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Dance Review | Eiko and Koma

The Slowness of Motion, and What It May Reveal

By ALASTAIR MACAULAY

DURHAM, N.C., June 28 — Few things in the performing arts are more marvelously strange than the way the Japanese-American choreographers and performers Eiko and Koma, having started a slow phrase of movement, take it, and with it a whole work, in dramatic directions you could never have seen coming.

Their “Quartet,” which had its world premiere this week at the American Dance Festival here, ends as it begins, and this proves to be a real shock.

At the start Eiko and Koma flank the two Cambodian teenagers with whom they are working, Charian and Peace. The teenagers lie “dead” in the center; the two seniors, heads raised, are on either side, like parents mourning their children. Gradually they rise and drag their children’s bodies to the rear of the stage as if to a more private domain.

These images of death and grief recall the last Eiko-Koma-Charian-Peace work, “Cambodian Stories Revisited” (in a New York performance I greatly admired in May). And there is an impasse when nobody visibly moves a muscle for perhaps two minutes. Amazingly, this works, not least because of the thick sound score of birds and insects, gradually supplemented by bells and other instruments. Then Eiko and Koma slowly rise in a new numb phase of loss.

But Charian and Peace do finally rise from their “death” and move into fabulous, one-legged, statuesque, balanced positions; these recall other moments of “Cambodian Stories Revisited.” Meanwhile, Eiko and Koma don’t react but carry on their grief-laden intensity regardless, and the situation starts to suggest that they’d rather their children were dead, that mourning matters to them more than children and that they take no pleasure in their offspring being alive. It’s possible to read the children now as ghosts moving among the living, but what’s striking is how soon they are variously oppressed or shunned or diminished by their parents.

There are multiple permutations, but all too suddenly we’re back where we began. The parents are again mourning their children, but now we can’t help feeling that was how they wanted it and, worse, that they drove them to extinction, that they never knew how to help them flourish. Your ends were our beginnings: if not, your beginnings would have been our ends.

Other interpretations of the 30-minute “Quartet,” other narrative readings, are possible, but, I think, kinder ones. Eiko and Koma, famous for moving slowly, are dance-actors of expressionist urgency. The slowness and the intensity are odd, disarming bedfellows.

“That was the fastest I’ve ever seen them move,” the man behind me said afterward. “Last time, they spent the whole piece just getting from one side of the stage to the other. And it was great.” I love that, but I hope he didn’t mean that the pleasure lay in their slowness alone.

It’s still not unusual for Eiko and Koma to be connected to the slow-motion modern Butoh style of Japan, where the slowness is the point.

But with Eiko and Koma the sculpture-in-motion urgency is such that one’s brain tends to accelerate rather than decelerate while watching them: they give you so much to see. They are masters of fragmentation, of poetic distortion, of making even the slowest movement become a psychodrama leading we know not where.

This was evident decades ago in their “Grain,” a 35-minute work new in 1983 that was performed as part of the program by Charian and Peace (aside from the first scene, still amazingly performed by Eiko and Koma at their most enthralling).

The young performers give it a quality quite unlike that of their elders: tragic they-know-not-what-they-do innocence, whereas Eiko and Koma always seemed to have been weathered by time and feeling.

It works, beautifully. To watch Charian arrive on Peace like a bird of carrion while he lies like a baby asleep; to see him, in a later scene, sit coolly with an elbow resting on the sole of his amazingly upturned foot as if it were a ledge; to see them both lie on the floor, slowly hoist their pelvises up in the air like molehills: these are just some of the startling thrills of the singular dramatic poetry of Eiko and Koma.

The American Dance Festival continues through July 21 at Duke University in Durham, N.C. Program and ticket information: (919) 684-4444 or americandancefestival.org.