

KNICKERBOCKER

PROFILE: SACHIYO ITO

Sharing Her Art With a Flick of Her Fan and a Flutter of Her Kimono Sleeve

By RUTH GRAHAM

Sachiyo Ito is like a bird. Graceful and refined, yet not the least bit fragile, she flew to New York from her native Tokyo 32 years ago, and now glides across the stage during her performances of traditional Japanese dance.

"If I am a snowy heron woman," she said, referring to a popular Kabuki dance, "I should be that, not Sachiyo Ito. Not thinking, 'My back hurts,' or 'The light in the corner is not good.' ... If I am intellectualizing something, the performance is not successful. I like to be in the dance. Just the sense of, 'I am moving.'"

Ms. Ito, 55, performed several dances in a recent show at Tenri Cultural Institute titled "Modernity in Tradition." A contemporary fan dance called "Mirage," which she choreographed in 1991, was delicate and flirtatious. For a new piece titled "Passing: By the Coral Reef," she donned a kimono with long fluttering sleeves. Through her gestures, Ms. Ito told a simple story of a day at the beach, invoking images of waves and sea creatures.

The dances were slow and elegant, with few sudden or forceful movements. The accompanying music was similarly minimalist; arrangements consisted of ephemeral compositions for stringed instruments, punctuated by brief percussive moments.

The style — of both the music and the dance — stood in sharp contrast with Western dance forms such as ballet, which often rely on dramatic orchestration and an athleticism that can be appreciated from the balcony. Ms. Ito's performance at Tenri, an intimate space, gave each audience member a close view of her movements and expressions. The room was packed, with many viewers forced to stand in the back.

The classical portion of the "Modernity in Tradition" program at Tenri focused on dance from Okinawa, a region located in the islands clustered in southern Japan. The area's culture bears the influence from Indonesia, China, and Korea. Okinawan dance was developed during the 12th and 13th centuries, when Okinawa was, according to Ms. Ito, "the crossroads of Asia."

Soon after her move to America, Ms. Ito



TORNAS EVERETT

had shifted her focus from Kabuki theater and dance to the Okinawan style. Kabuki is an established art, started by a woman in about 1600. Soon thereafter, Kabuki was reserved solely for men, who played both male and female parts and steered it toward drama and away from dance. During the mid-19th century, creeping Western influence in Japan compelled the form to adapt, and soon the dance aesthetic — as well as female participation — was reintroduced.

As Ms. Ito explained her background and the history behind her art, she knelt primly on the wooden floor of her Chelsea home and

dance studio. She had offered the only cushion in sight to her interviewer, who nonetheless sat with considerably less grace. Ms. Ito

In a dance titled 'Passing: By the Coral Reef,' Ito invokes waves and sea creatures.

darted occasionally from the room to fetch old performance programs and a binder full of photographs and press mentions.

Ms. Ito has a long personal history with classical dance. "Since my junior high school days, I already had a vision to introduce the art and culture of Japan outside Japan," she said.

That adolescent dream came true long ago, and Ms. Ito is now one of the preeminent artists and teachers of Japanese dance in America. Through the organization that she founded in 1981, Sachiyo Ito and Company, she performs, teaches, and choreographs both traditional and contemporary Japanese dance.

She began studying classical dancing at age 6 in Tokyo. Her father had died when she

was just months old, and her single mother, who had two other children to care for, was initially hesitant to spend money on lessons.

"I asked my mother, 'Please let me take dance lessons: I was shaking her body!'" Ms. Ito recounted, laughing quietly at her youthful persistence.

Though there were many excellent performers in her homeland, in the 1970s there were few opportunities for Westerners to see the spare dance form she practices — much less learn it themselves. Ms. Ito was determined to leave Tokyo and act as a "culture exchange" missionary of her art.

It was clear from the start that dancing would be her life. She chose a high school based on its performance program, and during college taught at the Tokyo American Club, which drew many students from America and Europe.

Through the National Theater, she met an American couple who became members of the club and were involved in Japanese arts. They encouraged her to travel to America to perform. She arrived in Connecticut in 1972. "My original plan was not to stay too long, but it ended up being 32 years!" she said.

After her first few years in America, Ms. Ito decided to begin studying "the aesthetic side of Western dance."

"I realized Japanese dancing is not all," she said. She received her Ph.D. from NYU in 1986, and has taught there as well as at Juilliard and at the New School.

She is currently preparing for her 32nd New York season concert at Pace University, a Kabuki play that will feature an appearance by the son of her mentor in Japan. Ms. Ito is also considering writing a book of techniques for other teachers.

Japanese dance treats its practitioners gently, allowing Ms. Ito to work well into middle age. "For another five years, I think I could still be doing it," she mused. After then, she will keep teaching: Her schedule is full of student appointments.

When performing, Ms. Ito pushes questions of teaching, aging, and technique out of her mind.

But even when she walks, she dances.