

# THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

Reservations: 255-5793

*Dance Steps*



EIKO AND KOMA IN "BY THE RIVER."

MANHATTAN ARTS

NOVEMBER 1987

## Asian Steps

### Eiko and Koma

by Paul Shackman

It's easy to be tedious, but it takes art to be excruciating. Eiko and Koma, a Butoh duo now resident in New York, move with such painful deliberation that in watching them, time itself takes shape, thickly. Their performances are not endurance contests, but the action is often so minimal that in the audience the sounds of swallowing, sniffing, scratching, shuffling feet, the shifting of weight and rustling of programs are transmitted with uncomfortable clarity. And if the pacing makes viewers acutely aware of their bodies, the dancers' unorthodox movements challenge the body's workings and even its shape. As in "By the River" at the Kitchen (by the river, incidentally) in mid-October.

Set (in collaboration with Clayton Campbell): shades of muddy green on the floor, in the cracked patterns of drought-stricken earth, cut by a dust-yellow swath of river—more like a desiccated riverbed. The wall backdrop is similar, but thick black brushstrokes obscure a complex scene; man-like figures can be discerned, or imagined, underneath.

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Sound: Only the sparse, reverberation of a (synthesized) plinking; maybe the faintly remembered echo of water dripping into a dying well, or a pebble bouncing into emptiness.

Sight: "By the River" begins with a film (by David Geary) of elongated, flickering candles projected onto the backdrop. Against the crowded black lines the candles look like riverbank reeds swaying in the wind. Blackout, then Koma appears, draped in a voluminous dust-colored robe. From a crouch, he slowly rolls onto his back and slowly claws his way to an unsteady upright position. Blackout, then Eiko, nude, daubed with mud, appears standing at the back. She makes her way to the river, crouches and presses her head to its surface. More brief scenes with both dancers together: Koma violently beats the dust with a black cloth while Eiko spiders contortedly across the stage; Koma limps forward supporting Eiko; Eiko lies motionless in the river, Koma covers her with the cloth and she begins to roll off-stage as he follows. Another journey ends. And begins.

Eiko and Koma wordlessly examine the basic elements of existence: birth, life and death—all the Big Themes—in a minimalist mode. It's not a lulling, repetitious minimalism, though; every movement courts exhaustion, groping, tentative and blind. Still, they go on, as in a Butoh Beckett (though surely the obvious, unbidden puns—Ache and Coma, Echo and Comma—are unintended).

## MONGOLIAN MUSIC AND DANCE

The opening of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and the People's Republic of Mongolia (once called "Outer Mongolia"), though good news for *koumiss* (fermented milk) fanciers, made few headlines. One visible result of this newly-established tie, though, was the appearance of a troupe—the first—of musicians and dancers at the Asia Society in early October. Only two dancers, actually; the lilting music of the steppes, including some eerie harmonic crooning, predominated. But the dancers displayed, beautifully and without folksy affectation, a range of traditional styles culled from the diverse tribes that people the region.

Dashjamts Nyamtsoo performed a graceful dance of welcome, her body in a half-crouch—the upper body rigid while her legs snaked fluidly from behind, gliding into position—arms snapping back and forth shaking tiny bells sewn onto her costume. In the same pattern of movement, straight lines and straight gestures, she saluted three directions and, finally, the sole musician bowing a "horse-head fiddle" centerstage. In other dances milk is symbolically splashed (not sipped) on the ground as an offering. Tsegmid Altangerel danced with boyish enthusiasm (he's 22) and a maniacal grin, dipping, bowing and flinging his arms in wide arcs. When he jerked his hands and forearms to and fro, they seemed attached together by rods. Splashing seems to have a prominent place in Mongolian folk dancing, but so does careful balancing. Nyamtsoo, bowls on her head and both forearms, danced slinkily, jiggling her shoulders, in an exhibition of balancing skill. When, setting all three bowls on her head, she shook her whole body, the bowls rattled and tinkled softly like bells.

For most of the dances the accompaniment was bowed string instrument, playing meandering melodies that, even at a fast tempo, sounded vaguely mournful. An exception was a lively drum dance, with bold leaps, more sweeping movements and strong percussion—not only the frame drum and triangular tambourine beaten by the dancers, but the added drumming, clapping and bell shaking of musicians. Unlike the other, more restrained dances, this one was wilder, and more akin to the shamanistic folk rituals of the North (not just Asia) and even Native American celebrations.