

## DANCE



DEATH BECOMES HER Eiko illuminates the dying process.

# Do or die

Eiko & Koma offer a haunting portrait of the end of life in *Death Poem*

By **Gia Kourlas**

For the past two seasons, Eiko & Koma have created works inspired by some aspect of death and performed them in the graveyard of St. Marks Church. This year marks the entrancing Japanese couple's most personal take on the subject. In *Death Poem*, an intimate, existential piece that opens at Danspace Project Thursday 23, Eiko & Koma head inside the church to create a meditation on the process of dying. "I was telling friends that this is not a very dancey piece," Eiko explains. "It can't be. But people come to look at babies and say, 'How beautiful!' So why don't we sometimes look at somebody who is dying?"

The new piece is likely to be more unsettling than the pair's recent works, which focused on the aftermath of violent death (2002's *Offering*) and the ancient cycle of life (2004's *Tree Song*). Eiko—pale, raven-haired and portraying an ailing woman—lies behind a veneer of mosquito netting, which gradually rises to expose her body. As the audience gazes at her, she gazes right back. "This is mainly Eiko's solo," Koma announces at the pair's West Side apartment. "The piece is only 50 minutes, and for about 40, Eiko is dancing alone. Then I come in as

a mourner or a caretaker figure, and we dance together."

Named after the Japanese tradition in which one writes a poem while on the brink of death, the new work is a way of blessing the end of a life. "Even though this piece is hard, I feel that it's something we have to go through," Eiko explains. "This is the most realistic project we have ever made. But it is not Eiko & Koma's death poem." Koma agrees: "It is a performance. Otherwise, I would cry."

*Death Poem*, which is set to a score of natural sounds incorporating frogs, crickets and cicadas, features visual elements from past works, from falling snow to a blue painting of a woman floating in water from the pair's 1993 *Wind*. In the final section, in which Koma joins Eiko, they seem to dance within the painting, as if they're floating in water. "Because it is my funeral in a way, we included all of the things that we have done," Eiko explains. "I'm not saying that I am really dying! We cannot express death

because we don't know what it's really like—we have only seen other people die. But for the living, death doesn't feel complete. Once you are invested in a relationship, you feel what's missing. That's what I've been feeling lately"

The piece was sparked by the recent deaths of a few of the couple's friends, including a Japanese artist whom Eiko took care of during the last weeks of her life. "She was diagnosed with terminal cancer in April," Eiko recalls. "During the summer, I filed all of her paintings, so I saw her almost every day in that process of dying. But what I realized is that the body deteriorates day by day. Living is dying. You still have lots of time to kill."

Eiko & Koma's work is gorgeous and grueling; at a snail's pace, their deliberate movement forages the depths of sorrow until you can't help but examine your own. "When I am lying down in the piece, I'm still living, I'm still seeing and feeling," Eiko explains. "I will really be looking. And I'm also passing time." She leaps to the floor to demonstrate, brushing her slim fingers toward one another while staring into the distance. "I'm not imitating my friend's movements," she adds. "It's more of a feeling that I'm rehearsing. But by rehearsing, my recognition is there, so in a sense it may be very real. I'm not acting somebody else's death." She shivers. "I don't know. I am a little bit scared. I still don't know how to do this yet, but I don't want this to be just a sad piece."

The mood lifts with Koma's outburst: "This is strange! It *has* to be a sorrowful dance. I appear later because in a sense I cannot do this kind of dancing."

"Why not?" Eiko shrieks. "You're going to die too! Stop it!"

He flexes his muscles: "I'm doing the weight training, I will try to be 100!" After a pause, he continues, "She is so good at this kind of movement because already she faced serious death twice. She was in a coma two times in her life. You know that when a person is dying, they can hear, right? In Japan, we say, 'Don't cry or don't say bad things.' While people are watching Eiko dance, I want them to say, 'You are a beautiful dancer, a beautiful friend.' I want the audience to tell her."

**Eiko & Koma perform *Death Poem* at Danspace Project Thursday 23 through Sunday 26.**

Eiko  
& Koma