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For Primal Duo, the Memories of Trees Hold No Terror

By JENNIFER DUNNING

CHAPEL HILL, N.C., July 11 — Eiko and Koma seem to live their dances, moment by moment in their slow unfolding. “Tree Song,” commissioned by the American Dance Festival in Durham, N.C., and performed at outdoor sites in the area, is a perfect example.

This hourlong piece subtly suggests an entire life cycle, though not chronologically, but it also takes on shifting nuances depending on the site. At Duke University in Durham, where the festival is held each summer, the huge overhanging branches of the tree under which the two performed gave “Tree Song” the feel of a ritual enacted in the womb. Eiko and Koma’s following performance, on Tuesday night under a tall, slender, graceful tree in McCorkle Park at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, had slight overtones of sexy playfulness.

These two minimalists trained with one of the founders of Butoh, the dark inchoate theater dance form that developed in Japan after World War II, and with a disciple of Mary Wigman, the German expressionist choreographer. Primal rites hold no terror for Eiko and Koma. A tree remembers, Koma said cheerfully in a pre-performance talk about the new work. Gesturing toward the dark, rich-looking dirt spread about the base of the McCorkle tree, he spoke about how the pool of dirt in his hand contained the remains of trees and



Eiko, left, and Koma performing “Tree Song” at McCorkle Park at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill on Tuesday.

their memories.

How to make a dance that also contains those memories and makes them live again? Eiko and Koma were dressed in loose bulky black fur shifts with their faces

painted dull white, their bodies smeared and dusted with dirt. Their moves about the base of the tree were simple enough, a matter of slow rises and falls and slow rolling for the most part.

At times they lay on the ground or approached each other in a nuzzling halting lumber. Mouths touching, they seemed to nibble on the petals of the chrysanthemums they wore, in the most sensuous of kisses. In one of the dance’s most quietly shocking passages, Koma pushed up against Eiko, a blanket of leaves and branches mashed between them. He seemed to press her into the tree in attempted obliteration, the blank white oval of her face hanging above him like a silent cry of horror.

Boughs circled the small performing space, with jets of flame rearing from them. Shafts of glowing and fading light the color of setting sun gave the scene a look of a hidden place penetrated completely by light. The sound of crickets and birds joined with plaintive Japanese songs in the night air, accented with the faint sounds of children and passing cars. In one of those lovely coincidences of outdoor site-specific art, the moment the lights went dark, the pricking light of fireflies became evident in the lawn beyond. Life continues.

The ingredients were few, then, and not complex. The great power of “Tree Song” lay in its inexorable flow and in the shapes these two highly focused, primordial creatures made in passing. At one point the curve of Eiko’s bending, black-coated body up against the tree trunk looked like a dark hole through which one might enter — or be drawn — into the heart of the tree.

Tree Song

Eiko
+ Koma