Beautiful movements, totally improbable

Eiko and Koma will wade into a Duke Gardens pond for their encore

By Roy C. Dicks
CORRESPONDENT

DURHAM
dance performance in a pond? With the audience sitting on the ground? At night?
Yes, for real.
“River,” one of the programs at this summer’s American Dance Festival, will be performed Tuesday and Wednesday by modern dance artists Eiko and Koma in the Culberson Asiatic Arboretum Pond at Sarah P. Duke Gardens.
The Japanese-born choreographer/dancer team Eiko Otake and Koma Yamada – referred to professionally only by their first names – have been a couple for 40 years and have performed together since 1976. More than 60 works for stage, video, environmental sites and art galleries have brought the couple international acclaim. Many of those works premiered at ADF since the team’s 1983 debut here.
Eiko and Koma are reprising “River” at the request of festival director Charles Reinhart, who is retiring at season’s end. When the team performed it in the Duke pond in 1996, adjustments had to be made because the water was so deep.

“We had to build a submerged platform to perform on,” Eiko recalled during a phone interview from New York. “One night I lost my footing and fell off the platform, so I got in trouble for a little bit, but I was eventually able to get myself back up.”
The incident alarmed Reinhart at the time because Eiko could not swim. “I’m so pleased they’ve agreed to risk their lives again,” he said with a chuckle.
The idea for “River” came about in 1995 when Eiko and Koma decided to expand their creative endeavors to the outdoors. That summer, they worked for a month in a Catskills mountain stream.
“The original conception was to explore the flow of a river,” Eiko said. “We wanted...
to convey the sense of movement in time from upstream to downstream.

“River” is intended to evoke humanity's ancient connection to the landscape, with the river as the past from which the future is born.

After its 1995 premiere in the Delaware River in Pennsylvania and performances in the Chattahoochee River in Atlanta and then at Duke Gardens, “River” was praised for its delicate beauty and mysterious majesty.

Local dance critic Kate Dobbs Araiil, who attended the 1996 Duke Gardens performance, remembers the performance clearly:

"Eiko was a pale blur in the gathering dusk, unfurling like a night flower," she recalled. "When I first saw Koma appear out of nowhere in the water, it was hugely thrilling, like seeing a large animal nearby in the wild."

“River” has been performed in 11 outdoor venues, including a creek and a lake. When a performance is in a still body of water, such as at Duke Gardens, the dancers make adjustments to the river-based choreography.

“We recognize that the audience knows it’s a pond,” Eiko said, “but we try to create the sense of upstream and downstream by our movements.”

Eiko & Koma also perform “River” indoors using an artificial pool, but those stagings have a different feel under more controlled conditions.

“In the outdoor performances, we don’t have much control of the people, so the audience’s focus is different,” Eiko said. “They are not always looking at us but also taking in the whole environment. Of course, rain is also a concern, but fortunately that hasn’t happened during one of our outdoor performances so far.”

The 70-minute performances, which start at 9:15 p.m., can accommodate 300 attendees. There is lighting and a recorded soundtrack, which features an original score by Sômei Satoh.

“River” may seem an offbeat concept, but modern dance can encompass virtually any form of choreographed movement.

Araiil’s assessment perhaps best characterizes the piece: "It was beautiful and totally improbable and so absolutely right artistically that it seemed like a dream," she said. "You awakened from an altered state when they took their bows."

music_theater@lycos.com