

# At the School of Hard Knocks, it's personal

BY DORIS DIETHER

This weekend Yoshiko Chuma and the School of Hard Knocks continue their run at The Kitchen with a piece entitled "Footprints of War." Although from Japan, Chuma was born after World War II, and has no memories of that war or its aftermath, and the Korean War did not have a major effect on her life either, although she was aware of the numerous American bases in Japan at that time. In the '60s, Chuma was still in school. She didn't get involved with the movement against the Vietnam War. "The American bases in Japan were the closest we got to Vietnam," she said.

Chuma's father was a doctor and one sister is a design artist. When Chuma was in elementary school she was in a special educational class for four years. "That must have gotten in my blood," she said. "When I was in the fifth grade I did a script. I was directing some of the pieces." She went to the university and graduated with a B.A. in education.

In the '70s she started working with some small underground dance companies although she never went to any institution or school to learn to dance. Many of her friends in Japan were jazz musicians. "In the beginning of the '70s I was hearing about Soho, New York, and all the artists," Chuma said. "The new music issues, the movements connected with anti-war and feminist issues. In Japan we were getting a lot of impact from your culture. In 1976 I came here and started seeing many things. Every day was very exciting and also lots of parties around that time."

The name of her company, The School of Hard Knocks, was created by her husband, film-maker Jacob Burckhardt, and composer Alvin Curran. They were doing

a piece in Venice in 1980 with that title, and the name was adopted for the company.

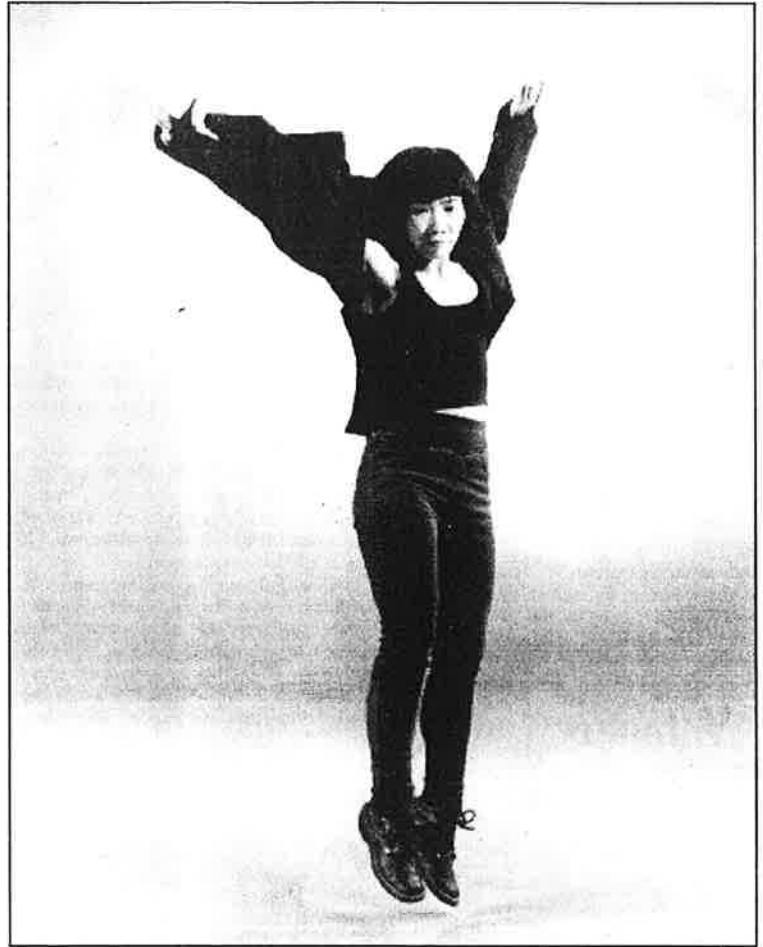
Chuma's works have ranged from solos and duets to huge works for 100 people with numerous props. However, she feels her style has changed since 1990. "In 1990 my son was born," Chuma said, "three months early. We had to take him out, so I had to be with him five months in the hospital. Then I lost my partner, Harry Sheppard, who died in 1992 by AIDS. From these experiences I started feeling I wanted to work with artists the same age as me. In dance, sometimes the choreographer becomes older but the dancer is always 20s or 30s. For me I needed to have the experience and conversation with somebody who remembered the same things. Also to talk about what do you think about this dance. And then I wanted to share more experience."

In 1992 Chuma began collaborating with older musicians, talented, high technique masters. At first there were five in the group, then the orchestra became larger. She had 17 string musicians from all over the world. She created a work called "Unfinished Symphony" which premiered at Danspace, St. Mark's, last year.

Chuma and her family live in a storefront in the East Village. "It's a very small community some times," Chuma said. When he was little, her son often toured with her. "Now that he's in school, I can't take him, so someone takes care of him when I'm out of town. When he was under five, he came with me to lots of places. He has been to maybe ten different countries."

In the last three years Chuma has been trying to clarify in her own mind what it is she wants to express or create. "So this piece at the Kitchen, called 'Footprints of War,' is a compilation of my experiences from my childhood to now and maybe my 20 years living here," she explained.

"This is a work for six women. One person who is experienced in staging is



*Villager photo courtesy Yoshiko Chuma*

Yoshiko Chuma has both feet off the ground as she searches for her ultimate message

Sharon Hayes who does performance art. Vicky Shick is an extraordinary dancer. Rocky Bornstein is sometimes a director, but she has danced with me for almost 10 years now. DD Dorvillier is a choreographer, Downtown scene. Then I invited two dancers from Japan, Hisako Horikawa and Kasumi Takahashi who is a very young contemporary dancer. Then we have live music, four musicians, one of whom is Robert Black who also worked with me for ten years. Everyone is on stage, 10 people."

Most of her dancers are people she has known. "I didn't need to audition. I can ask some artist who are the best people who are interested in this kind of work. Also, it's a very collective company, it's impossible just to replace. For instance, Bob Een, who also collaborates with Meredith Monk, in one of my pieces has to sing, dance, compose, and direct the music sometimes, and I can't replace anyone else. So my work is always connected with the person with

whom I work. It's a very person to person relationship. If I did replace him, I would have to shift again to keep the concept the same. The concept is always the same, but it's different the way I approach it.

"I get my dancers one by one. I can spend time with artists who have a good measure of intelligence so there is a working relationship with interest for me. I know what kind of a piece I want. I give a concept and they respond. I'm the director and also the choreographer, and for a long time I was also lighting designer and costume designer. In all aspects of the theater I feel I'm more a composer of the whole element and I have a visual image of the piece. It's not a dance piece or a theater piece or a dance and theater piece. I never categorize my work, but when I'm creating, I'm very clear."

"Footprints of War" at The Kitchen, 512 West 19th St., Apr. 28-May 1, 8 p.m., \$18, 255-5793, ext. 14.

