

dance

Unities are central to Japanese style

By ERNESTINE STODELLE

NEW YORK — Whereas western dancers are apt to flash smiles and spray the audience with the perfume of their individual personalities, Japanese dancers perform in a world of their own, light years away. From the moment she appears on the stage, Japanese dancer Sachiyo Ito seems to be weaving a silky cocoon around herself, so deep is her concentration and emotional involvement. Mesmerized, the audience is drawn into the mysterious web of a creative artist's intuitive realm.

Call her dancing ritualistic, call it a form of poetic drama, or liken it to a state of meditation that transcends stillness by embodying infinity in a succession of finite gestures...its exact nature defies definition. All I know is that the program of Japanese Classical and Contemporary Dance and Music offered by Sachiyo Ito and Company recently at the

Theater of the Open Eye was, for me, a revelatory experience.

Granted that sumptuous Kabuki costumes with their gold-threaded kimonos and high-piled wigs ornamented with glistening pins are not new to the western eye; granted that the soft-stepping eastern walk of toes turned inward in stockinged feet is familiar to our cruder hemisphere; and granted that the traditional white chalk make-up worn by Kabuki-trained dancers allows little variation of facial expression, I would daresay that no one in the audience was quite prepared for the extraordinary presentation that took place. It included comedy, drama, poetry, exquisite renderings of original and traditional Japanese music, and dancing of breathtaking charm. Total theater? Yes, indeed; but more than that, it revealed the large-scale gifts of the diminutive dancer-chore-

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ographer who conceived and directed every facet of the production.

Not content with a pure dance interpretation of the legend of Kyoganaoko Musume Dojoji, Sachiyo Ito introduced comic interludes in the form of spoken dialogues inserted between colorful appearances of a Shirabyoshi dancer, whose role she played. It was therefore no small surprise that after a slow, stately Noh dance bearing the title, "There are only pine trees beside the cherry blossoms in full bloom," two monks — acted by Mel Gionson and Ron Nakahara casually walked onstage to discuss mundane human affairs in Japanese-American jargonese. Each reappearance of the dancer in elegant, formal attire, replete with fancy hats, scarves, and even a little drum she played, served to emphasize the astronomical distance between the sublime and the ridiculous.

Japanese dancer

With an impressive cast of actors, singers, instrumentalists, callers, and seven dancers, Ito reconstructed a stunning Buddhist ceremonial dance in the tradition of an ancient Nishimonai rite representing the homecoming of ancestors. The custom of wearing headdresses and hats to conceal the ancestors' faces lent a mysterious air to the formal gesturing of dancers Martha Matthews, Chris Odo, Gary Parks, Mel Gionson, Bonnie Redding, Kim Myori, and Debra T. Yamaki. As they circled the stage, each dancer seemed to represent a person of different vocation: a hunter, a weaver, a tiller of the soil...so varied were their motions one could divine a whole community in ghostly action.

"Is it a snowy heron or a young girl dejected, standing in the snow?" were the introductory lines of the poem "Sagi

Musume (Snowy Heron)" read with sensitivity by Ron Nakahara and interpreted with consummate delicacy by Sachiyo Ito. Clad all in white with a silver obi around her waist, the tiny Japanese looked plaintively frail. Her movements — a sad tilt of the head, a twist of the shoulders, a curving inward of the body — spoke of ineffable grief, while the parasol she twirled in her hand told of time's inevitable passing. Gradually sinking to the earth, she faded into the snowy background, her loosened black hair falling in disarray.

The most revealing moment came in the final "Chieko: The Elements," a solo danced to the rippling harmonies of Dan Erkkila's musical setting of Kotro Takamura's poems to his wife, Chieko, who became insane as the result of the conflict of being both artist and the wife of an artist. Here,

Sachiyo Ito's artistry rose to the height of true tragedy. Chieko is quietly mad; she seeks refuge in nature. We see her surrounded by limitless space as though on the edge of the ocean; self-enwrapped, she sits as it were on the sand playing with imaginary shells, watching the flight of a seagull, and, most touching of all, brought briefly back to reality by the taste of a lemon given to her by her invisible husband. With the simplest of gestures, Ito creates the fragile life of withinness, while in the background, the bass koto's sonorous melodies played by Reiko Kamata and the poem's rhythmic cadences spoken and sung by Ellen Gould and Claire Padien paint the world that surrounded Chieko during her seven years of agony. Is it drama, is it dance, is it sculpture, is it music? With Sachiyo Ito, there are no divisions. All arts become one.