

DANCE

A Choreographer Who Connects With Stones and Trees

By GIA KOURLAS JAN. 23, 2018

The Japanese choreographer Kei Takei never knows what kind of dance she's going to make until she starts making it. But a good walk helps.

“For my stone dances, I was just walking on the street one day and I found a sudden connection with a rock,” she said in a telephone interview from Tokyo.

She picked it up and could sense reverberations. “It’s like a creative message,” she said. “I follow it and see where it leads me.”

It’s been 17 years since Ms. Takei, whose ritualistic, expressive dances value the natural world, last presented work in New York, but on Jan. 25 she returns with her company, Moving Earth Orient Sphere, as part of the Lumberyard in the City Winter Festival.

Adrienne Willis, Lumberyard’s executive and artistic director, said that the focus of this season’s festival is not only women but also on female choreographers and directors whose work has been absent from New York stages in recent years. “We started with Kei,” she said. “I had never seen her work live. I had only studied it or heard about it or worked with people who had been influenced by it,” including the choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar.

“She always talks about Kei,” Ms. Willis continued. “There was a moment where we were sitting around and said, ‘What about Kei Takei? I wonder what she’s doing?’ ”

Ms. Takei, who came to New York in 1967, moved back to Tokyo in 1992 to raise her son. There, she continued to choreograph and perform, but her engagements

here have been irregular.

Ms. Willis said: “Her work is still studied and appreciated. It was funny that nobody was ever like, ‘Kei, do you want to come back to the U.S.?’ ”

The Lumberyard festival will also highlight work by the playwright and performance artist Robbie McCauley (in “Sugar,” Feb. 1-3) and the choreographer, dancer and visual artist Dana Reitz (in “Latitude,” Feb. 8-10). For Ms. Takei, it’s a chance to present two works, one new and the other vintage.

Both come from her “Light” cycle, which she began in 1969. In “Part 8,” a solo from 1974, Ms. Takei uses fabric to tie herself up in knots, and in “Part 44 (Bamboo Forest),” which is to have its New York premiere, she explores imagery related to bamboo. It’s a work for 12 dancers to whom she’s drawn, she said, for their “expressive virtuosity.”

Ms. Takei, who wouldn’t reveal her age, still dances in her works and was a featured artist in “Beyond the Mainstream,” a 1980 presentation of “Great Performances: Dance in America” that focused on new dance. Many of the choreographers in it hailed from the postmodern collective Judson Dance Theater.

But Ms. Takei, who studied at Juilliard, beginning in 1967, wasn’t part of that crowd. Instead she formed a company, which she later named Moving Earth because, she explained, “we all move and we are on the earth.”

She paused. “Sometimes moving companies make a mistake.” Ms. Takei spoke with some translation help from her husband, Lazuro Brezer, who is Moving Earth’s associate director. “We get a lot of calls from people looking for furniture moving companies,” Mr. Brezer explained. “Or people trying to sell us earth-digging tractors.”

Ms. Takei confirmed this with a giggle. What follows are excerpts from the conversation.

How did you end up at Juilliard?

It was through Anna Sokolow [the politically conscious American choreographer and dancer]. She came to Japan and held a workshop. You had to show a dance to Anna, and she said that my dance was honest. I was very

surprised. I didn't have much technique or style, and there were a lot of really technically strong dancers jumping and flying around.

What was your Juilliard experience like?

I thought I learned modern dance in Japan, but it was totally different. American modern dance had a style — there was the Martha Graham style or the José Limón style. I was very discouraged. My English wasn't very good, so it was very hard. But Lucas Hoving was teaching composition class and that was the one class that I really enjoyed. That was the only A I got at Juilliard. Some of the others were Fs. After two years, I finally I had to give up.

Where did you go?

I went to the Henry Street Settlement. I looked for other things. I went to those places where people came from other countries, like Peru or Chile, and those dancers looked like me. They couldn't speak much English, they were kind of sitting in the corner of a studio, but they were very strong. And the passion they had! So I made my group with those people.

What did you want to express that wasn't being expressed in American modern dance?

My work doesn't start with technique. I had to find my own individual movement — movement that was honest and real for me. I lived near the Hudson River and I walked around a lot. I missed classes when I was walking. But I needed to find my dance.

What did you discover?

One fall day, there were dry leaves on the ground. I was walking in them, and I kind of found part one of "Light." I had this realization that I was going to make a dance using the leaves. In "Light, Part 1," three women and I do a very simple movement with cloth bags filled with dry leaves on our backs. That's the sound, and I am mostly rolling around on the floor in a large pile of dried leaves.

In your new work, you've landed on bamboo.

Bamboo is a very special plant in Japan and also for me. I like the movement. They can bend over and become wild, but when they are not moving they really

become silent and still. There is an ancient feeling and also a spiritual feeling. Also, the bamboo blossoms every 60 or 120 years and when the blossoms start, young or old, every tree begins to blossom and then they all die together. It's like self-sacrifice in the trees and that is a nice, strong life feeling.

Why is walking such an important part of your creative process?

It's grounding and away from daily life. It cleans up my spiritual side. It's finding the essence of me.

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