Sunday, was called simply "Anna Halprin, Eiko and Koma With Joan Jeanrenaud." It is an unusual assemblage of disparate elements, forming a tantalizing whole.

Ms. Jeanrenaud, a former and longtime member of the Kronos Quartet, is onstage playing her own music on the cello. The score is startling, varied in its range of sound and infused with echoes of what was once called Asia Minor. An Armenian song is embedded within.

In the end, it all looks like an Eiko and Koma piece, but not quite. There is the usual evolving image of a natural process: here, a journey toward death. Again, there is a theme of attempted rebirth after a disaster or a process of decline or decay.

Ms. Halprin, who is very spry in "From 5 to 110," her own choreography on the program, is the slow-moving traveler inching toward death. She is escorted, consoled, battled and grieved over tenderly by Eiko and Koma. Yet "Be With" is not without clichés. The final image has the three dancers in a literal renaissance, standing above a backcloth draped below. It is a distancing effect as is Ms. Jeanrenaud's enriching musicianship. She theatricalizes the activities, making them part of a performance rather than the usual Eiko and Koma dreamscape.

Nonetheless, death as a theme (the what) is less important than how it is treated. There is a great deal of Ms. Halprin in the piece. Long involved with American Indian rituals, she wears feathers in her hair. Her forceful personality is ever present. In this first collaboration with a third dancer, Eiko and Koma never dance directly with each other. Rather, it is Ms. Halprin's personality that draws them in.

In the central image, Koma presses his body against hers and their furious mutual resistance, partly erotic, is always desperate. It expresses the rage that not only the dying but also those who care for them can feel. There are tremendously moving moments throughout the piece. Patty-Ann Farrell designed the dramatic lighting.

For all their differences, the three dancers share an interest in ritual and myth, an unself-conscious regard for the nude body and an affinity for nature.

The pantheistic tenor of Eiko and Koma's work was seen more typically in "Snow" (1999), another piece on the program in which Eiko, in white, declined gradually in near imperceptible movements under falling snow. Koma, in black, faded in and out behind her or pressed his body against hers. If one didn't know them better, the duo would seem to be acting out a Japanese ghost story about a pining woman and

her dead lover. But that is not the way of Eiko and Koma.

Ms. Halprin is more direct, and "From 5 to 110" is both funny and serious. Based in California, she looks back on the causes in which she has been involved with shrewd self-parody. Dance is life, she suggests, as she recalls her prancing as a 5-year-old. "When I was 40, I danced for social justice and peace," she tells the audience and thrusts her arm up. The gestures are stylized, and the punch line is emotionally powerful. At 110, she says, "I will dance the way things really are." In short, she reverts to the childlike prance with which she began. She repeats it and then touches the floor (earth) with her palm.