

DANCE Who Are the
Watchers, Who the Dancers?

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Sachiyo Ito, the image of woman as willow

By Deborah Jowitt

SACHIYO ITO, an expressive and powerful performer, is, at the same time, touchingly delicate; she can create an illusion of such fragility that you can hardly believe she can support the weight of her elaborate black wigs or hats or the layers of kimonos that swaddle her. One of the highlights of her expert program at Japan House was *Nakazato Bushi*, an Okinawan court dance. Wearing a bell-like hat, clacking two pieces of wood together, she seems infinitely refined, her body turning and twisting, bent knees pressed together, feet stepping gently. The pieces of wood emphasize her sudden occasional stops. It's an image of woman as willow—strength through pliancy.

Ito has also staged two wonderful excerpts from Japanese dramas—one from a Kabuki play of 1843, the other dating from 1914. In the former, *Kyo Ningyo*, she is a statue of a courtesan who comes to life much to the delighted amazement of the woodcarver who made her. At first she is stiff, imitating her creator's gestures with jerky care. But, of course, he doesn't want her to be like him, he wants her to behave as the beautiful Umegae would. When he slips a mirror of Umegae's into her kimono, her gestures become supple and seductive. The celebrated Sahomi Tachibana brings skill and wit to her portrayal of the woodcarver—a cheery little man who accepts the problems and delights of a glamorous life-sized doll with bumbling eagerness.

In *Onatsu Kyoran*, Ito plays a girl demented over the death of her lover. She wanders and staggers, leaning back slightly as she walks, dropping to the floor like a puppet whose strings have been let go. Her head wobbles on her neck. In this tale, Tachibana again plays a man—a drunken horse groom. In the midst of this pathetic tale, we laugh at his bandy-legged walk, at his greed for the bottle, even at the way he rocks on the outsides of his feet and scuttles away when he realizes this beauty is crazy. The play also features some very small children, evidently trained and directed by Ito. They play little dance games with ropes—always tidy and channeled, back and forth, up and down—and with innocent cruelty torment the heroine.

All their parents were there with flash cameras. And I could hardly—even though outraged—blame them. ■