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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

In the End, Emotions, Not Cleverness, Truly Stir the Soul By MARGO JEFFERSON

Recently a friend sent me an essay on the meaning of the avant-garde. Eugene Ionesco had written it in 1964. As he is still being hailed, along with Beckett, as a lion of avant-garde theater and as his plays are still being produced ("The Chairs" will be done at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in December), I reread it eagerly. In his writing Ionesco liked to make a show of authority, then contradict it with equal authority. (This piece was from a book he called "Notes and Counter Notes.")

"We all agree that an avant-garde is revolutionary," Ionesco wrote. It trumpets the new and looks completely new - at first. Most revolutions, though, are also "a turning back, a reappraisal" of forms that have been forgotten or declared pass • Ionesco called the meeting of the old and new a "union between the historical and the unhistorical, the topical and the untopical."

The point is: Artists find new ways to give form to what he called the "changeless basic material we find inside ourselves." This is why it was so thrilling to see Jane Comfort and Company at the Joyce Theater last week, and to have seen the dance pair Eiko and Koma three times this season. What I long to see in the world around me today is more of the "changeless basic material" used by all truly brave artists: the changeless basic material of passion.

So much self-declared new art touts its intellectual credentials. There are elaborate displays of technique, anti-technique and the artist's thoughts about both. There is technological know-how. There is language filled with theory, irony and constantly updated cultural references. There is a shortage of unembarrassed emotion, of passion in all its variety.

Ms. Comfort is a true dance-theater artist with her own physical language - very exact, but using the whole body. Everything feels fresh yet ancient in "Persephone," her meditation on the Greek myth. Tigger Benford's score, based on Javanese gamelan music, does not sound derivative and gives us a sense of ritual and delicate formality. Our first vision is of women in white on a white stage - a vision of serenity. Demeter (Aleta Hayes), the goddess of vegetation, and her daughter, Persephone (Cynthia Bueschel Svigals), are seated on the ground. Four women and one man stand behind them. All move their arms and torsos in a quiet, undulating rhythm. The mother and daughter step

across the floor together; Demeter's arm cradles Persephone's. They sing together - a quiet chant. The others turn, jump and cartwheel gently. It is an earthly paradise. But its lulling movements hint that when nothing changes, even paradise is not enough.

Hades enters quietly, dressed in red, and stands on the side watching. In the original myth, he kidnaps Persephone. Here he does not. Ms. Comfort gives Persephone consciousness. She is ambivalent; she makes choices. And she deepens emotionally. Hades compels; he is erotic, not rapacious. Persephone is drawn to him because he is drawing out her desires. She is excited and fearful; she turns back guiltily, then quickly moves forward. When Demeter realizes her daughter is gone, the sounds that come from her throat - tonal moans, rising to a "NO," then a long, terrible cry - have the raw force of tragedy. The strips of white that covered the stage are slowly ripped up, revealing the black stage underneath. The earth goes barren while Demeter mourns.

In the underworld Persephone is aroused and repelled. Sex takes place while creatures hurl themselves about and cavort frantically. Hearing her mother's anguished call, Persephone flees back to earth. All is restored. They are happy for a time. But the old ways, the calm rituals of planting, sowing, tending the earth, are not enough. The old ways never are when one has had a profound new experience.

Eiko and Koma came to the United States from Japan in 1976. They are dance, theater and environmental artists. Nature is their landscape. (To say "theme" would be to make them sound a bit pompous. Nothing about their work is at all pompous.) To watch them is to feel you are watching creatures in a state of metamorphosis, human to animal to plant and back to human. Often they begin curled and twisted up at opposite ends of the stage - mysterious organisms. With slow, infinite care a leg extends centimeter by centimeter; an arm seems to move as slowly as a growing tree limb might. It takes such control. When their bodies finally meet and attempt some organic connection, it feels overwhelming. Agonizing, too, sometimes.

In "Tree Song," which they performed last summer in the graveyard of St. Mark's Church, white makeup mingled with dirt. They seemed like creatures stranded on a post-nuclear world, part human and part mutant. In "Mourning," which they performed at the Asia Society in August, their nakedness felt primal but not at all sexual - they embodied the process of being stripped bare by emotion. And in "Snow," which was part of the recent City Center Dance Festival, they became part of a winter world. Their bodies moved ever so slightly on the ground; snowflakes began to move in the air. Their bodies tested space; snow drifted through space. Their bodies clung and twisted together, then went still. The snow kept falling. I don't think anyone in the theater dared to breathe.

For Eiko and Koma and for Jane Comfort's dancers, every movement arises from an emotion or prepares us for one. Nothing looks too symbolic or virtuosic. Nothing is extraneous to the story. And through it all there is the pure beauty of dance, of bodies attuned to music, to one another and to the space they live in.

