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Japan visit inspires new dance

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Each year the restless mind of Randy James finds new material to investigate. This gutsy modern dance choreographer from New Brunswick goes out foraging and shares his discoveries at an annual concert with a loyal public.

His investigations always represent a challenge, a way of setting the bar a little higher for himself and for his company.

In his last evening-length dance, "The Hungarian Project," James stayed close to home, plunging into the inner world of family traditions and the experience of immigrating to America.

The exquisite new piece that Randy James Dance Works showed last weekend at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick headed outward in a different direction. "Looking East," a reflection on the choreographer's experiences last summer in Japan, processed the unfamiliar and exotic, conjuring a Japanese fantasy from scraps of memory. James couldn't have traveled farther from his old neighborhood.

While the movement style of "Looking East" seemed familiar (this was James' dream, after all), the choreographer departed from custom by emphasizing stillness as well as energetic action. This is a choreographer enamored of physicality, who loves driving movement for the sheer joy of it. Yet under the influence of Japanese aesthetics, James stopped, however briefly, to contemplate the virtue of slowly evolving rituals, economy of gesture and actual immobility.

Portions of "Looking East" displayed James' old verve, yet other parts resisted the distraction of flying bodies and allowed the audience to observe scenes of carefully arranged elements, suggesting a harmonious society in which everything had its place. The dance focused on elegant details and breathed a delicate atmosphere. It could be soothing and sensual, as well as exuberant, and at one point two dancers bathed in an onstage rainstorm.

Assisting James were the remarkable set piece and lighting by John Lasiter, which situated the action within a transparent white room like a Japanese portico open to the air. A narrow bed of gravel marked the downstage boundary that separated this magical space from the real world.

Lasiter's lighting was a show by itself, dividing the stage and transforming the set with shades of white that ranged from cream to silvery moonlight, darkening at times to gray, and once to beige. Colorful costumes by Kim Lennox and Nancy Swolensky contrasted with these pale hues. The commissioned score by Jason Berg had a jazzy flair, while incorporating some traditional Japanese instruments that added to the sense of place. This was a spectacular environment in which to dance.

James' references to the sights he saw in Japan were all abstracted and absorbed into the choreography's timeless flow. An episode in which the dancers gathered downstage to make faces at the audience suggested theatrical masks, but not even an expert on sumo wrestling would have recognized the traditional squat and thigh slapping of the wrestlers in this context. James only hinted at narrative in a dramatic first-act trio for Ricky Santiago, Missy Pfohl Smith and Elizabeth Spatz, which recurred in the second act.

Ying-Ying Shiau, a dancer whose solemn demeanor concealed electric energy, became a frequent focus, wandering through the dance like a spirit. The piece closed with her standing on one leg, in a quiet image of asymmetry and balance that for all its Western modernity seemed very Japanese.