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Noru Ka Soru Ka is an international collective of Japanese dancers and musicians from the US and Switzerland. Their exciting, dynamic performances challenge category and style. Noru Ka Soru Ka's audiences encounter everything from provocative sensuality, to martial arts inspired athleticism, to driving rhythmic percussion and furious walls of electronic sound and dance. Noru Ka Soru Ka has thrilled audiences in Europe, Asia, and the United States.

Performers are Makoto Matsushima (Dance, Voice), Mao Arata (Dance), Georg Hofmann (Percussion) and Mike Nord (Guitar, Electronics).

Noru Ka Soru Ka is Japanese for „bend or break“ or also „take the leap“ describing the performers' risktaking curiosity performing on stage. Makoto Matsushima and Mao Arata work together since 18 years, mostly as members of the internationally acclaimed group Pappa Tarahumara. Georg Hofmann and Mike Nord collaborate since 30 years in different Jazzgroups and inter-art projects releasing several CDs on Leo Records.

Noru Ka Soru Ka emerged in 2006 from a chance conversation between Mike Nord, at the time visiting professor at Tokyo International University in Kawagoe, and promoter Miki Sugiura at a local restaurant. Their chat lead to an impromptu performance collaboration between the musical group Carr Nord Hofmann Maddox, and Japanese dancers Makoto Matsushima, Mao Arata and Kenzo Kusuda at Session House, a center for contemporary dance and new music in Tokyo.

Inspired by the Tokyo performance, Noru Ka Soru Ka reunited in Oregon during June, 2007 to rehearse, experiment, record and videotape, producing the DVD 6 Etudes. Their culminating performance at Willamette University's Hudson Hall was rewarded with a standing ovation from an enthusiastic audience.

The core of the group Mike Nord, Mao Arata, Makoto Matsushima and Georg Hofmann have continued Noru Ka Soru Ka as a quartet, developing a unique collaborative approach to dance-theater and music. Their rich, sensual language fuses East and West, experimental and ancient.

In Spring 2011 Noru Ka Soru Ka appeared in highly successful performances in the US as well as in Switzerland, where they premiered before a European audience. The performance in Luzern, Switzerland is captured on the DVD releaseeasy!....Live at La Fourmi .



Noru Ka Soru Ka and Improvisation today

The first performance 2006 at Session House in Tokyo was an experiment. Miki Sugiura brought the artists together for introductions and a brief rehearsal one evening, and we were on stage the next. The Session House performance, to a packed audience, had many great moments. It also had the kind of panic moments that any two hours-old ensemble might experience. Nonetheless we were thrilled by the potential revealed in the work on stage, and the natural way it came together. While our roots and cultural references were different, our basic approaches meshed fantastically. There was much to be learned from a further exploration of both our differences and similarities. Ever curious and on the lookout for new artistic experiences, we agreed that the collaboration was rich in potential and should be developed.

Since 2011 Noru Ka Soru Ka tours as a quartet, refining and evolving its artistry as an ensemble, the inspirations to draw on, and the way we perform. Two important ideas, central to Noru Ka Soru Ka's approach of improvisation, excite, challenge, and motivate the groupmembers as improvisational artists.

First is their sense of collaboration. Music and dance are equal partners in our performances. Any one member of the ensemble may establish a direction, or push the work in another in the midst of a piece. Either music or dance may be in the foreground or background at any given moment. Empathy and communication on stage are paramount.

Second is the desire to develop a unique, evocative fusion language. While drawing freely on the dance and theater traditions of East and West, Noru Ka Soru Ka performs without regard to reproducing a particular style of movement or sound other than our own. A performance moment may reveal inspiration from abstract to lyrical, tonal to atonal, or in other words from Noh to New Music, Aikido to Bach, or abstraction to Hip Hop.

The ensemble preparation process is focused and disciplined. Exploring ideas, experimenting with different combinations and colors "tools" are crafted. Perhaps most importantly, rehearsals are where the quartet builds the communication, empathy, and trust essential to their ability to take the leap in improvised performances in front of audiences. Reflection helps clarifying where to go next, and is key to our growth as ensemble artists.

Mike Nord, 2013

Mike Nord and Georg Hofmann collaborate in different groups and intermedia projects since 1984, when they met in the jazz-group NYZ. Additionally to playing Jazz and later free music and producing 5 CDs together, they cooperated in many international intermedia projects.

Makoto Matsushima and Mao Arata closely work together in PAPPA Tarahumara since 1997. Both participate regularly in side projects collaborating with all kinds of visual artists, musicians, dancers and sculptors.

These common histories of course help the process of creation in Noru Ka Soru Ka. Dancers and musicians already found their styles before collaborating in Noru Ka Soru Ka.

makoto matsushima



Makoto Matsushima is a founding member of internationally acclaimed Japanese dance theatre company PAPPA TARA-HUMARA with whom he has toured internationally for over 2 decades. In the Village Voice Deborah Jowitt reviewed his work at BAM as “nimble and powerfully expressive.” Matsushima has also appeared as an independent choreographer and performer participating in residencies and festivals in New York, Berlin, Macao, Hong Kong, Jakarta, Seoul, and Amsterdam to list just a few. Matsushima has developed a very original movement/voice art strongly influenced by Aikido, Iai, Kendo, Tai-chi and other Asian martial and chanting arts. His works are named ‘a spatial poem’ or ‘a humoristic lyrical critique’ that introduces new encounters and rediscoveries for the conflicting changing environment of urban Asia.

mao arata



Mao Arata started to dance with four years old. She joined PAPPATARAHUMARA in 1997. She has performed in Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, Europe, USA and Latin America with the group. As a freelance dancer/choreographer, she is actively engaged in creating solo dance pieces and collaborations with artists from other fields (musicians, object creators and sculptors). She also participates in regular performances given by NEWS, which is a dance unit made up of female performers of Pappa Tarahumara. She performed solo at the Guangdong of Modern Dance Festival. In China in 2008. In the Village Voice, Deborah Jowitz describes Arata's 2007 work at BAM as "uncannily beautiful; she can drop suddenly as if folding into soft earth."

mike nord



Mike Nord has performed and recorded original music in the US, Europe, Mexico, Japan, and Nepal with Carr Nord Hofmann, Crossing Borders, Steve Gorn/Benji Wertheimer and the WU Faculty Jazz group among others. As a composer and performer he has done interart collaborations with Ann Kresge, Noru Ka Soru Ka, Footprints, Matthew Nelson and more. Mike Nord has given improvisation workshops internationally, and co-chairs the Arts Technology and Multimedia program at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, where he teaches music technology and improvisational studies.

georg hofmann



Georg Hofmann is a freelance performer, composer and teacher. Recording/performance of original work with Charles Gayle, Ernst Reijseger, Pierre Favre, Robert Dick, Trevor Watts and Lucas Niggli among others. Leader of Shades of Time with Raul Tudon, Marimba and Steve Gorn, Bansuriflute. Active as a composer with commissioned work performed at Schauspielhaus Zurich, Stadttheater Konstanz, Ring Theater, Zurich, TMC Avantgarde Fashionshow and die lange Nacht der kurzen Geschichten, Zurich. Georg Hofmann teaches Drums and Improvisation at Konservatorium Winterthur, Switzerland.

reviews

Watching Makoto Matsushima's Rhythmic Moves

I regretted so much missing Makoto Matsushima's Hane-G from last year, because as one grows older, a loss in especially a dancer's body language is inevitable. Therefore this performance of Noru Ka Soru Ka is a must-see for me. Where Hane-G boasted Maquize's The Old Man with Enormous Wings as a point of departure, Noru Ka Soru Ka's show was simply named after the name of the group. The fact that the performance was mostly improvised (The collaboration with music, the solos and the duets) made it very hard to think of another name for it. However, it was the creative sparks which happened during the improvisation that mesmerized the audience. The performance was roughly divided into two halves. The first half was mainly solos by Makoto Matsushima and Mao Arata. The dance proceeded rhythmically in divided space. The music used a non-melodic electronic ambience for its main approach, constructing a spatial world for performance. The second half was mainly composed of duets, moving within the space constructed in the first half. There was additional electronic melody and electronic single notes, sculpting a texture of dissonance. On the other hand, the two dancers changed from boxing moves to dancing softly, the performance thus became very volatile and multi-dimensional. The performance of Makoto Matsushima still amazed me. In his solos, there was this rapid change of texture, fine and unique, like flowing liquid, transforming without a sound. And this transformed texture can be different in style and in motion. It truly is a unique style.

Wong Hon Leung, IATC Hong Kong

NORD/HOFMANN/MATSUSHIMA - The Music of Noru Ka Soru Ka

Leo Records CD LR 680

According to the sleeve notes accompanying this fascinating disc of improvised music the title of the group is a Japanese expression meaning 'bend or break' or even 'taking a risk' or 'making a leap'. The music was originally conceived to accompany improvisational dance, which is the part we can't see in this medium, but was thought by its creators to be sufficiently interesting to issue in purely audio form, a decision with which I must heartily agree.

There are no songs or tunes as such despite each piece bearing what might be construed as descriptive title. Instead we have a series of sound constructions or artefacts, to which the unseen dancer will, no doubt, add another important artistic dimension. The voice of Matsushima is a key element in the mix imparting, against ethereal electronic and percussive events, a largely wordless commentary in the form of sighs, breaths and guttural exclamations that recall a famous 1961 piece by the Italian avant-garde composer, Luciano Berio which featured the voice of his wife, the opera singer, Cathy Berberian. The piece in question, 'Visage', is challenging and provocative, even threatening at times whereas the music here is more meditative, dare I say 'spiritual' in that it has echoes of Balinese temple music, Buddhist chants, Japanese classical music, and devotional Islamic music with ululations and ecstatic cries, though in the final track it comes close to the aphasic incoherence of Berio's disturbing piece.

To experience in full the artistic intentions of this group as originally intended one would have to see the multi media event complete with dancer but for those who are in tune with the outer limits of musical expression the audio realisation will do very nicely until the whole package comes along in a video format. Perhaps YouTube will oblige.

Euan Dixon, Jazzviews, November 2013

Cultural Intersections in the music of Noru Ka Soru Ka. CD LR 680

History tells us that jazz has had a dance, but also the free improvisation has had its own dance: there are numerous performances that bind improvisers and special dancers. The Improvisation provides visual images and the dance projects them, utilizing the same freedom profuse in the sounds. We are also very far from the movements of jazz dance as well as it has developed from swing until the sixties because the movements in the free improvisation have products a change: they have lost their original attachment to the syncopated rhythm and have adjusted to the models derived from contemporary dance. So in the free dance the poses have become decisive, they have assumed a different fluidity and variability that is essential for transfer (through the physicality of the roles of the dancers) those same conquests that have been made in music (the freedom in the “harmonic” rules of the movements, aleatoric gestures, jumps, and so on).

U.S. guitarist Mike North (guitar and electronics) and Swiss percussionist Georg Hofmann have experienced a lot of this type of approach between music and dance, in fact they have gone beyond their primary purposes, seeking new expressive land between the free improvisation and one of its parents, namely the oriental culture; the project has been implemented with the dancers Mao Arata and Makoto Matsushima; the latter, in addition to being a dancer, is also a singer. The decision to translate into an official record their live performances made during the tour of the autumn of 2012, also has a very specific motivation; “Noru ka Soru ka” is a Japanese word meaning “bend or break”, and is a term that well reflects the artistic content of the project: of course, the cd does not allow visual feedback (which I would say is essential in this type of events)*, but the music works to compensate for this lack revealing a fascinating and suspensive sound, where “Western” settings of the two musicians (you can hear remnants of Frisell and Sharpe on the one hand, Pierre Favre and Centazzo on the other hand) approach almost naturally the “Oriental” settings: this is a type of sound, perfect for encouraging the gradual changes of the Japanese.

Matsushima has developed (over many years of experience) his own style influenced by some martial arts and a certain type of pragmatic singing of his country, someone called it “poetic space”, referring to the choreography composed for to denounce the undeniable stress of the great urban centers. Probably this is the profound meaning of “bend or break”, ie the desire to find an environmental balance that involves all elements of our live (men, principles, religions, and so on), reworking the true sense of our troubles. This cd is a wonderful piece of art that will fascinate you with candor in some areas of music that are unfortunately still too often neglected by the global establishment.

DANCE REVIEW | PAPPÀ TARAHUMARA

A Seascape Dotted by Chaotic Bursts Some theatrical pieces inspire a vague and intermittent boredom as they are performed, yet feel worthwhile by the time you emerge, blinking, into the theater lobby. Such was “Ship in a View,” a work performed by the Japanese dance-theater company Pappà Tarahumara, which opened at the Brooklyn Academy of Music on Wednesday night as part of the Next Wave Festival. “Ship in a View,” directed and choreographed by Hiroshi Koike, is a strange work that has an oddly familiar feel. Its austere aesthetic (a bluish-gray backdrop and vaporous lighting, a few chairs, an overturned bicycle, a ship’s mast center stage) and slow, stylized pace are often reminiscent of a Robert Wilson stagescape. And its vignettes of random human experience — a couple dancing gravely in each other’s arms, a woman laughing hysterically, a knife-wielding man silently stalking through a crowd — occasionally evoke Pina Bausch’s tragicomic dance epics. But Mr. Koike, who founded Pappà Tarahumara in 1982, is a skilled theater maker who knows how to create a world of his own. Here, that world seems to be near the sea, the sound of which resonates faintly as the piece begins with a miniature sailing ship rolling, dreamlike, across a darkened stage. When the lights come up, a woman staggers into the center, her mouth open in a silent agonized scream, and a group in long dark-gray coats walk slowly and implacably across the stage. It takes a moment to realize that the outpouring of sound overlaid on the humming electronic score (by Masahiro Sugaya) is coming from one of the women in the group, the first of the many dancers who sing wordlessly and powerfully throughout the piece. The song, like the dancing, seems to emerge irrationally and inevitably from the performers as they pass through their denuded landscape. And while the movement — a fairly conventional blend of modern dance with some ballet influences — is not especially remarkable, Mr. Koike has a truly choreographic skill at composing a stage picture, using techniques of fugue and canon to layer sequences of movement and provide an overarching logic to scenes of near, but not quite, chaos. The eventually predictable alternation between such near chaos and beached calm is the central weakness of “Ship in a View,” inducing a glazed-eyed state somewhere between hypnosis and boredom. But in a final section, Mr. Koike floats the silver-costumed dancers in near-Baroque displays of slow, courtly movement around two seated scarecrowlike cloth figures, one with a television for a head. It’s a mystery, but a perfect one. The village is a memory, the laughter and madness forgotten, the dancers finally at sea on that ship of the mind.

Roslyn Sulcas, New York Times, 2007

CLAUDIA LA ROCCO. *The New York Times*. March 4, 2006

Makoto Matsushima and Mariko Ogawa are separated by just a few feet at the end of Pappa Tara- humara's "Island," but they might as well be on different stages. Gazing into the rafters, their bodies finally still, they seem to contemplate alien worlds. Mariko Ogawa, seated, and Makoto Matsushima of Pappa Tarahumara in "Island," at the Japan Society. Or maybe they're looking up at the same night sky we all see. Some islands are closer to the mainland than others. This enigmatic work, directed by Hiroshi Koike, had its United States premiere on Thursday night at the Japan Society. It was the dance-theater troupe's New York debut as well, and one hopes the company will return with more strange offerings. (One also hopes that a more effective means of translation will be found, as the video screen off to one side of the stage forced irritating decisions between seeing and understanding.) Adapted from Gabriel García Márquez's story "A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings," the hourlong "Island" does not encourage synopses. In bursts of one-sided dialogue and narration, Ms. Ogawa describes how her husband threw himself, rather literally, into books after returning from a war. "I can only think he disappeared in maps he has drawn on books," she explains. Now an old woman, she searches the library for him, accompanied by Mr. Matsushima, who might be an old lover, her husband, a ghost, all of these things or none of the above. Early on, the two briefly dance, but their arms encircle the air between them instead of each other. Her crooning lullaby is ill matched to his rough howls; perhaps the soldier and his wife were so distanced by their long separation that they exist more truly for each other as memories than actual beings. Perhaps. But narrative meaning tells a narrower story than the one hinted at in their highly physical wanderings, punctuated by the two running circles around the bare stage, arms undulating like Mr. Márquez's wings. Their movements are sometimes mimetic, as when the two transform themselves, wonderfully, into puppets, and sometimes more dancery. But everything is done just so; the performers are never in doubt of their meaning, whether we are privy to it or no.

Ship In A View

From esteemed Japanese director Hiroshi Koike and his dance-theater troupe Pappa Tarahumara comes "Ship In A View", an ethereal spectacle that made its Bay Area premiere at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts on February 19th. Drawing on memories of his Japanese seaside home, Koike creates a haunting dream that combines technical gimmicks--such as a small, dark vessel sailing across the stage; a ship's propeller fan lowering from above the proscenium to fan a silk flag on a mast, a futuristic couple with computer screen heads, a horizon line of lights that rises up and down like shifts in sea level--with dancers emerging from shadows, moving at the pace of Noh theater or breaking out into the chaotic improvised movement or choreographed flurries.

"Ship In A View" is a hypnotic remembrance of Koike's seaside town: a dreamscape where vignettes small and large -- a woman calling out to sell soybeans, a brewing storm, factory workers on an assembly line that double as school kids raising their hands in response -- create a ghostly ritual of remembering, of both connecting to and separating from the past.

With its strong analogies to the sea and predominance of grey hues in the form of fog, smoke, the steel grey saturation of stage lighting to the gun grey to sea grey frocks of costumes, the audience is drawn into a visually seductive dream full of promise and silent apprehension. Will "Ship In A View" end revealing no more than the cool empty grey space it occupied at the beginning? Will it roll on as anti climatic as the lapping of waves, the way Japanese cinema often seems to Westerners? Created in 1997 and maintaining several of its original dancers, "Ship in a View" pushes and pulls like a vague rip tide - edited, unedited, improvised, choreographed, reworked and revisited - for one hour and thirty minutes without intermission. Dancers fill the stage like random driftwood, like a flock of seagulls moving in unison, or as forceful waves crashing against a jetty. They eat, smoke, pour water over their heads like climatic sexual fluids, slap, push, chant, roll, pirouette, walk, dance solo with a headless Victorian doll, set up props, take them away, light themselves with fluorescent tubes -- or sit (as one man does) solo in a wood chair Zen-like - unmoving as an antique photograph of a Japanese ancestor.

In the tradition of Noh Theater their facial expressions are a significant part of the choreography as is the intensity of gesture. Yet, departing from this style are arbitrary vocals, almost Celtic chants - ala Meredith Monk - or melodic lullabies that dancers randomly perform live while acting or dancing. With the aid of sophisticated sound technology, the vocalist/dancers trick us into thinking that their haunting cries are pre recorded. The sound is too crisp, especially from that corner of the stage, the voices too articulate to be -- live - with movement, and yet, it is live - as both magic and chaos continue.

Fortunately for both audience and the piece itself, "Ship In A View" gradually builds to a transcendental climax, when a shower of individual light bulbs descends upon the stage in a grid of rain. Ascending through this slow descending shower of lights, lying flat as a corpse on top of a modern sarcophagus, a dancer is drawn heavenward by four cables. The man from the wood chair --the stoic ancestor --, who sat rigid in one position throughout most of the performance, now walks like a breeze-blowing mist under a downpour of lights. The visual is pure, devastatingly beautiful... waking the audience from its dream, a dream that was never theirs.

David Moreno, culturevulture.net, San Francisco

technical ryder

Noru Ka Soru Ka is able to perform in virtually every possible setting from small theaters to big dance stages. Requirements are:

Stage:

Feathered stage floors and dancecarpets are of course fantastic, but no strict requirement.

Light:

Basic light with if possible blue and amber colors. Sidelights if possible

Depending on Budget Noru Ka Soru Ka travels with a light technician. There is no strict light plan though

Sound:

Pa-System with min. 2 monitor mixes, reverb/delay, 4 monitorspeakers or 3 monitors + 2 keyboard or bass amplifiers

1 Vocalmic

2 overhead

1-2 bassdrum (depending on how many bassdrums are used)

Drumset:

Minimum: Jazzset incl. seat (throne) and all hardware, 3-4 Cymbalstands
18" Bassdrum, 12" Tom, 14" Floortom, 14" Snaredrum

6 towels