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writers on dancing

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One Last Time

Platform 2016: “A Body in Places”

Eiko

Danspace Project

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by Martha Sherman

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Some day, people who love movement art will say “Were you at the Eiko Danspace Platform in 2016?” And for those who are lucky enough to answer “Yes,” it will be as if they’d been at Woodstock as hippie teenagers in the 1960s. This series of artistic ideas and events have enhanced the entire dance community. Eiko’s vision and her own breathtaking artistry are memorable and transformative. On the last day of the five weeks of solos and events of “A Body in Places,” Eiko offered two performances, one of them in community (“Talking Duets”) and one, a final midnight solo.

Eiko in "A Body in Places." Photo Courtesy of Danspace Project.



“Talking Duets” was a near-perfect idea – a series of interlinked duets between powerful artists including Eiko, their voices heard both vocally and in movement, in a dialogue triggered by thoughtful questions from a moderator (Laura Flanders) and the audience. The rules were clear – one minute solos, three minute answers, alerted by a soft bell. When Flanders posed a question to Eiko in her first duet, there was a surprised stillness as Eiko answered; her body is so expressive in silence, it was like hearing Marcel Marceau narrate his mime (or Teller explain a trick.)

Although each segment was intriguing, there were several practical problems. In the movement duets, the improvised combinations seemed to trigger as much tripping over each other and near-collisions as melding or connection. The verbal responses had other practical problems.



Although Flanders’ questions were excellent, even the most thoughtful questions often triggered more glib responses than considered ones. (“What sort of body do you like dancing with?” Ishmael Houston-Jones was asked. “This one.”) In addition, the acoustics in beautiful St. Marks’ sanctuary are quite poor, and except for those speaking into microphones, many of the verbal responses just couldn’t be heard. David Brink helped the audience by voicing our most common question to his partners: “What did you say?”

Elizabeth Streb chose only to respond verbally (not with movement) in her duet with Eiko; as masses of words flooded from her, masses of foam peanuts were released from a cloth bin above her head. Both Streb and the peanuts frothed. Well past her one-minute solo time

allotment, Houston-Jones started shouting “Ding” from the corner, to remind the rule-makers that she’d talked enough. When Eiko joined in, played and stomped in the peanuts, climbed into Streb’s lap, and skittered around the room – a playful

side of her not evident in her deliberate, weighty solos. Streb's triggering this side of Eiko's dance personality was her best move.

There were many questions posed about honesty in dance and in words. Although these provoked several of the more glib responses, Eiko responded to one question "I said many things I have forgotten." It gave the audience permission to let go of words that were inaudible or lightweight, and give our attention over to the movement.

Most aligned between voice and movement was Yvonne Meier, who was, as ever, challenging and demanding ("Why is my solo at the end?") In response to a question about her "messiest" dance, she gave a wonderful description of the piece that she'd performed as part of the 2016 American Realness Festival – a grand, shameless, messy work indeed. Just as Meier uses her weight in performance, her voice was weighted, and unapologetic. She was the opposite of mercurial Eiko, and the shifts of balance in their duet were challenging. When Meier partnered Houston-Jones, they twitched around each other like two difficult siblings in a loving conflict. Ishmael's comment that "transitions scare me" was especially trenchant as he approached Meier, who pronounced that what she wanted to do was "scare the audience. Grandma scares the audience."

Each of the duets highlighted relationships between these experienced dancers, even if it was often hard to interpret the connections. In their duets with Eiko, though, what was most evident was simple love. As she called for Brick to join her in their duet, he galloped toward her, lifting her gently over his back. The last duet, between Eiko and Houston-Jones, was the most tender. They whirled around each other as he leaned in and she proffered a tender cheek against his arms and then legs. We happily believed them both, when in answer to the question "Will you ever stop dancing?" the answer was: "When I die."

At midnight, four hours after the early duet program ended, a small hard-core audience gathered at outside the St. Marks gate. The group was primarily made up of acolytes who had been following Eiko's solos all month, but also included a few newcomers who were reminders of the uncertainties of entering Eiko's world for the first time (the awkwardness of where to stand, whether to look into her eyes, whether you really should take the flower she seemed to be offering.)

Our guide slowly walked us around the tall iron fence along Second Avenue, and into the 11th St. side of St. Mark's – not surprisingly, the final "place" for Eiko's solo was the church itself. As we glanced to the left on our walk, she had begun her dance in the churchyard, a wraith among the old graves and old trees. In the cold, in her ragged white kimono and geta, she was especially vulnerable and ghostly.

She opened the back door of the church, and led us to the Parish Hall, where her familiar red river of silk cloth cut the room in half. Moving back and forth, skirting the room's edges, Eiko searched, her arms reached up and her eyes peering and pained, often looking deeply into ours. Then she wriggled between us through the door that led to the sanctuary, which was set with chairs for the Church's Sunday prayer service, a lectern and low tables also ready. On one of the tables was Eiko's large water bowl, her own holy chalice. In the back of the room was a large vase of white chrysanthemums. Each of these iconic elements seemed entirely in keeping not only with Eiko's solo, but also with a service of worship here in St. Mark's Church. Her movement has been a kind of meditation throughout; here, it found a gentle home.

We followed her now familiar wandering, filled with pauses, huddling and moaning. She took the large sheaf of flowers, and frantically pulled the petals off with her mouth, spewing them around the floor of the Church's entryway, and making a final offering of flowers to a few in the audience. As she ended the dance – and this long series -- Eiko faced the front door of St. Mark's Church, paused, and bowed deeply, murmuring a soft "Thank you." Among her many lessons, here she was, graciously teaching us how to say goodbye.

Top photo: David Brick and Ishamel Houston-Jones in "Talking Duets." Photo © Ian Douglas.

Middle photo: Yvonne Meier and Eiko in "Talking Duets." Photo © Ian Douglas.

Bottom photo: Eiko in "A Body in Places" Photo Courtesy of Danspace Project.





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