Fall 2017

Ballet Review

0 74470 80914 2 03

Ballet Review 45.3
Fall 2017

Editor and Designer:
Marvin Hoshino

Managing Editor:
Roberta Hellman

Senior Editor:
Don Daniels

Associate Editors:
Joel Lobenthal
Larry Kaplan
Alice Helpern

Webmaster:
David S. Weiss

Copy Editor:
Naomi Mindlin

Photographers:
Tom Brazil
Costas

Associates:
Peter Anastos
Robert Greskovic
George Jackson
Elizabeth Kendall
Paul Parish
Nancy Reynolds
James Sutton
David Vaughan
Edward Willinger
Sarah C. Woodcock

Cover photograph by Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet:
Teresa Reichlen and Russell Janzen in *Diamonds*.

Geimaruza Nihon Buyo

Karen Greenspan

The distinctive sound cue of wooden blocks clapped together twice prompted the audience to prepare hearts and minds to enter the world of Japanese performance. The stage was then filled with the young and spirited performers of Geimaruza, a nihon buyo dance troupe presented at Japan Society in New York City. The company was formed in 2006 by a group of graduates of Tokyo University of the Arts, Japan's highest ranked institution for training in fine arts and music. The troupe of six dancers was joined by eight highly talented musicians for the performances, preperformance lecture-demonstrations, as well as an afternoon movement workshop.

Nihon buyo is translated as "Japanese dance." This classification is a bit elusive – after all, what is "Japanese dance" exactly? Nihon buyo *technique* is the same as the traditional dance technique used in kabuki theater. Geimaruza's repertory, steeped in 400 years of history, has expanded beyond its origins to encompass popular sections from kabuki plays as well as works inspired by noh theater, folktales, and folk dances adapted in original, neo-traditional choreographies. The Geimaruza ensemble includes its fair share of female performers, which is another departure from the traditionally all-male, kabuki performing art form.

The opening dance, *Ayatsuri Sanbaso* (Puppet Sanbaso), is a character dance based on the Sanbaso character from the ancient noh play,

Ayatsuri Sanbaso. (Photo: Julie Lemberger, Japan Society)

Sanja Matsuri. (Photo: Julie Lemberger, JS)

Okina. Sanbaso is an earthy character who performs a fertility dance-ritual in the play. First performed in 1853, the nihon buyo piece renders Sanbaso as a marionette manipulated by a *koken* (stagehand). The dance begins as the puppeteer uses pantomime movements of handling the puppet's strings to demonstrate his control over the marionette.

Sanbaso comes to life displaying his opulent feather robe outlined in gold. He bows, stomps, spins, and bourrées across the stage using puppet-like, disjointed, detached movements. Eventually the puppet takes in hand two noh theater props – a fan and a bell tree (a cluster of large jingle bells attached to a handle). The puppet dances the planting/fertility rite from the *Okina* play with its characteristic stomping movements while shaking the bell tree – all symbolic of planting.

Several times during the piece, the puppet spins out of control when a string seems to break. As in so many classic tales involving the creator and the creation, a power struggle develops. In some stories, the out-of-control situation becomes scary. But, in *Ayatsuri Sanbaso*, the tone is humorous as the puppet seizes the upper hand and concludes the dance leaning atop the master.

Oshukubai (The Nightingale in the Plum Tree) encapsulates Japanese humor and how it is evoked from the simplest set of circumstances. Inspired by a children's story as well as images from nature, this narrative dance centers around a newly blossomed plum tree and the birds who seek shelter within her foliage. The plum tree, played by a female performer formally clad in the finest, springtime, peach-color kimono and coiffed in a Geisha

hairstyle with delicate hair ornaments, wakes up from a long winter's sleep and is naive to the habits of the different birds that seek shelter on her branches.

The plum tree eagerly awaits the arrival of the nightingale and is completely duped by a mischievous crow that shows up pretending to be such. The crow's choreography contains birdlike movements, pantomime, and folk dance, whereas the plum tree is rendered with human qualities. In fact, she shows her hospitality to the crow (who has convinced her that he is a nightingale) in true Japanese style – by serving him tea! When the true nightingale shows up, the plum tree's confusion is finally overcome by the nightingale's graceful dance and song. The plum tree and nightingale confront the crow in a two-against-one, danced confrontation. By the end, the brazen crow is so embarrassed that he tries to make a quick escape.

After several pure music offerings, the ensemble concluded the evening with a four-part piece called *Shunkashuto* (Four Seasons). The medley blended classical and folk dances from different periods and styles in a crowd-pleasing finale.

Sarashi Sanbaso (Spring) is a dance excerpt from a kabuki play that was first performed in 1755. In the dance, a princess from the Heike clan pretends to perform the Sanbaso (fertility) dance for the enemy Genji clan. Midway through the dance, she steals Genji's white banner (two white chiffon streamers) and transitions from the earthy stomps, twists, and turns of Sanbaso to an ethereal manipulation of fabric – painting the airspace with billowing white swirls. She makes a dramatic exit along a diagonal, moving upstage as her white streamers ripple behind her.

Sanja Matsuri (Summer) is another famous kabuki dance piece that originally premiered in 1832. In this dance, two fishermen possessed by spirits perform a simple folk dance wielding open fans. Most notable about this dance is the eerily affecting, round, metal mask they each wear – a metal frame with a bold ideogram cut out of the front partially revealing the actual face of the performer. One of the masks represents the possessing good spirit, and the other, the evil spirit. The dancers hold it in place by biting onto a mouthpiece while dancing the lively movements.

My favorite section was the light-hearted *Tsugaru Tanto-Bushi* (Autumn). Set to a farmer's song, this couple dance uses multiple props and was again delightful in its simplicity. The two female dancers first dance with paper parasols painted with spirals of orange and yellow that swirl in a kinetic illusion as the parasols are twirled. Next, they don the comic masks of hyottoko and okame, with their chubby cheeks, and dance a silly love duet using pantomime and very simple steps. They continue their comedic folk dance until one finally drags the other off the stage.

Shirasagisho (Winter) provided an elegant finale as the choreography portrays herons that dance on a frozen lake before flying away. The dancers move slowly, holding an open, white fan in each hand, which they lightly shake from high to low, to indicate the falling snow. They move together about the stage while coordinating their fans to create pleasing designs. The energy builds as confetti snow falls from the rafters as the dancers circle their fluttering fans in a graceful, winter fantasy.

The Geimaruza performers, although young by Japanese performing standards, displayed dancing that was professional, precise, informed, and enthusiastic.