

Spring 2016

Ballet Review





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Cover photograph by Paul Kolnik, NYCB:
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dancer, Peter Martins included, perform this solo with so much eyebrow-raising panache.

My silly criticisms aside, this performance by Miami City Ballet was as fine an evening of dancing as I have ever seen this company give, and the credit for that goes to Edward Villella, who had the chutzpah to start this company thirty years ago in a cultural wasteland. And now Lourdes Lopez, who has waved her magic wand over these dancers' heads and given them the guidance and the repertory that is allowing them to develop their craft in a town that doesn't seem to know how lucky it is.

New York

Karen Greenspan

Japan Society presented a delightful program of traditional dance to live music from Japan's southern island chain – Okinawa. The dancers and musicians, culled from the faculty and alumni of the Okinawa Prefectural University of the Arts, performed selections from Okinawa's classical court dances (koten buyo) as well as popular folk dances (zo odori). They are inheritors of a centuries-old, distinct tradition – a rare gem that exemplifies the concept of “less is more.”

Okinawa was once an independent nation known as the Ryukyu Kingdom (15th–19th centuries) under the greater governance of China. The stately court dance tradition evolved as a result of this diplomatic relationship in which Chinese envoys and emissaries remained on the islands for one half of a year as they timed their ship voyages to the prevailing winds.

As a matter of state, the royal Ryukyu court was obliged to provide fitting entertainment for the foreign visitors and created a palace department of dances headed by its own dance official. The traditional dances of the native villages were refined into the classical court form. To assure the highest standard of court ceremony, the dancers and musicians were all males selected from the warrior class. Today, the dance form is mostly performed by women.

Later, in the 1600s, the Tokugawa shogunate took steps to bring Ryukyu under its influence, and by 1634, Ryukyu began sending a regular ceremonial delegation bearing gifts and entertainment to the Japanese mainland in a demonstration of allegiance. In 1879, shortly after Japan changed from a feudal shogunate to a unified nation, Ryukyu became a prefecture (district) of Japan and was renamed “Okinawa.”

The first half of the program at Japan Society was from the zo odori repertoire. This genre developed after the end of the Ryukyu Kingdom, when the court dances evolved into popular entertainment. The dances grew to be more lively and unrestrained as they were performed for the general public and did not require the formal tone required for guests of state. In *Hatuma Bushi*, the lilting rhythm of the sanshin (banjo), along with the whistling and singing by the ensemble, combined with dancer Satoru Arakaki's thigh-slapping and mimed gestures, reflected the light and cheerful tempo of island life.

Kanayo Amaka, a playful paired dance, portrayed a young couple in love. In a culture where overt demonstrations of affection are rare, it was surprising and charming to watch Satoru Arakaki and Izumi Higa dance together holding hands or with his arm around her shoulder. Their exchange of tokens of love and dancing together holding her sash gave the dance a folksy flavor. It was utterly endearing when the young man whisked out his water dipper while standing on one leg as the couple pulsed and turned in unison. Then the young woman performed a little swagger before he sprinkled her with water.

In contrast, the tone of the court dances was one of understated elegance and economy of movement. *Kashikaki*, a solo woman's dance with a spool of colorful thread, showcased many of the hallmarks of Okinawan women's court dance. These components included the characteristic foot-sliding walk (also used in Japanese Noh theater movement) with knees bent and weight pitched forward, the subtle inclination of the head and torso, and the pre-



Izumi Higa in *Mutu Kadiku*.

Photo: Julie Lemberger, Japan Society

nature, and dance is the way the islanders sustain a harmonious relationship. She led the participants in three hand and arm gestures evoking praise of the gods and spirits, and followed with a dance called *Karaya* that incorporated the foot-sliding walk, the three praising gestures, and the simple diagonal, fixed floor pattern for women's dances.

For the final hour of the workshop, we were privy to a behind-the-scenes demonstration of a performer transformed into an *onnagata* (male actor/dancer who portrays women) onstage. Sitting behind his makeup table, Yoshikazu Sanabe applied layer upon layer of makeup, a wig, and hair ornaments. As he stood, he was helped into his radiant persimmon-colored print kimono, dyed in the traditional Okinawa style noted for its vivid coloration. Thus transformed, he performed the *Karaya* dance we had learned earlier, about a young woman who goes out to moon gaze and ends up musing about her love. His portrayal was pure perfection.

scribed floor pattern – a simple diagonal entrance, the dance in the center of the stage, and an exit along the original diagonal back to the point of entrance.

The women's dances create a maximal expression with a minimum of movement. This ideal was brought home again in the final number, *Mutu Kadiku*, in which the performer wore the *hanagasa*, an ornate red floral-shaped headpiece that resembled a large red lotus lampshade.

Easily the audience's favorite was *Shundo*, the only surviving couple's dance in the classical repertory and the only one in which masks are worn. Two couples perform this comedic treasure – one pair is beautiful and dances gracefully; the other wears ugly masks and dumpy costumes and moves awkwardly, doing a parody of the elegant couple's movements. Of course, the ugly duo stole the show as they bumbled around cluelessly poking fun at the elegant pair. Nothing communicates across cultures like simple humor.

At the Okinawan Dance and Music Workshop the following day, Professor Izumi Higa explained that all Okinawan dance is considered a prayer. Life on the islands provides a constant reminder of the tenuous relationship between living beings and the forces of

Chicago

Joseph Houseal

At Columbia College, the Stephen Petronio Company, now thirty years old, launched its *Bloodlines Project*, in which Petronio acquires and presents choreography from his own artistic heritage: postmodern dance.

The plan is to feature, over the next five years, works by Merce Cunningham, Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Anna Halprin, Yvonne Rainier, Steve Paxton, and others who represent Petronio's personal influences. In the process Petronio establishes himself as a serious steward of dance preservation, having had personal contact with these choreographers as well as the living artists who were involved in the creation of works.

This inaugural performance featured *Glacial Decoy* (1979) by Trisha Brown, her final all-women work that features a photographic set and quietly erotic costumes by Robert