

Sachiyo Ito Reflects on 30 Years of Teaching Japanese Dance in New York

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Osechi ryori, the traditional meal consumed by Japanese on New Year's Day, is filled with foods that symbolize fertility (herring roe), good health (sardines), and longevity (shrimp).

Japanese dancer and instructor Sachiyo Ito must have eaten a lot of shrimp, as she is entering her 31st year of teaching, choreographing, and performing traditional and contemporary Japanese and Okinawan dance in New York through her non-profit organization, Sachiyo Ito and Company. However, Ito attributes her longevity to the international flavor of the city and Western curiosity.

"Japanese dance seems unique," says Ito. "New Yorkers are sensitive to something new, something they haven't seen before. Here in New York there are people who are interested in seeing something from other cultures."

Sachiyo Ito and Company's performances introduce the uninitiated to elegant and beautiful kimono, the precise and exacting movements of Kabuki dance, and the contrasting liveliness of folk dances from Okinawa.

When Sachiyo Ito and Company celebrated its 30th anniversary by holding a concert at Ailey Citigroup Theater in October of last year, the group performed to a packed house, which surprised Ito given the state of the economy and the number of non-profits competing for donations.

But the sold-out show didn't surprise the mayor's office. So significant is Sachiyo Ito and Company's 30-year history in New York that the occasion of their anniversary concert prompted New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg to declare Sunday, October 23, 2011, "Sachiyo Ito and Company Day." In his proclamation that appears on the first page of the concert program, Mayor Bloomberg states, "Dr. Ito and members of her studio have worked

on everything from Broadway productions to experimental pieces, and the extent to which they have affected and diversified the performing arts in New York City is both impressive and far-reaching.”

A native of Tokyo, Ito started taking dance lessons at age six and later studied at the Fujima School of Japanese Dance. When she first taught dance lessons, many of her students were the wives of US military men stationed in Japan. Seeing an opportunity for teaching non-Japanese students – a kind of untapped market – Ito decided to take a chance in America. She left Japan, bringing with her centuries of traditional Japanese and Okinawan dance.

She came to New York in 1972, earning her M.A. and Ph.D. in Dance from New York University. She then taught at NYU and the Juilliard School and participated in educational programs for institutions such as the Japan Foundation, Japan Society, and Asia Society.

After giving a number of performances as a solo artist, Ito decided it was time to assemble a group of dancers. Thus, Sachiyo Ito and Company was born in 1981 “so that we can carry out the mission to promote friendship through dance, through the arts, through introducing Japanese culture,” says Ito.



Branding itself as the only dance company in New York to perform Japanese classical dance, Okinawan dance, and contemporary versions of both, Sachiyo Ito and Company brings Ito’s vision and choreography to events across the city. In April Ito’s group will perform in Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s Sakura Matsuri for the 31st consecutive year, making them one of only three acts to participate in the annual cherry blossom event every year since its inception. (Japanese Folk Dance Institute of New York and Ikebana artist Fumiko Allinder are the others.)

“I’m surprised [Brooklyn Botanic Garden] keeps asking us because there is so much interest in pop culture,” says Ito, referring to the Garden’s recent additions of a cosplay fashion show, manga and anime workshops, and performances by J-pop bands that appeal to a younger crowd.

To broaden the scope of Sachiyo Ito and Company, Ito conducts a Salon Series, held three times a year at Tenri Cultural Institute. Through these educational lecture/demonstrations, Ito compares aspects of Japanese dance to the dances of other cultures and collaborates with dancers and musicians of all genres.

In addition to performances and educational outreach, Ito continues to offer private dance lessons to twenty students, although not as many Americans as she had anticipated in the early 1970s.

“In terms of proportion, I have more Japanese young students in their 20s and 30s,” many who are studying modern dance in New York, says Ito. “By learning Japanese dance, they want to incorporate it in their [modern dance] performance, and they want to learn more about themselves, more about their own culture. Growing up they had more interests outside; they were attracted to something from the West or American culture. So now that they’re here, they think, ‘Oh, I should know more about my own culture and my own roots.’”

In essence Ito isn’t merely a dance teacher; by default she instructs her students in several aspects of Japanese language, history, and culture. The songs of the Okinawan court and folk dances she teaches contain Okinawan dialect, which is virtually unknown to Japanese people. The lyrics to Kabuki songs have lines from old waka (Japanese poetry) written in an ancient Japanese language that is no longer spoken. Ito turns into a history teacher when describing scenes from Kabuki and Okinawan dances that tell of court life and events that shaped Japan. Costumes play a major role in Japanese dance, and a lesson with Ito means a lesson in kimono culture: How to dress in the elaborate outfits, how to tie the obi (sash), how to use the fans and other props.

One reason Sachiyo Ito and Company has succeeded for three decades is that Ito receives great satisfaction in bringing these intricate pieces of Japanese culture to New York and seeing positive reactions from those she teaches and entertains. As Ito walked onstage at Ailey Citigroup Theater in October, some of her former students were in the sold-out crowd, including one of her first: A military wife who flew from Nevada to celebrate Ito’s milestone and to remind her of her longevity.

