

AROUND TOWN

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Body speak

Sankai Juku, the award-winning butoh dance troupe, visits Taipei for the fourth time as part of New Aspect's 30th anniversary celebrations

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

The award-winning Japanese butoh troupe Sankai Juku has returned for a fourth visit to Taipei, to perform *Kagemi — Beyond the Metaphors of Mirrors* to the National Theater this weekend for three performances, beginning tonight.

Dancer/choreographer/designer Ushio Amagatsu founded Sankai Juku in 1975 in Japan, building on his training in classical and modern dance to explore the world of butoh. Experts say that butoh originated in the post World War II chaos of 1950s Japan, when artists of all genres were trying to come to grips with the devastation caused by the war, the country's rapid modernization and growing dominance of American influence. The emphasis was on a return to primitively spiritual, to the instinctual, to an awareness of what it means to be human.

Butoh borrows elements from both traditional Japanese theater, including Kabuki, and Western dance, though the most pronounced Japanese element for many is the use of white body paint and its very stylized movements. Its movements were also heavily influenced by meditation and martial arts. There is no one school of butoh, for each style is an idiosyncratic as its originator. Amagatsu has been quoted as saying that butoh allowed him to work out his own language of the body.

What was once seen as very Japanese has become very international, with butoh troupes or butoh-inspired dancers now found the world over. Sankai Juku is considered a second-generation butoh troupe and is the biggest one in Japan, even though it has been based in Paris for more than two decades.

The company is composed of seven men, including Amagatsu. All have shaven heads, which, along with the white body paint they wear on stage, has the effect of stripping away their individuality, creating an image that is both everyman and otherworldly.

Five years after the company was founded, Sankai Juku was invited to perform at the Nancy International Festival and the Avignon Festival in France in 1980, sparking an interest in them, if not a craze, from arts festivals around Europe. The company ended up relocating to Paris and they have been based at the Theatre de la Ville ever since, producing a new work approximately every



Dancers from Sankai Juku perform *Kagemi — Beyond the Metaphors of Mirrors*. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEW ASPECT

two years. The Taipei performances are part of a fall tour that will take the troupe through seven cities in Japan before heading back to Europe for dates in Madrid, Amsterdam, London and Barcelona.

Kagemi — Beyond the Metaphors of Mirrors, which premiered in 2000, was reportedly inspired by an *ikebana* exhibition Amagatsu saw in the 1970s, where hundreds of fresh lotus leaves had been attached to the ceiling of the exhibition hall. That image is conveyed by the stark white set — rows upon rows of lotuses hovering above an all-white floor.

The seven performers are initially clad in white costumes layered in rings, which give them a vaguely exoskeletal, extraterrestrial look, complemented by fixed mask-like expressions on their faces. Toward the end of the piece they change costumes, donning white robes covered in black-gray grit, meant, perhaps, to symbolize the debris picked up as one moves through life.

Seven is apparently a key number for Amagatsu, and, as in several of his other works, there are seven tableaux in the piece. *Kagemi*,

he has said in program notes, is an exploration of the world of shadows, of reflections, of the world behind mirrors. Takashi Kako and Yoichiro Yoshikawa composed the score, which combines piano, percussion, electric guitar and dripping water, moving from soft, intimate levels to almost industrial-strength sounds.

Sankai Juku's Taipei visit is part of New Aspect Cultural and Educational Foundation's (新象文教基金會) 30th anniversary celebration. Founded by composer Hsu Po-yun (許博允) and his wife Fan Man-nong (樊曼儂), a flautist, the group has brought an incredible variety of international artists to Taiwan over the past three decades, along with promoting local artists and artist exchanges.

To remember the highlights of those events — while not forgetting the more painful memories of those shows that left New Aspect deeply in debt, as Hsu would be the first to admit — the company is staging an exhibition at Huashan Culture Park (華山文化園區), 1 Bade Rd Sec 1, Taipei City (台北市八德路一段1號) from Sept. 5 to Sept. 14, with pictures and videos of many of the artists and performances. There will also be a series of forums about cultural performances, the history of New Aspect and art and society, on Sept. 6 and Sept. 7, and then from Sept. 12 to Sept. 14 at the park.

In addition, New Aspect will be hosting the 2008 Taiwan International Piano Exhibition in late October and early November, all part of its anniversary celebrations. More information on both the anniversary celebrations and the piano exhibition can be found on the company's Web site, www.newaspect.org.tw.

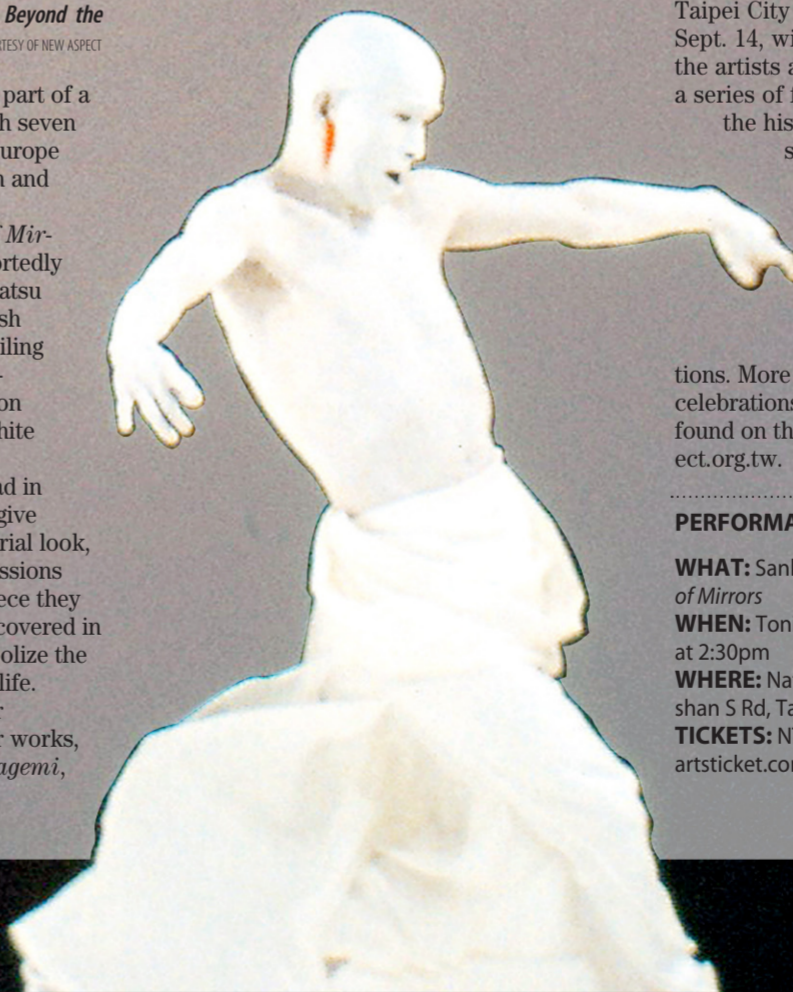
PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Sankai Juku, *Kagemi — Beyond the Metaphors of Mirrors*

WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:30pm and Sunday at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1, Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei (台北市中山南路21-1號)

TICKETS: NT\$500 to NT\$3,000; available at www.artsticket.com.tw or the theater box office



Masters of discipline

Don't expect to be surprised by the program, but there is plenty to admire in the Russian Festival Ballet's depth of talent

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

The Russian Festival Ballet must be one of the most-traveled dance troupes in the world, having appeared in more than 50 countries. They always seem to be on the road and have visited Taiwan more than a dozen times in the past few years. Since Taipei lacks a resident professional ballet company of its own, the Russian Festival troupe could be considered the next best thing.

They are back in town this weekend to perform their crowd-pleasing troika of *Sleeping Beauty* (tonight), *Swan Lake* (tomorrow) and *The Nutcracker* (Sunday). However, unlike previous tours that took them to Hsinchu and

points further south, this visit is strictly for Taipei audiences.

The company, now 19 years old, was formed by Timour Fayziev, a former premier danseur-turned-choreographer, with the aim of presenting the traditional romantic classics. The company's repertoire may not be as broad as other troupes — it sticks to the same nine ballets — but Fayziev's focus was on quality over quantity.

He took advantage of the collapse of the Soviet dance system to fill his company with graduates of the Bolshoi and Stanislavski schools who were well-schooled in classic Russian techniques and style. He has also had his pick of winners of international ballet competi-



The Russian Festival Ballet puts on the classics of ballet like few other troupes can. PHOTO COURTESY OF BAROQUE ART

tions. The company is now almost 60 members strong, which allows him to have two to three traveling groups at any one time.

One of his company's strengths is its corps de ballet, a must for turning pieces such as *Swan Lake* or *Giselle* into mesmerizing spectacles. Principal dancers may grab the spotlight, but nothing detracts from watching *Swan Lake* more than seeing a ragged line of cygnets clomp onto the stage. It was often painful to watch the American Ballet Theater's productions years ago, despite such stellar performers as Cynthia Gregory or Natalia Markova, because ABT's corps de ballet was made up of women coming from a variety

of schools and lacking a unity of style, much less of timing.

You may not know or remember the names of the Russian Festival Ballet's stars, but you will remember the company's performances.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Russian Festival Ballet

WHEN: Tonight through Sunday at 7:30pm, tomorrow and Sunday at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1 Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei (台北市中山南路21-1號)

TICKETS: NT\$500 to NT\$3,000, available at the National Theater box office or www.ticket.com.tw