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Muteki-sha, a Japanese duo in Butoh performance

Japanese dances: intriguing ambiguity

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Of all contemporary theater forms, Japanese Butoh is the least like ordinary life. What you see is recognizable human bodies hovering at the extreme limits of physical control and consciousness, distorting and transforming their natural selves into superhuman images. Few theatrical devices intervene between the performers and the audience. If they wore masks, they'd be easier to take, but also less extraordinary.

Eiko and Koma studied in Japan with Kazuo Ohno, one of the founders of Butoh, and with German modern dancers, before settling in New York about 10 years ago. "By the River," commissioned last spring by the Boston Dance Umbrella, had its New York première this month at The Kitchen. As in many of their other pieces, they seem to be isolated souls, drifting in a featureless landscape. They might be lost, or in pain, or just striving

DANCE

to achieve communication out of a primal silence.

"By the River" begins with a film (by David Geary). Out-of-focus candles flicker onto a backdrop and floor painted in irregular black and white shapes.

After a period of darkness, a figure is seen crouched near the floor. Very slowly the figure rolls onto its side, uncurls, begins to rise. You see it's a man in a sand-color linen kimono, but there's very little else that's clear about him. He scrabbles upright, so slowly that you see his toes clutch the floor and spread out again. Pitched slightly forward but ready to sink to the floor again, he starts across the space and the lights go out.

Now a woman stands in the space, naked, her body smudged with ashes or dirt. She sways off-center and reaches up and out as if searching for something, but her eyes don't follow her grasp. She bends over from

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the waist, her long black hair like a curtain, and begins a laborious crawl.

Later, the man and the woman are in the space together. They eye each other, seem drawn together. She sprawls on the floor, never seeming to be completely at rest there. He drags some kind of heavy black cloth along the floor, slowly lifts it, and slams it down, the way African tribes beat the ground to scare animals into their traps.

Briefly the man and woman merge. She clings to his back, slithers slowly around his body while he supports and embraces her. She lies on the floor again, and he regards her with tenderness and fear. He spreads the cloth over her and she begins rolling out, taking the cloth with her like the papery layers of some molting reptile. He follows at a cautious distance.

Eiko and Koma are riveting performers. They never look collected and composed, but are always ambiguous – veering off balance, shifting small, contrary parts of their bodies, arranging themselves so we see them in surreal perspective: Eiko's upside-down face, her eyes probing from side to side, as she lies with arched back and crimped legs and spidery, elbowy arms. Koma's potential for sexual aggression, which he keeps compacted and suppressed in a body keyed up with wariness.

The duo Muteki-sha visited the Asia Society from Tokyo the week before Eiko and Koma's performances. These two women are also disciples of Kazuo Ohno, and of Butoh master Tatsumi Hijikata. They also create transformations through subtle changes in body shape and especially facial expressions. It's harder to trace a story line in their work "Niwa – The Garden," perhaps because they don't interact as characters the way Eiko and Koma do. They seem rather to be exploring facets of a female personality, phases of her life.

At first a woman (Natsu Nakajima) emerges from the darkness at the back of the stage. The subtle, dim lighting (by Nobuyuki Tanaka) comes and goes, and this eerie fluctuation makes the woman appear disembodied.

You can't quite tell if she's moving, or what she's doing. In fact, she's advancing very slowly, with the smallest changes in her upper body, quavering from states of what might be fear to ecstasy to expectation. She holds something big in her arms, and we discover only as she nears the bright center of the stage that it's a bunch of dried wildflowers. She cradles it like a bouquet or a baby, lifts it high like a torch, thrusts it out like a firebrand.

Later, another woman appears, possibly the alter ego of the first. While Nakajima is by turns calm as a Buddha and sensitive to the slightest emotional disturbance, Yuriko Maezawa, the demon-half, is excitable, lovable, and possibly dangerous. One figure wishes to be beautiful, the other can't help being grotesque.

In my favorite part, Maezawa pokes a frowzy head up out of a huge basket. After looking around with a lantern on a stick and making sure it's safe, she climbs out, ventures into the space, and soon is kiting at breakneck speed across the stage, her red kimono spread from her outstretched arms, tiny feet scarcely touching the ground.