

the village

VOICE



BRINGING WAR HOME CHUMA ON THE BEACH

Shick, Takahashi, and Horikawa in Yoshiko Chuma's *Footprints of War*

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

Yoshiko Chuma's working life is an international conspiracy. Many of her grants and commissions involve cultural exchange; she depends on the overseas market for teaching and performing. In 1996, her performances in Japan outnumbered those in America. In 1997-1998, her *Unfinished Symphony*, related Crash Orchestra projects, and The Living Room/Waiting Room Project racked up a total of 77 performances in the U.S. and 22 abroad. (The latter boundary-breaker, supported by grants, involves miniperformances in shops, cafés, and people's homes.) Recent commissions include a piece for Bryant Park and two in Macedonia. Chuma has brought Japanese dancers here and to east central Europe. Macedonian dancer Iskra Sukarova was supposed to perform in Chuma's new *Footprints of War* (at the Kitchen through May 1), but a real war interfered with the virtual one. Chuma's current production associate, Boris Bakal, is from Zagreb, and the company's debating what to perform at the upcoming international theater festival called (perhaps more appropriately than its founders realized) MESSarajevo.

In *Unfinished Symphony's* witty war zone, dancers and musicians rush about and instruments outfox their players. Ironically, in the austere *Footprints of War* there's no visible struggle. The atmosphere is one of hushed waiting—for the bombs to fall, the ship to sink. Six women (Rocky Bornstein, DD Dorvillier, Sharon Hayes, Hisako Horikawa, Vicky Shick, and Kasumi Takahashi) stand up, sit down, scan the sky, reposition their striped beach chairs as if their lives were on hold. As in a Noh play, the past's violent events are reenacted in memory, and the women's recollections, hinted at in solos, suggest the everyday dilemmas of war: "How much rice is left?" "Why hasn't he come home from school yet?" Horikawa jumps rope obsessively. Hayes and Takahashi kick a soccer ball around. Performing everyday rituals keeps disaster at bay.

The air of reflection, stoicism, and controlled panic may have been shaped by the World War II survivors Chuma interviewed during a 1995 tour of her native country on a Japan Foundation fellowship. The audience, however, grasps images of stories rather than the stories themselves. An exchange of confi-

dences is distilled into Shick leaning forward in her chair to gaze searchingly at Horikawa. The most overt expression of despair has Shick falling stiffly, twice, against Bornstein's braced shoulder. When Dorvillier lumbers up to an empty chair, tips it over, and then repeats the action with an occupied chair, it's as if she's trying to get the memory right.

Tom Burckhardt's perfect set keeps shifting our perspective. Sometimes a strip of black-and-white sand borders the black-and-white cardboard waves in the background. Take away the beach, add a rail, and the space becomes a ship's deck. Performers carry in miniatures of their landscape, expressionlessly arranging tiny striped chairs, tables with umbrellas, rocks. A little steamship, its windows lit, is pulled across. We see the "real" environments but also see how toylike they must have appeared to the pilot of the *Enola Gay*, whose voice we hear on tape recounting what he saw just before and after his plane dropped the atomic bomb on the busy port city of Hiroshima—reducing it to what he compares to a giant spill of tar.

Halfway through the piece, musicians (bass player Robert Black and guitarist Mark Stewart of Bang on a Can All-Stars among them) enter, joining Alvin Curran's music to his quietly ominous taped sounds, intermittent bursts of chaos, and silence. A violin and a cello add poignantly sweet melodies to the mix. Lighting designer Pat Dignan occasionally flashes a blinding white glare; once he turns bright lights on us onlookers. Hayes wears a headset throughout, sometimes functioning as a stage manager doing a dimmer check, her unhurried matter-of-factness chillingly analogous to that of a bombing countdown.

The women are wonderful in their separate ways: Shick pensive and gentle, Dorvillier focused intently on tasks, Bornstein jittery and athletic, Takahashi given to bursts of unexpected energy, Horikawa contained and almost numb. The nearly constant rearranging of chairs begins to pall, and the integration of the musicians into the action isn't quite worked out yet, but Chuma has made a mysteriously disturbing piece, a rendering of the unspeakable as refined as a postmodern tea ceremony. How will it play in Croatia? ▮