

Take Dance

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Choreographer Take Ueyama is taking on the dance world. In a campaign to revitalize the art form he loves, he works to bring the joy of dance to wider audiences and hopes that one day dancers and dance companies will have more security in our culture. Ueyama knows the best way to accomplish this is exposure: introduce dance to more people. Have them fall in love with it. And with *Take Dance*, as reflected in its program of three dances at New York's Symphony Space, there is much to fall in love with.

The world premiere of "Dark Mourning" opened the evening, juxtaposing the surreal, visceral, universal moments when someone or something passes away. A meditative elegy highlighted with bursts of quick, sharp passion, "Dark Mourning" danced us through the many phases of grief. With daring duet work and a detailed, sensitive use of the hands and fingers that is a signature of Ueyama's work, we journeyed through the grief, nostalgia, longing, despair, anger and frustration inherent in loss. Just as in life, processing grief is never linear, and each vignette of "Dark Mourning" doubled back on itself, visually displaying the erratic, confusing desperation of sorrow.

Though completely different in style, "Dark Mourning" brings to mind Anthony Tudor's ballet "Dark Elegies", but where the latter describes villagers' collective grief at the loss of children, and individual expressions of grief as part of a whole, Mr. Ueyama's dance focuses more on individual expressions of pain and resolution, including, in some cases, the individual's response to his or her own imminent death.

The piece opened to a dark stage, 7 dancers in a tight clump with their backs to the audience, walking so slowly their progress was barely discernable. Slowly arms, hands, heads punctuated the dirge in gestures of comfort and sadness. In the third section, Kyle Hotchkiss, a tall, elegant sculptural dancer performed a sinewy, reptilian solo as if being birthed into a new world, a soul passing from matter to spirit, earth to sky.

Long time mentor for TAKE Dance, choreographer Kazuko Hirabayashi created the second piece on the program, "A Baited Soul" a new duet for Ueyama and Jill Echo, both formerly of Paul Taylor Dance Company. Inspired by the classic Japanese ghost story "Tales of Moonlight" and "Rain", this duet combines classical modern American dance with Hirabayashi's Japanese heritage. When we reviewed this well-regarded work of fiction, we found it to be made up of 9 separate stories. "A Baited Soul" seems to be an adaptation of the chapter titled "The Serpent's Lust", a legend of the young Buddhist monk Anchin and Kiyohime, the daughter of a steward of Masago. According to the legend, Kiyohime fell in love with the handsome Anchin when he spent the night at her father's house during a pilgrimage. When he failed to return to her, as he had promised, her jealous anger transformed her into a serpent and she pursued him to a temple where he had taken refuge inside the temple bell. She coiled herself around the bell and roasted him to death with the heat of her passion.

Although we could not be sure if this was the inspiration for the opening section of the duet, Ms. Echo's movements were definitely serpentine, seductive, alluring and then attacking, like a predator stalking her prey. There was a lustful quality to their dancing, a sense of Ueyama being taken over or possessed by her spell.

The second section featured Mr. Ueyama in a deliberately paced athletic solo, remindful, in its measured tempo and focused intensity, of Jerome Robbins' "Watermill," but we could not decipher the context for the two juxtaposing sections. Was Ueyama taken over and 'roasted to death,' entering another, alienated world? Or did he break free of her passionate spell and we bore witness to this transformation? Perhaps program notes would have been helpful. Regardless, watching these two veteran dancers, being drawn in by their command of presence, razor sharp focus, 100% commitment to the moment, and complete mastery of the nuances of their bodies, was a delight. They are both, masterful, expressive dancers.

The highlight of the evening for us was "Flight", a gorgeous, sweeping piece for 13 dancers. Ueyama is most inspired by nature and attempts to capture the beauty, purity, and honesty of nature in his work. "While in Rome, I witnessed this beauty yet again. Looking up I saw a flock of starlings playing in the sky. Their movements far surpassed any dance I had ever witnessed, with their breathtaking unison flights and banking turns, sculpting the air in patterns so seamlessly elegant," comments Ueyama in the program notes for "Flight". And capture that he did!

Dressed in gossamer white pants and loose tops, the dancers traveled in flocking patterns across the stage, breaking off and joining other dancers in kaleidoscopic patterns reminiscent of birds in flight, representative of the starlings that Ueyama witnessed, or perhaps of mythical Japanese cranes. Undulating torso's and meditative movements were accented with aggressive sharp gestures, capturing both the masculine and feminine quality, of nature's creatures. This dance had both a sculptural quality in its design and movement vocabulary, yet at the same time was loose and meditative, a wash of bodies in space. Groups came together and fell apart again, reconfigured on another part of the stage. The piece uses, in part, the same music as employed by Twyla Tharp in *In the Upper Room*, and through its dynamic staging delivers an equivalent jolt to the senses. It was never too much on the eye, never chaotic or haphazard, but intentional and effortless.

We watched transfixed. I felt my muscles twitching in response to the soaring bodies before me- I wanted to get up and join them! Floating, soaring, dabbing, flicking, exploding, rippling- "Flight" has it all! So many different movement qualities contrasted in a single phrase of movement. This was particularly pleasing because it came as such a surprise. Equally pleasing was the fast and detailed group work performed with such passion and energy yet not a single quality or nuance of gesture was lost in the controlled frenzy. I was mesmerized by the softness of the dancer's fingers and arms and captivated by the interesting, atypical bird-like head and hand gestures.

I had the pleasure of watching this piece in rehearsal a week before the show opened at Symphony Space, and I was struck by the serious yet warm atmosphere of the company. This group of dedicated, talented dancers rehearsed "Flight" with performance caliber energy and focus and spent down time reviewing phrase work or keeping their bodies warm and supple- not a moment was wasted or unintentional. It is no wonder this company produced such a riveting, intelligent, pristine evening of gorgeous dancing.

Take Dance, sensitive yet visceral, marries the harmony of Eastern philosophies with the energy and explosive drive of Western cultures. They are not to be missed. Go see them, bring a friend, and fall in love.