

WASHINGTON MARKET REVIEW

Dance

Sachiyo Ito: East Meets West

When the stage of the Theatre of the Riverside Church suddenly blazes with light, there materializes before us a glimpse of another world. A Japanese *shirabyōshi* dancer, laden with gold-threaded kimono, lacquered wig, and fan, stands facing squarely front. A plaintive *nagauta*, or song, swells forth, lamenting, "there are only pine trees beside the cherry blossoms in full bloom." The short figure, made massive by her sumptuous robes, begins to dance. She moves slowly, inching one foot in front of the other. A few decided sweeps of the arm, a decisive turn of the head, seem to be all the dance is made of, but their execution is so fiercely concentrated that the gestures remain imprinted in our mind.

This is Sachiyo Ito, performing the role of the dancing girl in the *kabuki* dance drama *Kyōganoko Museme Dōjōji*. The work dates from 1753, when it was first adapted from a *noh* dance. That Ito is capable of performing such a work testifies to her rigorous train-

ing at Japan's celebrated Hanayagi School; that she is able to mount parts of it and other classic Japanese dances in New York speaks of her determination to foster a kind of dance little known in the west.

Ito has lived in the United States since 1972. In addition to her concerts of classic dances, which range from *noh* to *kabuki* to the sort of folk dance known as *bon odori*, Ito choreographs her own works, drawing heavily on her extensive background in traditional Japanese stage techniques. She also teaches at New York University and at the Japanese-American Association of New York.

Beginning her concert with *Dōjōji*, Ito immediately demonstrates her technical expertise. (Doing so is like a ballerina starting with Petipa: you show what high standards you're capable of.) As choreographed by Tomijuro Nakamura I, *Dōjōji* relates the legend of Kiyohime, who loved the priest Anchin in vain. In pursuit of her lover, Kiyohime turns herself into a

snake. She coils herself around the temple bell where Anchin is hiding and melts the bell with the heat of her passion. This dramatic scenario hints at *Dōjōji*'s origins in *noh*, which typically deals with the supernatural or the gods, and not with ordinary people. However, the action is not related with the histrionics we might expect from similarly heightened plots in western opera. Ito's dance is both stately and meditative. It is also mesmerizing. At the conclusion of the six short dances that made up this section of the program, the audience sat stunned before bursting into enthusiastic applause.

Perhaps as a way mediating between these visually beautiful, but kinetically austere, dances and her audience, Ito has a pair of monks, played by Mel Glonson and Tom Leng, joke about mundane affairs while she's offstage changing costume. This is not a risk worth taking. Each subsequent incarnation of the exquisite Ito is worth waiting for, but the pleasurable anticipation is considerably lessened by having to listen to these two. It might be better simply to let us sit and absorb the visions Ito has left trailing, like perfume, across the stage.

But the true tour de force of the evening came at its end, with *Yagura No Oshichi*, or *Oshichi at the Watchtower*. Ito's great skill here is to enact a section of a play first presented in 1706 in the *Bunraku*, or puppet theater. She therefore appears as a puppet (supported by the hooded—thus "invisible"—Cathy Prins, Leola Roberts, and Robert Scaglione).

which itself represents the human Oshichi. The *kabuki* dancer's chalk white makeup normally appears mask-like; here, the confounding of human and theatrical roles furthers the mysterious web. At the conclusion, with Oshichi straining desperately to strike the watchtower's drum, and thereby save her beloved's life, Ito unites dancing and acting in a riveting display. Even at the height of her frenzy, Ito's serenity and strength of spirit are absolute.

—Gary Parks



Sachiyo Ito, Japanese classical dancer.