

Two Dancers From Japan In 'Fur Seal'

BY ANNA KISSELGOFF

Eiko and Koma are two Japanese dancers who have enjoyed a growing reputation in the dance underground for the last year. On Thursday night at Japan House, a full house saw them simulate two seals in their best-known theater piece, "Fur Seal."

What Eiko, who is the female of the species, and Koma are really presenting is a fable about human existence. The entire image of the hourlong work is an enactment of a mating rite. But it is an image so skillfully and even beautifully developed that it is meant to have greater ramifications than itself.

In these two wallowing forms, Eiko and Koma silently register a whole gamut of human hopes and despair. The Japanese in them allows them to come up with a moral that radiates more stoicism than pessimism, but the human landscape is nonetheless bleak.

At root, their method is as old as Aesop. But their message has the same resonance of post-Sartre and post-Beckett drama. There is barely a moment of tenderness in this courtship of two seals who act like humans and two humans who act like seals. Their actual mating becomes a brutal little social dance. Yet for the better part of an hour, the entire action is directed toward seeing how these figures will make contact. The tension builds slowly but steadily. All is anticipation.

And yet when they come together, it is clear that instinct is not a substitute for the spirit. The impact of their instinctual drive has not changed their lives markedly. They are dazed and spent at the end. In the beginning they were hunched and slumped. There is clearly a cycle suggested here—a mating cycle that will obviously recur and that despite its temporary "high" will not make life better than it is.

Both avant-garde and rooted in their own heritage, Eiko and Koma are perhaps too good, self-consciously so. They stand in danger of appearing like trained seals themselves, performing the obligatory Japanese number for Westerners. The small pine of the Noh play has been replaced by a fat pine trunk that hangs from the ceiling. The sense of slow time of Japanese classical theater is also present.

And yet there can be nothing but admiration for the brilliance with which Eiko and Koma develop their drama. Imperceptibly but sharply, a clear emotional progression takes place, and it occurs along a series of shifting levels.

The meshing of human and animal images comes from the dancers' gestures or movements. Each is particularly adept at simulating a seal lying on its stomach, with chin resting on the ground. And suddenly these animals move like humans. The same identification is made by mixing a sound tape of salon music, seal barks and a Beatles song, "I Am a Walrus."

In their black silk costumes, changed later to fur, and in white-face, Eiko and Koma have an impressive control over muscles and gesture. "Fur Seal" is indeed a fable for our time. Even the curtain call was choreographed, with the performers sinking into a slump.

Jorge Bolet Fills In

Because of illness, Claudio Arrau has had to cancel his appearance at the 92d Street Y.M.-Y.W.H.A. tonight. Jorge Bolet will give the piano recital instead, at 8, playing Schumann's "Carnaval," excerpts from Liszt's "Années de Pèlerinage" and Chopin's Barcarole and Fantasy.

Milnes Saves 'Otello'

The performance of Verdi's "Otello" at the Metropolitan Opera last night was saved by Sherrill Milnes, the baritone, who stepped into the role of Iago after the first act. Cornell MacNeil sang the first act, but was vocally unable to go on. Mr. Milnes, who was at home, agreed to the substitution even though he sang Thursday and is scheduled to sing tonight. The second-act curtain was delayed an hour.