

Sankai Juku: Toki

Sadler's Wells, 21 November 2008

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

Butoh is about the dignity of restraint. Each gesture must be performed with the consideration of a lover preparing the perfect gift for his betrothed.

A relatively modern form that came to prominence in the 1960s, butoh is a revolt against more traditional styles of Japanese dance. Even so it feels long rooted and ancient, and it borrows from the kabuki and noh disciplines against which it is rebelling.

The dancers of Ushio Amagatsu's Sankai Juku company are like members of a cloistered religious order with shaven heads and painted torsos. They wear basic cream robes, or loincloths, or strip down to their supports for their onstage rituals that are like devotions in white.

This cabal arrangement is endlessly fascinating and *Toki*, the second of two programmes at Sadler's Wells, is as stately as it is delicate. *Toki* is in fact less interesting than the first work, *Kinkan Shonen*, but more beautiful. What it lacks in colour and avian diversion (the latter work features a pas de deux with a live peacock) it makes up for in comeliness.

Performers use their bodies to write in the air. They stretch their mouths wide as they caress the space around them and use fingertips to pluck away invisible molecules. There is as much expression in the slightest tilt of Amagatsu's head as there is in the wild, momentary flux of his freely hinged elbows.

Nothing is rushed: all is proscribed by constant, piston-like breaths.

Seven solid pillars made to look beaten by the weather are used to hide behind. One by one dancers peer around the columns that form an arena for sacrifice and worship reminiscent of Stonehenge. While some enter the circle, others remain behind to perform illusions of elevation to a soundtrack of industrial sighs and

tintinnabulation. Listen to the carillon of stressed tram cables and rogue steel pipes along cement.

Night passes and dawn returns and the monks of movement taper their bodies and grasp at the heavens as the morning sun flushes their pallid breasts. Patience has been their lot and our enthrallment. Even the curtain call is unhurried.

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