

Noise

An Arts Blog

The immense sensory odyssey of 'Dream Island' at Baltimore Theatre Project

By **Maura Callahan**

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When you see "Dream Island" at the Baltimore Theatre Project, try to enter the theater with as few expectations as possible, even after reading this review. As hard as that might be, nothing can prepare you for the waves of enchantment and disorientation driving the combined play, lab, and dance performance concocted by Naoko Maeshiba, founder of the performance lab Kibism. Emily Hall, Sarah Lloyd, Donald S. Roderick, and Danni Tsuboi—who are listed as creators as well as performers—along with director/choreographer/performer Maeshiba, sound designer/performer Khristian Weeks, and lighting designer Rebecca Wolf, weave 13 vignettes into an immense sensory odyssey.

"Dream Island" is rooted in the fascinating history of a man-made island in Koto, Japan called Yumenoshima—literally, "Dream Island." In the 1930s, the island was intended to be the home of an airport, but the plans were abandoned after World War II. The land then became a public beach, followed by a garbage dump. In the '70s, the waste was covered by a layer of topsoil and became a municipal park. Some of the events for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo are slotted to take place on the island, which now hosts a large yacht marina, an exhibit of a boat exposed to radioactive fallout during the United States' Bikini Atoll tests in 1954, and a huge greenhouse dome **heated by burning trash**.

Without consistently coherent dialogue or a clear action-driven plot, the sensory experience alone grounds the performance in a powerful but subtle narrative. As the performers move their bodies, rearrange and interact with props, and introduce new sounds and shadows, the picture of the performance shifts in tandem with the mutation of the island. Watching the performance unfold is like watching an action painter begin to construct an image before going over it or erasing over and over again, leaving remnants of what came before. The plot is dependent on the transformation of the image.

The performers' movements express a spectrum of gestures from careful delicacy to charged ferocity. They tiptoe perilously around the buzzing blue edge of a spotlight, traverse the stage in slow, Japanese Noh theater-inspired dance movements, and navigate and control each other's bodies with their own. Amid mesmerizing ambient sounds and electronic beats, they flail and scream and writhe and do push-ups; their bodies become possessed with alien forces, pushing them into spastic contortions and floating states of paralysis. They perform movements there aren't words for. They cover Maeshiba in a mountain of clothes as she cowers on a chair and proceeds to sing in Japanese, balancing the mass on her back in a simultaneously disturbing and hilarious kind of way as the performers begin to surround her

with tiny illuminated disco balls.

Brilliant color and light percolate through the performance, driving the metamorphosis of the island, playing a role as engaging as the performers themselves. A youthful girl wearing a pink-and-white-striped shirt plays ecstatically in a pile of enchanting yellow plastic bananas, until the performers toss various pieces of garbage onto the floor, at which point the bananas also become trash. Under a hazardous red light, the performers lay white clothes flat over a layer of rust-colored dirt spread over the floor like dry paint. Wearing sterile blue, orange, and transparent lab coats and radioactive teal gloves, they navigate the darkened space lit only by a small, weak spotlight. Behind frosted plastic curtains, the performers create monstrous shadows, given mass by undulating wind blowing the veil forward, until the plastic comes down and washes over the stage in a vicious, noisy wave.

In the second act (marked by the interruption of a woman's remote voice, which also introduces and closes the performance, mimicking recorded instructions on a carnival ride), the audience is asked to roll their programs into tubes held by rubber bands handed out prior to the show. The performance continues to develop through the narrow tunnel view of the tubes, as the scene becomes increasingly bleak and, at times, nightmarish. While the telescopes give the audience agency over their focus, the busy activity on the stage beckons rapid shifts in the audience members' limited perspectives. The engagement is both entrancing and terrifying, like watching a disaster unfold from a point of obfuscation and helpless distance.

Every movement, sound, color, gesture, prop, light, and word feels deliberate without an inkling of pretension. From tropical dreamscape to trash dump to nuclear dystopia to plastic tsunami, the scene evolves as a surreal and at times absurdist painting of a real place that feels like a microcosm for the real world.

The last three performances of "Dream Island" take place tonight and tomorrow at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. at the Baltimore Theatre Project (45 W. Preston St.) for \$12-\$22 per ticket.

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