

nihon buyô japanese classical dance 101

by colleen lanki

*"The most important thing in nihon buyô is the koshi (the centre of gravity, the pelvis).
The second most important thing is the eyes."*

Fujima Yûko (1929-2003), Classical Japanese Dance master performer and teacher

The origins of nihon buyô (Japanese classical dance) are found in 17th century kabuki theatres and pleasure quarter teahouses. It is a form of dance designed to tell stories, depict characters, and express emotions. It can be astonishingly elaborate - danced by a virtuoso actor in gorgeous costumes; it can also be breathtakingly elegant - performed in a simple room by an eighty-year old geisha. It requires lifelong study and commitment to the art; my teacher, Fujima Yûko, began her training at age six, started teaching at age sixteen, and died of heart fail-



Photo courtesy of Colleen Lanki: Colleen Lanki, 2005, Vancouver BC

ure after a performance at the National Theatre of Japan at age 73.

Nihon buyô is traditionally performed to the music of the three-

stringed shamisen along with the voice. The lyrics of the songs are generally what determine the choreography, with some movements being mimetic (although stylized) while others are either emotive or decorative. In some shows, the dancer portrays only one character that changes mood or attitude during the performance. In other shows, a performer will transform and depict a variety of male or female characters, animals, plants, natural phenomenon like the rain or mist, or even inanimate objects. The main props used in these dances are fans and long pieces of cloth, which are used to represent a number of things: doorways, mountains, mirrors, falling leaves, water, or a love letter.

Training in nihon buyô is through oral transmission. A student learns entire pieces by dancing behind his/her teacher, copying every movement and stylistic trait. In this way, not only is a lineage of choreographies passed down through generations of dancers, but also a lineage of style. An astute observer can tell by the way a dancer holds his/her hands, or through the pacing of a certain dance, who the performer's teacher is. After some years of training, a teacher may give the student a professional dance name, consisting of the "family" name showing the school of dance, and a "given" name using part of the teacher's name and adding some-



Photo courtesy of Colleen Lanki: Fujima Yûko, 2003, Tokyo Japan

thing original. It is not just a teacher/student relationship that is created, but one like a parent and child, with heavy responsibilities on both sides.

The traditional nature of nihon buyô does not negate the creation of new dances, or its evolution into an international dance form. Groups such as Konokai create new works to contemporary music, and even dancers with more traditional ideas adapt old dances, or create original choreographies to traditional music. My own teacher created many new dances, including one based on the character of Lady Macbeth. She also toured Europe conducting workshops and performing in order to introduce nihon buyô to non-Japanese dancers and audiences. In spite of its 300 year-old history and rich legacy of dances passed down through the generations, nihon buyô is a living art form that remains timely, offering us a rich mode of expression and entertainment.

Colleen Lanki has been studying nihon buyô for over 10 years (7 years with Fujima Yûko while living in Tokyo, and currently with Fujima Shôgô on trips back to Japan). She holds the professional name Fujima Sayû. Colleen will be performing five new choreographies based on nihon buyô forms, in The Komachi Variations on January 15, 2006, 8pm at The Dance Centre. Please visit www.rhizomeproductions.com for more information. ♪