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At 81, Dancing With New Partners

By JANICE ROSS

ANNA HALPRIN gingerly walked a few inches on her bare feet across the hardwood floor of the dance studio. Across the room Koma called out to her softly: "Walk as if each step was on a carpet of tiny, tiny flowers and you are not wanting to crush them. Feel the nice smell of the flowers in the upper body. And below, under your feet, destruction!"

Ms. Halprin, 81, tried again. This time she let her chest and head arch slightly backward and her arms float gently open, elbows bent, as she moved her feet in small steps, brushing them lightly across the top of the floor and then plowing them down in the imaginary flowers. "My balance isn't so good now, so walking slow is hard," Ms. Halprin told the Japanese-born Koma, 53, and his wife, Eiko, 49, who crouched near Ms. Halprin's feet.

The composer and cellist Joan Jeanrenaud sat in the middle of the studio, her eyes gazing down as she played double stops, pulling rich, resonant tones from her cello, occasionally hinting at a klezmeresque melody in little lyric runs. She, too, was focusing on the task at hand, adumbrating death and relationships, the topics of this emerging crosscultural and crossgenerational dance.

The setting was Ms. Halprin's dance studio in the rugged terrain around the wood-and-glass home she and her husband, the architect Lawrence Halprin, share in Kentfield, a suburban town in nearby Marin County. The rehearsals of the new collaboration "Be With" began one year ago, before its premiere at the Kennedy Center in Washington in October and in San Francisco at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts two weeks ago. On Tuesday, "Be With" will have its New York opening at the Joyce Theater, and performances continue through next Sunday.

For the auburn-haired Ms. Halprin, the quip about balance was a rare admission of any age-imposed limitation on her remarkably lithe and limber body. The previous day, for her first session with the dancer-choreographer team Koma and Eiko, Koma had asked Ms. Halprin to "be an egg," which she dutifully did as a solitary exercise for one hour. Later, on a gray and chilly afternoon, the three had spent several hours, nude except for wraparound skirts, improvising movement studies on the outdoor dance deck on the hillside below the Halprin home. Very comfortable with nudity, they were in quest of sculptural still-life images to evoke the implicit subjects of their collaboration -- the navigation of relationships and the end of life.

Ms. Halprin's choreographic pursuits often begin by conversing with the environment, using the setting as an impetus for emotional reflection that then resonates through the body as a physical gesture. During her lifetime in the vanguard of dance-theater, Ms. Halprin has inverted Martha Graham's dictum that movement never lies, steadily insisting that lies never make movement. Ms. Halprin has made a career, and a reputation, of dances about frank encounters with one's body and emotions. In several of her works over the last five years she has ruminated on aging and dying as both natural but, in the case of AIDS and other terminal illnesses, tragic processes of the body in decline.

"It's interesting how the creative mind works," she said. "There are images floating around consciousness, and you pluck one out from your field." It is the environment, naturally, that has been her steadiest collaborative field over the 54 years she has lived and worked in the artistic isolation of the West Coast. Ms. Halprin first came to notice during the mid 1960's, as a different kind of artist than she is now, doing risky, confrontational, messy works about racial, sexual and social relations. Her dances,

like "Parades and Changes," from 1965, were part autobiography of the moment, part private emotional confession and part public physical exploration. Detractors called her an artist who confused the boundary between dance and therapy; colleagues and students called her a visionary, the mother of postmodern dance. Indeed, it is one of the anomalies of Ms. Halprin's stature that she has no protégés yet countless disciples.

It was Eiko and Koma who first approached Ms. Halprin about creating a collaborative work, supported by a grant and enthusiasm from Charles and Stephanie Reinhart, the artistic directors for dance at the Kennedy Center. "Stephanie and I have been the midwives for this project," Mr. Reinhart said from his home in New York. "We went to Eiko and Koma, and said we'd like to commission you to do something with another artist. When they came up with Anna Halprin, we jumped for joy."

The match was both logical and iconoclastic. All three artists work intuitively using nature as a springboard, coaxing out their choreographic designs rather than imposing them, letting the subject of their dance emerge quietly. Eiko and Koma have always worked exclusively with each other, with an acute eye toward form and images, whereas Ms. Halprin focuses on what she calls her holistic body, a conception of the body as part of a total environment in space. The result, "Be With," is a document of a process, an emotional movement-puzzle that keeps spilling its pieces on the floor and reassembling them in a new order. In rehearsals for "Be With," death and tangled human bonds inhabit the studio improvisations through a sense of the body as an unwieldy freight whose steering grows increasingly perilous.

But the mood isn't always somber. In rehearsal, Eiko affectionately teased Ms. Halprin, telling her not to think about doing a phrase of movement to the right and then the left. "We do it on the right side, then we do it on the right side and then we do it more, more on the right side," Eiko said.

"We negotiate," Ms. Halprin said dryly.

Koma said of the dance, "This is Anna's story."

Eiko continued: "We want it as raw as possible. We want to go to a place where we don't crave variety. It's not so interesting for us to make a theater piece for the audience. This is for us and Anna. It is something else."

The rehearsals were as much about finding motivation as about inventing movement out of the poetry of decay. As the work evolved over the months, Ms. Halprin immersed herself in Eiko and Koma's style of slow, sustained action and they in turn were tugged into her steady questioning of motivations and the psychological and emotional texture of the dance. "My challenge is to find a way of moving in the very stylized way they have developed," Ms. Halprin said. "In my work I don't start with emotion. I start with something that might elicit emotion."

Eiko and Koma in turn spoke reverently of her. "We have gotten so much from her," Eiko said. "This is just a way of giving back." When pressed about the specifics of Ms. Halprin's influence, Koma said simply: "We live in New York and we are crazy. Here we know there is another person on the West Coast even more crazy."

Eiko continued: "Our process of working is important because it doesn't start with content. Koma is the only one of us who drives. If he couldn't drive we wouldn't stay married." She smiled. "He is the chauffeur and he drives me in and her out," she said, gesturing to Ms. Halprin and speaking now of their initial entrances in "Be With." "So we spend a lot of time finding spaces for him to be involved."

"We have a different way of working than Anna," she added, explaining that although the extent of their formal training with Ms. Halprin was a single workshop in 1977, her significance in American postmodern dance has been formative for them.

They laughed about how, at one point in the dance, Eiko bites Ms. Halprin's leg to cue her to begin a slow descent when she forgets her cue. "It's difficult to have a common language," Eiko said. "I want her to enjoy a free ride. She doesn't have to worry about what I'm doing. I want her to feel where it is juicy, delicious. You can enjoy the landscape more when someone else is driving."

The costumes began as lacy cheesecloth robes that Koma handpainted a fiery red and orange and then cut and tied until they resembled shredding skin. Now they impart an eerie texture of decomposition to the dancers' crumpling walks along the mottled deep-rust rear wall of the studio.

Recalling a comment a visiting architect made when he viewed the dance the previous evening and noticed the reflections of the dancers in the studio windows, Koma suddenly had an idea. He raced out to a local fabric store and returned an hour later with several yards of black cloth. Immediately, he set to work, building a boxlike rectangular structure out of shoji screens and a desk lamp. In a few minutes he had made a pair of fabric-draped, dramatically lit, vertical coffins for the two women.

The three of them stand in an immense version of these structures to form the final picture of the completed "Be With," a mordant yet transcendent image of the dancing body stilled.

Janice Ross is working on the biography "Performance as Experience: Dance, American Culture and Anna Halprin."