

Eiko and Koma Slow Time Down

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Dance

DANCE VIEW

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Often, as one watches the dances of Eiko and Koma, one cannot be sure if one is beholding creatures at the dawn of time or at the end of history. And as the strange beings created by these Japanese-born dancers and choreographers creep and fumble their way across the stage, time may seem to have stopped.

Eiko and Koma have been performing their collaboratively devised dances in America for the last decade. Their most recent production, "New Moon Stories," presented as part of the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, consisted of revised versions of three older pieces ("Night Tide," "Beam" and "Elegy") plus the premiere of "Shadows," and it can be regarded as a summing up of a decade's endeavors. It also made one recall some of the other works these choreographers have offered here.

All of them are slow. Indeed, slowness is perhaps the first thing one notices about them. Yet, though slow, they are not long. "White Dance: Moth," the longest single one that I can remember, lasted an hour. Most are shorter. All four parts of "New Moon Stories" took only 70 minutes. However, the two dancers move as if they had all the time in the world. One can look and look at them and not much may appear to be happening. Yet things do happen, and they happen in their own time. Eiko and Koma slow time down. They can also, in a curious way, seem to compress time and fit the work of ages into only a few minutes. Watching their dances can be like seeing glaciers move or living forms evolve.

Despite their gestural deliberation, Eiko and Koma are not boring. Rarely do they make one impatient watching them. Instead, one feels impelled to keep watching because of their remarkable powers of concentration. They make every minute count. They make stillness count, too. Often in their dances they lie on the floor as inert as stones. Then, as in "Night Tide," they may stir and laboriously reposition themselves, and one may start thinking of the formation of rock clusters. If the time scheme in which Eiko and Koma

choose to move is seldom that of busy 20th-century men and women, it always appears appropriate to the beings they depict.

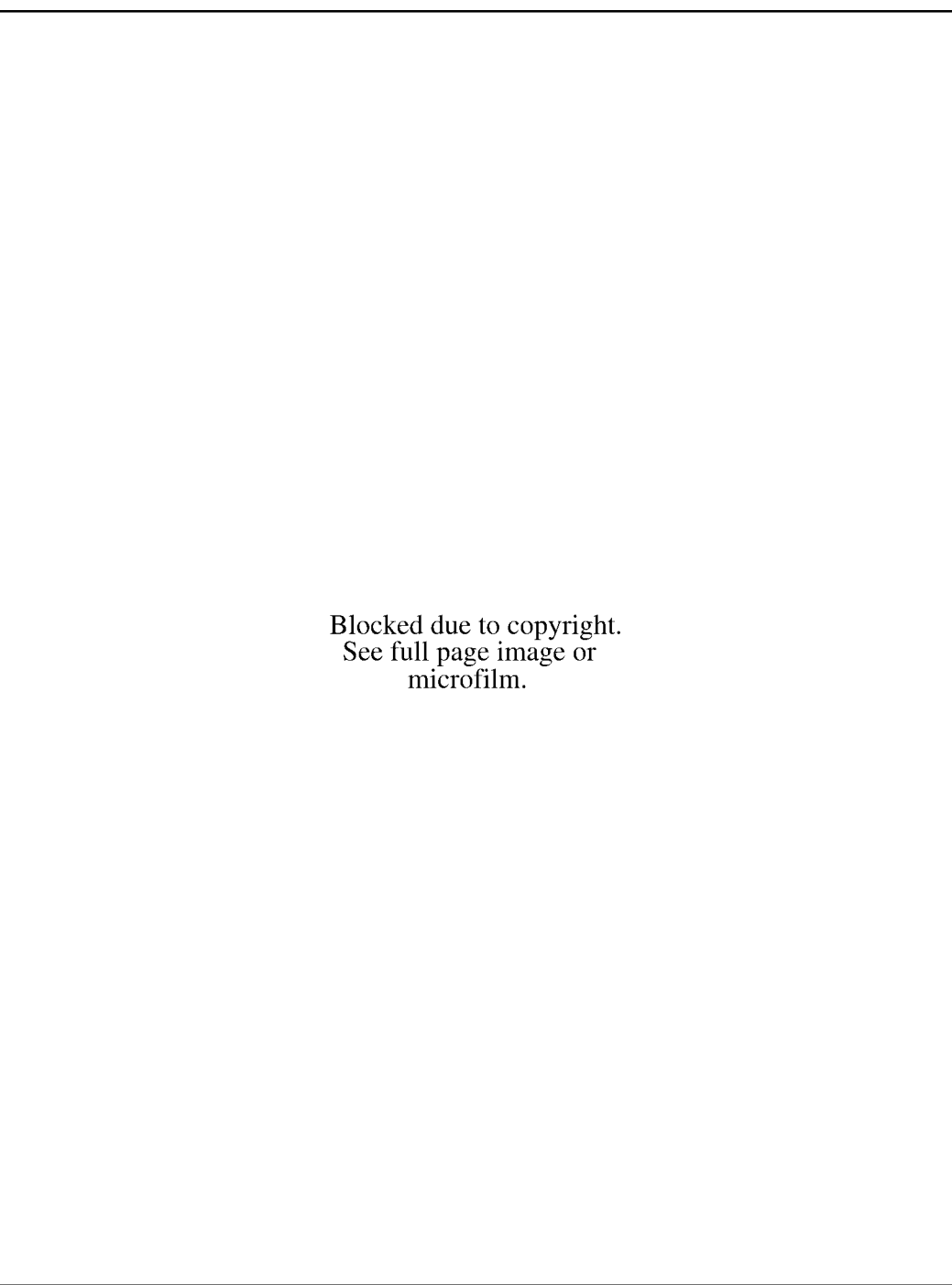
But just what are those beings? There are moments when Eiko and Koma suggest creatures emerging from primordial swamps. However, in other works, they could be the maimed — and, perhaps, no longer fully human — survivors of some catastrophe the future still holds in store for us. Whatever they may be portraying, in several dances they emphasize that they are different from ordinary people by keeping their heads turned away from the audience. We cannot study their faces to see if they betray signs of human emotion. Nor can we hope to look them in the eye with either sympathy or suspicion.

However alien they may appear, the things they do always seem to be part of some natural process. One cannot avoid talking about forces of nature when one discusses their dances. On occasion, the choreographic references to nature are fairly explicit. In "Fur Seal," Eiko and Koma wore shiny black costumes, made snorting and gasping sounds as they moved and seemed to be courting each other in some sort of animalistic mating ritual. One could easily imagine they were seals.

Yet this was a dance, not a lesson in natural history. What helps make the nature dances of Eiko and Koma fascinating is not their literal imitation of any bird, beast or

bug, but their ability to invent a convincingly non-human way of moving. During one scene of "Fur Seal," Eiko puffed up her cheeks, then spat out objects resembling wadded bits of paper. Although I have no idea what this was supposed to mean, I soon realized that I was not watching any human dining custom.

In other dances, the references to nature are oblique. "White Dance: Moth" was certainly not what one might have expected. None of its movements fluttered. All were weighted; all required effort. The dancers often made their bodies look so heavy that they could have been boulders in a Japanese stone garden, and the kinetic imagery



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throughout the dance kept recalling stones. Much of the time, the dancers did not move at all. Whenever they did stir, it seemed to take forever just to raise an arm. At one point, Koma toppled to the floor — a falling stone. At another point, he picked Eiko up, as if lifting a stone. Still later, he dropped a bag of potatoes on the stage; they, too, resembled stones.

And this was a dance with "moth" in its title! Yet, if boulders could wish, they might wish to be as light as moths. And if boulders could dance, this is how they might go about it.

The program note Eiko and Koma wrote

for "White Dance: Moth" consisted of a poem containing the line, "To live is to be fragile." All their dances attest to that. Many also emphasize that, like moths or seals, human beings are a part of nature and that they must struggle to survive. The two dancers took turns being helpless and strong in "Grain." They scattered seeds and huddled like cavemen before a fire, eating rice until the flame was extinguished and they were presumably deprived of heat and light and, possibly, life itself.

"Fission," which appeared to be set in a wilderness, depicted a scramble for survival. In "Beam" the dancers, with much effort,

Eiko and Koma in "Beam," seen in the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. "The two dancers move as if they had all the time in the world."

managed to climb a mound of earth. Yet "Beam" made it clear that in the struggles for existence there are no final victories. Standing on the crest of the hill, Koma lifted Eiko. Then she slipped from his grasp and disappeared down the slope, leaving him alone and bereft. However, despite life's hardships, there can still be fleeting moments of tenderness. Thus the struggles of both "Night Tide" and "Shadows" ended with an embrace.

Nevertheless, no one should assume that love can conquer all. Eiko and Koma occasionally show people overwhelmed by monstrous adversities. "Thirst" found them standing beside a wall against which a thousand generations had surely wailed. As Koma tottered toward Eiko, as if trying to bring her the only drop of water left on earth, one knew both were doomed to endure tribulations without rest.

Whereas "Thirst" was a terrifying vision of aridity, "Elegy" took place in actual pools of water — pools of tears, one suspected. The dancers rose from the water, only to sink again, and when Koma twitched for the final time one wondered whether this was life's last gasp or the first faint stirring of rebirth. And, if it was rebirth, would these reborn beasts prove rough or helpless?

Adept as they are when they choreograph for themselves, Eiko and Koma might still prompt dancegoers of a certain esthetic temperament to object that, until they demonstrate their ability to choreograph for other bodies, these two dancers may be unduly limited by their own personal idiosyncrasies. So, perhaps, it is significant that this fall they created their first work for other dancers, "Broken Pieces," which Codanceco presented at the Bessie Schönberg Theater. In mood, it closely resembled the dances Eiko and Koma have created for themselves. It was slow and weighty and it showed three women holding their hands like claws and keeping their gaze averted from the audience as they huddled together, only to part. This was clearly a dance by Eiko and Koma. And it was a good one.

Therefore, it indicated that Eiko and Koma create their effects through choreographic imagination and not simply through the strength of their stage presence. If, as dancer-choreographers, they have much to offer audiences, as choreographers they also have much they can share with other dancers. ■