

Eiko and Koma: Life in the Slow Lane

By JACK ANDERSON

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DANCE

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SLOW, VERY SLOW — THAT'S THE first quality almost everyone notices about the collaboratively choreographed works of Eiko and Koma. Audiences have found their unruffled pacing both strange and eloquent ever since the Japanese-born dancers made their New York debut 14 years ago.

Eiko and Koma are now highly regarded creative figures in the American dance scene. They have given annual New York seasons, some of them under such auspices as the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival and the Japan Society. Over the years, other productions have been commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and the American Dance Festival in Durham, N. C.

The Japanese-born couple continue their unhurried studies of the basics of existence.

Slowness is not the only distinctive feature of their creations. As Eiko and Koma proceed to scramble, hunch, drag themselves along and even topple over, other things become apparent. Their productions are visually powerful, and they concern aspects of nature. Some have been inspired by such basics as trees, stones and grain. Others evoke such processes as growth and decay, creation and



Eiko and Koma rehearsing for their six-day run at the Joyce that begins Tuesday.

The New York Times/Jim Wilson

destruction. At times it may seem to take ages to raise an arm or a head; positions are held and frozen and then give way to other sculptural positions that are also frozen.

The program Eiko and Koma will present Tuesday through next Sunday night at the Joyce Theater features three New York premieres: "Memory," "Rust" and "Passage." Movements will undoubtedly again be slow. And the stage will look mysterious. The scenery for "Memory" and "Rust" consists of a chain-link fence. "Passage" is dominated by a blood-red backdrop, and the action will occur in a pool of water. As in some, but not all, of their previous presentations, the dancers will be nude for the entire evening.

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Their choice of accompaniment is also typical of them. To help focus attention on their movements, Eiko and Koma are sparing in their use of sound. "Memory" will be danced to a barely audible recorded score by a West German composer known as Deuter. "Rust" will be performed in silence. And the only accompaniment to the movements in "Passage" will be the drip of water into the on-stage pool.

The dancers' slowness can suggest eons of time. During a recent interview in their midtown Manhattan apartment, Koma recalled that he and Eiko once did a work about mountains in love. "Mountains can't move fast," he observed. And Eiko pointed out that

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it may take a very long time indeed for stars and planets to draw near one another as they travel through space. Both dancers insisted that slowness can be beautiful for its own sake. According to Koma, "When we move slowly, we are enjoying each moment as it occurs, and we hope the audience will enjoy it, too."

The dancers will stand in front of the fence in "Rust." And that work's title sums up its theme: Lighting effects give the impression that their bodies are indeed rusting. In "Memory," Eiko will be in front of the fence, but Koma will be behind it, sometimes appearing to be a person actually present, at other times only a remembered image. "A body looks very tender, very vulnerable, when seen against chain-link," Eiko re-

marked.

If "Passage" glares with redness, so does much of life, the dancers believe. "Our blood is red," said Eiko. "The earth's blood is red, as well — the magma of volcanos is red. So is the other soil of South America."

The use of water in "Passage," as in some of their earlier works, is not just a theatrical stunt. "Real water is more beautiful than any lighting effect can ever be," Eiko said. "Water is something everyone knows. So, when audiences see me covered with water, they will know how I feel."

Performing in the nude has been part of their theatrical style ever since their "Night Tide" in 1984. Eiko explained why: "Every time we are naked, it's because we couldn't find an appropriate costume for that

scene. It's uncomfortable to be nude on stage. So, we keep trying out costumes. But when none seems right, we dance nude. After all, nudity is also a form of theatrical costuming." Concerning the nudity in "Passage," she said, "It's hard to move in water with clothes on, and it feels colder because the wetness just gets into a costume and stays there."

Both of these theatrical nonconformists come from middle-class families. While studying law and political science in Tokyo during the late 1960's, they joined student groups protesting against America's involvement in Vietnam. At the same time, they developed an interest in contemporary dance. Neither has studied any traditional Japanese form. Instead, their early training was in the often grotesque contemporary Japanese style known as Butoh. In 1972

they met at a dance studio and soon decided to devote their lives to the art.

Both were eager to learn more about Western modern dance. But because of their opposition to the war in Vietnam, they were reluctant to visit the United States. Instead, they became curious about the Expressionist dance form that Mary Wigman, one of the most influential choreographers of this century, had developed in Germany during the 1920's.

Off to Europe they went — and by a route so roundabout that, Eiko said, "to this day my mother hasn't forgiven me for it." With an eye on their budget, they took a boat from Japan to Siberia, then the Trans-Siberian Railway to Moscow and, from there, a plane to Vienna. At first, they naively hoped they could earn a living just by dancing extemporaneously in cathedral squares. Quickly cured of that illusion, they bought an old automo-

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bile and drove across the continent, trying to obtain engagements in cultural centers. When luck was against them and funds were low, they would pull off the roadside and sleep in their car.

As they traveled, they searched for a dance teacher. Although Wigman had died in 1973, an acquaintance suggested that Eiko and Koma, who use only their first names, might find it stimulating to study with Manja Chmiel, a Wigman pupil who taught in Hanover, Germany. She proved an inspiration who strongly supported their collaborations.

Gradually, the couple's reputation grew. One of their performances in Amsterdam was seen by Lucas Hoving, the Dutch dancer and teacher who was for many years a principal of the José Limón Dance Company in New York. Mr. Hoving urged them to come to America. And, because the United States had by then withdrawn from Vietnam, they followed his advice, making their New York debut in 1976. The city is now their home.

Their unhurried choreography initially astonished audiences. But many dancegoers soon found it eloquent. Eiko says with a laugh that, today, a few of their most ardent fans accuse them not of slowness but of moving too quickly. For anyone unacquainted with their style, Koma has this advice: "Going to our dances may be like going to a new restaurant. The food may seem strange. But don't be hesitant. Just try it — taste the food. Taste the movement." □