Slow-moving husband-wife dancers at ADF

Japanese duo marking 19th festival show

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DURHAM — Twilight brings creatures of the modern dance variety to join river cooter turtles, Mallard ducks and other water birds in the Cullerson Asiatic Arboretum Pond at the Sarah P. Duke Gardens. The husband-and-wife duo, Eiko & Koma, take the plunge today and Wednesday to bring their 1995 “River” to the American Dance Festival for the second time.

They first performed it at the 1996 ADF and return to do it again during ADF director Charles Reinhart’s last and 43rd season because it’s his favorite of the couple’s dances, Eiko Otake said in a telephone interview last week. “We feel very close to him,” she added. Over the years, Reinhart has been very supportive and honest when they’ve asked his opinion of their work, she added. This summer marks their 19th ADF appearance.

They arrived Friday with a crew and sons Shin (Forest), 26, and Yuta (Being Kind), 23, to begin building the platform on which they will perform in the pond.

“The pond is too deep to stand in,” Eiko said.

It’s unusual for them to perform in a pond as rivers account for most of the 11 locations where they have performed this work.

“Here we didn’t have a suitable river,” Eiko said.

These performances are part of their for lifetime contributions to modern dance.

“I love trees,” Koma says in the documentary. “They are born, they are dying here and going back to the earth ... Sometimes when I dance, I think of extinct animals and insects.”

In “River,” they drift downstream — a journey that suggests the passage of life and time.

“I feel like water in a river always runs and never stops,” Eiko says in the documentary. She thinks about how the river existed long before she did and will continue after she’s gone. “It brings us in and it takes us out.”

The Japanese-born couple began their personal journey in life and dance in 1971 while studying with Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, two founders and masters of butoh, the radical post-war Japanese theater form. They soon began working together to create their own dance, forming their company in 1972. To further explore movement, they left Japan and studied with Mary Wigman disciple Manja Chmiel in Germany and then with Lucas Hoving in Amsterdam. Hoving encouraged them to go to New York where they arrived in 1976.

Since then, they’ve created over 60 dances in a style all their own. They become part of the environment they create whether it be land, trees, wind, night tide or river. They convey the essence of such creatures as the seal and raven. They do not hurry. In fact, they move so slowly at times that

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it's hard to tell that they're moving at all.

"River" is no exception. The dance covers about 70 feet in 55 minutes, Eiko said. Still, even the slightest movement will stir the water.

These performers face challenges they would not have on dry land. There are those river cooter turtles for one thing. They can grow as big as 12 inches long.

"I was bitten by a turtle last time," Eiko said in the interview.

Then, there's the water quality. Before performing in rivers, they have the water tested for their own safety.

"We're not doing that here because we know the water is not that clean so there's no point," Eiko said, mentioning all the birds that live in the pond. "We try not to swallow the water."

They must also be careful not to slip off that platform they've erected below the pond's surface. In one of their 1996 ADF performances, Eiko did slip off and her more vigorous arm movements to get back on caught the attention of Reinhart. But Friday, Eiko set the record straight about the couple's swimming ability. Turns out they can swim, but the fact that they're wearing kimonos makes it difficult to do so, she said.

Staying on track isn't easy because spotlights blind them and so they have only "luck and instinct" to guide them, Eiko said — not to mention 40 years of dancing together.