



Artful Disorder: H. Art Chaos at ADF

by Kate Dobbs Ariail

June 29, 2009, Durham, NC: Dance is so closely associated with life that it was deeply jarring to watch H. Art Chaos' *Flowers of the Bones*. The work, by choreographer Sakiko Oshima, set on her company, is occupied with death — if not death everlasting, then death by metamorphosis and transformation. The morgue-like lighting, cold and greenish, chilled the skin, and the hard tables ranked back through the stabbing shadows signaled death's implacability. There was something medical about the scenes in the company's world premiere performance of the [American Dance Festival](#)-commissioned work in Reynolds Theater, but the only healing offered was that of resignation to the inevitable.

But this death or dying is not a still thing, although the dance opens with a frozen image — a stiff horizontal body hanging high above the stage. When they begin to act, the dancers embody a force moving between the worlds of desiccated bone and resilient flesh. The sharp geometries of spatial and lighting design reinforce the sense of intersecting worlds. Working off reverberating musical chords and aerial harnesses, the dancers bounce and drill and spring back, in uneasy travel. Strange and graceful — perhaps intercessory — long-tailed creatures flow through the space, disturbing the atmosphere, before the final stillness: The aerialist lies rigid on a table, in an open coffin of light.

Although initially seeming spare, the production design of *Flower of the Bones* is rich and so thoroughly thought-out that it is difficult to tease apart the elements. You can almost hear the light and feel the music in your eyes. You actually can hear the swishing of the long-tailed costumes — made of bunched, gathered, tattered silks by designer Shinjiro Asatuki — as they move among the strange notes of recent music by Robert Normandeau, David Darling, and Alan Terricciano (the latter commissioned by ADF). The choreography itself is not quite as interesting as the dancing, especially that of lead Shino Kido, but the entire spectacle is satisfyingly theatrical.

Also on the program was Oshima's compelling, deeply female, 1995 interpretation of *The Rite of Spring*, set to a full orchestral version of the Stravinsky music. (Oshima says she choose the Seiji Ozawa recording for its "exactness.") The sacrifice here is a rape that has happened before we are there to witness it — but others have witnessed it, and Oshima explores their complicity in the violence.

When the piece begins, we see overturned furniture, a lamp lying on the floor, a bathtub, and a crumpled dress nearby. The tub hints at ritual cleansing, and it is used for that — but, the work seems to say, for some stains no cleansing is adequate. Dancer Naoko Shirakawa, who with Oshima founded H. Art Chaos in 1989, takes us through all the painful stages of rape's aftermath, completing the seasonal sacrifice with an arm-slashing suicide, before the cathartic moments when she returns to wash the world with ferocious sprays of life-giving water in a scene as painterly as it is kinetic.

This program by H. Art Chaos is the kind of thing die-hard ADF fans live for from year to year. It is always thrilling to see the big, polished companies, especially when they bring new work, but the chance to see highly-crafted experimental strangeness from the far world is the Festival's special gift to its attendees.

The ADF continues through July 25. See our [calendar](#) for details.