

Strange Beauty: Naoko Maeshiba Talks About Paraffin, Kibism, and the Undefinable

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When asked to explain the one-hour dance/theater production of *Paraffin* – which plays from June 17-20 at [Baltimore's Theater Project](#), [Naoko Maeshiba](#) says, simply, that there's nothing to understand. Speaking as someone who's seen it twice, I'll second that. The production leaves the audience grasping at strange impressions that float in the memory and vanish the moment one tries to make sense of them: women with clusters of nylon webbing exploding out of their shoulders, a young woman being unraveled out of an extended bolt of cloth, a man in a Macintosh and nautical rain hat chasing down nonexistent butterflies.

Paraffin, which won a City Paper Best of Baltimore award for Dance Productions, is returning to Theater Project this weekend for what may be the final production for Maeshiba and her team of Towson students and dancers. Maeshiba, who is a professor at the Towson School for Theater Arts, talked a little bit about this project, and the name itself that she coined as a name for her unique approach to movement theater: Kibism.

So what is Kibism?

Basically, I was thinking about the exploratory love idea. The name reflects what I have been trying to explore. It comes from the Japanese word, Kibi. "Kibi" in Japanese means "subtlety" or "the internal workings of things." Something that doesn't rise up on the surface. And another coined meaning that I got was from a Chinese Character, which means "Strange Beauty." Someone wrote about my performance some time ago and she couldn't grasp it, and she called it "strange beauty" or something like that. That's sort of what we're trying to do. And that's the approach I take when we're going through a unit.

And basically what I've been trying to do is to explore the body and the environment. The philosophy of body weather is included in my thinking. With that approach, I'm working in the undefining process. To undefine the body. It's what Grotowski did, sort of, in theatre...we're sort of similar to that in that we're trying to undefine what's being constructed throughout this process, and really trying to find the body's expression. So we're using the body not as a tool, but as a vessel which transmits external stimuli.

How did the name “Paraffin” come about?

Paraffin is the name of the paper. There used to be this sort of book cover: a Japanese company used paraffin paper. It's semi-transparent, you can see through the title, but it's not so clear. I've always been fascinated by the feel of it, that you can't clearly see it, but there's some kind of mystery to it underneath. And the feel of the paper is a little bit like insects' wings. And as it gets much more brown, so there is a long aging process, and what's underneath is not clearly seen. That was part of the explanation. And the meaning of paraffin is also very inflammable by nature. So there's always the possibility of it being very flammable. That seems to fit the whole meaning.

I've talked to people walking away from this production with completely different ideas of what they've seen.

Yeah, and that is definitely a really great thing about it. It'll be great if everyone comes up with their own story. They don't necessarily understand everything, but they felt something. And they are very curious. So that's completely okay with me.

This production was first shown in 2009 in Baltimore at Theater Project.

Was that the premier?

2009 was the premier.

Who were the dancers?

Half of them were students, some of them were people I'd worked with before, and some were people I'd recruited. So it was a mixture of students and people who had studied with me before – they had some kind of understanding of what we were trying to do, philosophically and thematically.

The basic play. What happens?

Um..What happens? Hmm. There are some threads. There are maybe two main threads. Decivilization and civilization. And I don't want to get too intellectual. But there is nothing to understand really. I have real suspicions about "understanding". When I think back to the most memorable performances I've seen, I think I don't understand them. And so I have a feeling that when you think you understand, you've already labeled it and defined it, and you feel like you've "got" it and you put it aside and leave it. We want people to keep questioning and searching. This kind of process is very important. So it is intentionally not intellectual. It's experiential. I'm really building a structure, very minutely, but at

the same time, you have to leave a lot of space. So there is nothing right or wrong way to experience this. I find that sharing experience is what's most important.

Obviously, you've had to work with these particular dancers on it for awhile. I'm sure they were asking a lot of questions. How did they wind up finding their place in this very philosophical idea?

Yeah. We had a long rehearsal process. We spent about six months building it, but it was more like nine months, including the training. We had a script: everything is scripted. I wrote the script. So they understand the characters. They had a pretty good understanding about the motives, what each character wanted. In the process of teaching, something came up about the word "undefinable." They seemed to think that anything undefinable is also eternal. So that idea really worked well with me. It was amazing that these young people were expressing these feelings about something they didn't quite understand. That really intrigued me.

What was difficult for them?

I think the most challenging thing is restraint. And not letting everything out. Because they tend to think that when you bring everything out, it's more effective. But in a sense we're trying to be very ineffective. By being ineffective we're creating much more space, and more eye contact, and more interactive qualities. But it is very difficult. You have to really trained, and we trained a lot.

So for you, training is all about restraint.

Well it is in traditional Noh Japanese theatre. I believe in the power of that. It's a challenge for young people.

Is this your last performance together?

For now, I think. I was just thinking the other day that it would be interesting if we tried to do it in five years with the same cast. They would have gotten older. To see how their understanding is, and what they'd bring to the characters after five years. I'm very curious about that.