

# The Oregonian

Wednesday, March 1, 2006

Dance review

## 'Amai' a very expressive show, almost painfully so

### Butoh artist Michael Sakamoto's interactive work runs an emotional gantlet

By Catherine Thomas  
*The Oregonian*

At first glance, Los Angeles butoh artist Michael Sakamoto looked either lost or soused as he commenced a stealth attack on the Conduit stage Friday night.

Head wobbling, body lurching painfully in small, confined stutters, he confronted an audience still filtering in with a character so wretched it made you want to look away.

"Amai" is Sakamoto's head-on collision with cultural prejudice and preconception. Clad in dark shades and a too-big business suit, clutching a battered briefcase to his chest, he crawls schizophrenically through the risers and lolls at the audience's feet, a sad little man with a pencil-thin mustache and body in revolt.

He peels a slip of paper from his notebook, thrusting it purposefully into an audience member's hands. The paper is teen-girl luster, all lipstick, stars and neon hearts. The message, scrawled in frail block letters, is bleeding: "It hurts too much . . ." Watching Sakamoto take the stage, his muscles locking and stuttering in fits and waves, you believe him.

But "Amai" unfolds less as a study in physical atrophy than in existential dislocation. Film (watery video of nostalgic Everyman scenes) and score (sunny

Japanese pop, foreboding mystery theater, velvety torch-song jazz) stop and start in spasms. Sakamoto's malleable face shape-shifts from coy giggles to bitter affliction while his body sways and flinches. It's kabuki, urban hip-hop and Charlie Chaplin's poignant Little Tramp at once.

And it's subversive: Sakamoto fetishizes a scarf, for instance, then turns it into a noose. And in his subtle, gender-bending coup de theatre, he transforms from sad clown to enchantress sylph. Spine curled, slender body encased in a sparkling black evening gown, he's a woman drowning in memories and broken dreams.

Sakamoto's second solo, "The Rite of Spring, Part II," isn't as tightly wound, and it raises the question: Can any soloist improvise successfully to this iconic Igor Stravinsky score? Even trimmed to half an hour, "The Rite of Spring" is formidable, with a daunting arc. Sakamoto sets himself in perpetual pop-lock motion to the score's violent, hallucinatory phrases, but he's hewing to a familiar groove. You're left with cataclysmic little moments -- Sakamoto gulping air from an outstretched palm, or curling his fingers into a claw stalking his throat. But his jagged marionette feels like what we've seen before.

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