

Review: Eiko's 'Platform 2016,' With a Class, a Film and More

By Siobhan Burke

Feb. 22, 2016

One thing you might not know about Eiko, the veteran dancer, choreographer and activist at the center of Danspace Project's "Platform 2016: A Body in Places": She's funny. Humor isn't a quality I associate with her powerfully slow, often sorrowful work; if it's there, it's subtle. Last summer in Lower Manhattan, as part of a solo project also titled "A Body in Places," she let her frail-looking body drift through the pedestrian traffic of Fulton Street Station in memory of the victims of Sept. 11. She looked like an angel, a ghost, a saint, certainly not one of us.

But "Platform," a six-week series of performances, workshops, film screenings, book club meetings and other events that she has helped organize, all in the East Village, gives us a fuller picture of the artist: Eiko as teacher, curator, New Yorker, friend and someone as capable of cracking jokes as embodying grief and pain.

In the first three events of "Platform" — a Delicious Movement class on Wednesday morning, a screening of the postwar Japanese film "The Burmese Harp" that evening and "Talking Duets I," a performance on Saturday night — she brought a light touch to themes as grave as death and suffering. One of the first ideas she imparted at Wednesday's workshop, which drew more than 40 students of varying ages and levels to St. Mark's Church: "When you die, the body keeps moving."

Delicious Movement, taught every Wednesday during "Platform," isn't strictly a dance class, and Eiko was sure to let us know, introducing the D-word tentatively, as if it might harm us: "Is everyone O.K. with the word dance?" The term carries baggage that "movement" doesn't, assumptions about training and physique and dependence on music at odds with the inclusive, exploratory spirit of her class.

"Dance is hundreds of wildflowers growing, blooming, wilting," she said. "And most important, not all at the same time. I have no taste for unison movement."

By that definition, living and dying, flourishing and expiring, action and rest are inseparable, each a form of the other. Over the two hours of Delicious Movement, Eiko invited us to move without attempting to make, do or achieve anything.

"Move to rest," "move to be useless," "go to bed," "continue moving," were among the prompts she gave us. Lying on the ground and moving slowly — the slower you move, she said, the less likely you are to hurt others — felt at once rebellious, an exercise in resistance, and delightfully futile.

Introducing Kon Ichikawa's 1956 "The Burmese Harp" at Anthology Film Archives that night, Eiko told us that the film, about a Japanese soldier in the wake of World War II, "taught me how to live with death." She is teaching us to do the same.

Back at St. Mark's on Saturday, Eiko was joined by the adventurous improvisers David Brick, Emmanuelle Huynh, John Kelly and Bebe Miller for "Talking Duets I," a game of asking and answering (or refusing to answer) with flexible rules. From a table on the sidelines, Judy Hussie-Taylor, Danspace's artistic director, posed questions to pairs of performers, who responded through words and movement.

“Emannuelle, what is a dangerous dance?” Ms. Huynh’s initial answer — “a dance that hurts” — became a tussling exchange with Eiko, who allowed herself to be dragged across the floor, not resisting but not surrendering either. Asked if he could “be Eiko,” Mr. Kelly sank glacially to the floor with wide, sad eyes — a convincing impression — prompting Eiko to playfully storm out of the room. To see her gently teased and teasing back was a new experience, perhaps for her as much as for us.