

The New York Times

Reviews: Summoning Spirits and Dancing in Latex Body Bags



Koma performing his solo work "The Ghost Festival" at St. Mark's Church. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

By Siobhan Burke

May 16, 2017

A Man and His Apparitions

KOMA, 'THE GHOST FESTIVAL'

Performed May 11 through 13 at St. Mark's Church, Manhattan.

Walking past St. Mark's Church in the East Village last Thursday night, pedestrians slowed to look at the man in billowy white on top of a trailer, raising a white flag. It was Koma Otake, in the closing moments of his new work, "The Ghost Festival." Having spent the past hour summoning spirits, he looked like an apparition himself.

Koma, known by his first name, built a career over four decades with his wife, Eiko Otake; until recently, Eiko & Koma, as they call themselves, were best known as a pair, an inseparable unit, celebrated for meditative, sculptural performances that evoked a vastness of space and time.

But in the past several years, their paths have diverged, with Eiko developing her site-specific series “A Body in Places,” and Koma nursing a foot injury. “The Ghost Festival,” presented by Danspace Project, is his first multidisciplinary solo work. As a soloist, Koma revels freely in qualities that were more concealed in the couple’s collaborations, just as Eiko has on her own: a whimsy, slyness and almost slapstick sensibility. It’s a pleasure to see this other side come out of hiding.

A performance and installation (the trailer is part of it), all created by Koma, “The Ghost Festival” is inspired by Owara Kaze no Bon, a dance festival in Toyama Prefecture, Japan, near his birthplace, Niigata. Like visitors to that gathering, he’s paying homage to his ancestors, artistic ones at least. And though he doesn’t name them, they appear in the changing states of his roguish dancing (to tango music) and in the shadowy figures painted on 24 panels, displayed in the church sanctuary and outside in Abe Lebewohl Park. (The show starts inside and migrates outdoors.)

While Koma’s injured foot is strong enough to dance on, there’s a fragility to “The Ghost Festival,” a playful undercurrent of reckoning with vulnerability and age, whether he’s tossing off a debonair spin or getting stuck under a ballet barre.

There’s also a recklessness, as when he clambers atop the trailer — whose open doors reveal candles floating on water — and tries to drag a painting with him. It’s not the only time he reaches longingly for a canvas and the ghosts he’s conjured there.

Editors’ Picks

While they may have eluded him, Eiko was close by. In a prelude to this performance, Koma knelt at the trailer’s edge, as she, by his side, scooped water from a bowl and let it stream down his back.



From left, Alex Mugler, François Chaignaud and Cecilia Bengolea in “Dub Love,” at Dia: Beacon. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Team Work and Body Bags

FRANÇOIS CHAIGNAUD AND CECILIA BENGOLEA

Repeats May 19 through 21 at Dia:Beacon, Beacon, N.Y.; diaart.org.

The duo François Chaignaud and Cecilia Bengolea, who are not married, have a shorter history, having collaborated for 12 years. (He's from France, and she's from Argentina; they met in Paris in 2004.) But like Eiko & Koma, they're known, at least for now, for their work as a team.

Last weekend, Dia:Beacon presented a selection of their works in its cavernous basement gallery, under the eerie green hues of Dan Flavin's permanent lighting installation.

The most alluring was their 2009 "Sylphides" (not to be confused with Michel Fokine's 1909 ballet, "Les Sylphides"), in which Mr. Chaignaud, Ms. Bengolea and two other dancers perform inside of black latex body bags. Some are fully inflated, blown up into pillowlike shapes that rock side to side; others, deflated, conform to the contours of the dancers' bodies, transforming them into what look like oil-slicked statues.

The program opened with Gregorian chanting from some of the bag-encased performers, creating a mystery and humor that the final (and longest) piece, "Dub Love," could have used more of. Set to a blaring dub and reggae soundtrack (mixed live), this 2014 work puts club dancing in point shoes, along with other moves you wouldn't expect to see on point. It's an odd mix that hasn't quite found itself, and maybe doesn't want to.

A version of this article appears in print on May 17, 2017, Section C, Page 2 of the New York edition with the headline: Reviews: Summoning Spirits and Dancing in Latex Body Bags. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

Published: The New York Times, 2017-05-16
www.nytimes.com/2017/05/16/arts/dance/review-koma-danspace-ghost-festival-francois-chaignaud-cecilia-bengolea-sylphides-dia-beacon.html