

# *THE OTHER HERE*

Annie-B Parson  
**big dance**  
theater Lazar,

[www.bigdancetheater.org](http://www.bigdancetheater.org)

# INFO PACK

**Directed and conceived by**  
Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson

**Choreography**  
Annie-B Parson and the company

**Lighting**  
Jennifer Tipton

**Sound**  
Jane Shaw

**Set**  
Takeshi Kata

**Costumes**  
Claudia Stephens

**Video**  
Peter Flaherty

**Executive Project Producer**  
Kim Whitener

**Performers**  
Jess Barbagallo, Paul Lazar, Molly Hickok, Jennie  
Mary Tai Liu, Chris Giarmo, Heather Christian

**12 people tour with this production**



photo: Stan Barouh



photo: Paula Court

Inspired by the luminous prose of the Japanese writer Masuji Ibuse, the heart-felt pop songs of Okinawa, and inspirational speeches from a global sales conference, **THE OTHER HERE** collides Eastern and Western elements to offer a disquieting contemplation on the search for connection in a world rife with disjunction.

Layered with the pleasures of Big Dance Theater's expert use of dance, music and visual design, **THE OTHER HERE** moves through a surprising day inspired by actual transcripts from an exuberant global gathering of top life insurance salespeople. Confounding expectations, the salesman are fascinating philosophers of life, love and death. In **THE OTHER HERE**, their activity takes place around a large table/dance floor/stage – creating a moveable feast around which they sing, dance, drink tea, make speeches and share their "contract of love".

The action centers on Mehdi, an aging salesman taken from the pages of Ibuse's short stories. Throughout the piece, Mehdi moves between home and work, country and city, centuries and continents, but has terrible regret about a past friendship with a beloved and deceased schoolmate. A long time ago this friend gave him the burdensome gift of a white carp. As conceived by video designer Peter Flaherty, the carp swims through the action as an elusive image of loss and promise.

Filled with Okinawan pop songs sung live, dance and visual delights, the one-hour piece is inspired by the wisdom and wit of Ibuse, elegantly taking us on a course of separation and connection, artifice and truth.

**For touring availability contact:**

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*"[My current work] celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears absolutism of the pure. Melange, hopscotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world."*  
 —Salman Rushdie talking about his new novel

Many years ago, I heard a piece of music by an Okinawan pop group, and fell immediately in love with it—the music led me to wonder what Okinawan dance looks like, so I went to the Performing Arts Library and watched tapes of their traditional dances. This region held something artistically startling, and I continued to store up material.

Then in 2003, Yoko Shioya from the Japan Society in New York City asked Paul and me if we were interested in working with Japanese material from a Western perspective (lucky, because what other perspective could we have?!). She handed us a book of stories by a famous, and maybe a little dusty, 20th c. Japanese writer, Masuji Ibuse. Ibuse's writing instantly captivated us with its humor, its unsentimental reflection, and its connection to nature. Ibuse, in his particular regretful relation to the past, reminded us distinctly of Chekhov; later we discovered that he greatly admired Chekhov himself.



photo: Stan Barouh

So, like many of our pieces, *The Other Here* started out as a pile of disparate materials, including:

- two stories of Ibuse's: *The Carp* and *Life at Mr. Tange's*
- Okinawan pop music
- Okinawan traditional dance
- a large table
- a zither
- audio tapes from an American life insurance conference

We didn't know what these chaotic sources would add up to. Members of the company started to learn Okinawan dance from a teacher in NYC, Sachiyo Ito. Our "Westernness" was quickly apparent in class with Sachiyo. We decided to keep that transparent, and we are not hiding that in the work. (Maybe we are emphasizing it...)

As we worked, we braided the two Ibuse stories into one, layering and interweaving the other elements into the narrative framework we were discovering on our feet. You might think of the show as a hand-stitched quilt with the various fabrics connected by an intricate pattern. Or a polyphonic piece of music.

Often there has been this apprehension: as if Westerners could only deal with a non-Western culture in bad faith, lapsing either into crass exploitation or cloying idealization, either way contaminating something better left in a state of purity. Artists, however, have always been wonderfully clumsy in their misinterpretations, as

they borrow ideas from other cultures, creating a global zeitgeist that has only been accelerated by books, boats, trains, planes, and now by the internet. Pure is not possible in a permeable world.

I thought of creating a libretto, spelling out the narrative step by step, but I think the following synopsis will suffice: This is a story of a life insurance salesman who is past his prime, and has terrible regret around his long ago friendship with a beloved and deceased schoolmate. And again, narratively, suffice it to say: a long time ago this friend gave him the burdensome gift of a carp.

—Annie-B Parson



photo: Paula Court

*“Some of the most interesting and intelligent performers in New York”.* - The Village Voice

*“THE OTHER HERE does what art ought to do: It shows us something new.”* - The Washington Post

*“...even if you claim dance illiteracy, Big Dance Theater’s fiercely visual work can move you to tears.”* - TIME OUT / New York

*“Deeply brilliant . . . people need to see this amazing company.”* - The New York Times

*“Like innovators, not imitators..they know how to deliver a spectacle piping hot.”*

- The Village Voice

*“Be forewarned: the company’s work has a way of sticking with you.”*

- The Village Voice

*“Beyond the formal pleasures and the wit of Big Dance Theater’s work, there is a dignity and gravity, a profound sense of something at stake, perhaps a search for truth.”*

- American Theater Magazine



photo: Stan Barouh

*For a boldly arranged marriage of dance and theater, hungry intellects concocting a brave new alchemy of the stage that is equal parts classical and contemporary text, deft music-theater composition, gifted ensemble and inspired design; for a constantly startling body of work from Flaubert to Tzara to Wellman with the fearless Big Dance Theater.*

**New York Dance and Performance “Bessie” Award Citation  
in recognition of outstanding achievement, 2002**

*Dance and text most often work their wonder in divided and distinguished realms. Yet this splendid and adventurous company conjures up visions of the contemporary that are as haunted as those of Tristan Tzara or Flaubert or Mark Twain's shorter, scarier stories. For its passionate practice of the most implausible choreographic and literary concoctions, the judges are pleased to give this award to Big Dance Theater.*

**The Obie Awards, 2000**

Founded in 1991, Big Dance Theater creates original dance/theater works which adventurously mix and re-mix dance, visual design, music, literary and found text. The company often works with wildly incongruent source material, weaving and braiding disparate strands into multi-dimensional performances that resonant with intelligence, humor and imagination. With Big Dance Theater, plot takes a back seat to knowing the world through motion, picture and form, and traditional tales by such authors as Twain, Tanizaki and Sophocles become both metaphor and frame for the dilemmas of the contemporary globalized present.

Led by Co-Artistic Directors, Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, the company has created 15 works. Whether a project springs from the verbal arabesques of a Mac Wellman script, the ridiculous hi-jinks of a Hollywood casting studio, or the elegant prose of a literary master, Big Dance Theater generates its work through the collective curiosity of its collaborators as they sift and explode characters, plots and situations through choreographic, musical and visual structures. Music is central to the company's aesthetic and it has commissioned scores from musical artists such as Glenn Branca, Cynthia Hopkins and Richard Einhorn.

**Awards** Annie-B Parson was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Choreography in 2007. In 2007 the company received the first-ever Creativity Award from Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson were awarded a 2002 New York Dance and Performance Bessie award for their body of work. The company was awarded an Obie in 2000 for its "passionate practice" of the dance/theater form. Founding member Molly Hickok was awarded a Bessie in 2005 for her work with the company and other BDT company members received 4 other Bessie awards and an OBIE award for their work with Big Dance.

**Presentations** Big Dance Theater has been presented by, among others: Dance Theater Workshop, The Kitchen, Classic Stage Company, Japan Society, Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, The Museum of Contemporary Art (Chicago), Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), On the Boards (Seattle), UCLA Live, and The Spoleto Festival (South Carolina). Internationally, the group has performed at festivals and theaters in France, Italy, Belgium, The Netherlands, Brazil and Germany.

**Annie-B Parson, Co-Artistic Director, Choreographer**

Ms. Parson founded Big Dance Theater in 1991 with Paul Lazar. She has choreographed and co-directed 15 works for the company, from pure dance pieces, to adaptations of plays and stories, to original works which imaginatively combine disparate source materials.

Her awards include a 2007 Guggenheim Fellowship in Choreography, a 2002 BESSIE for her body of work with Big Dance Theater and NYFA Fellowships in 2000 and 2005. She has been nominated for the prestigious CalArts/Alpert Award three times. She has been awarded company residencies at The Yard on Martha's Vineyard in 1996, 1998 and 2002. Ms. Parson was a YCC choreographer at The American Dance Festival where she worked with composer Richard Einhorn to create City of Brides.

Her independent work includes curating Sourcing Stravinsky for Dance Theater Workshop in 2006, collaborating with six other choreographers, including Robert LaFosse, Chet Walker and Richard Move, for The Seven Deadly Sins Project at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in 2001, and choreography for TV and film, including Jonathan Demme's Philadelphia and videos for Salt'n Pepa and Laurie Anderson.

Ms. Parson was a core member of Sincha Hong's company, Laughing Stone, from 1984 - 1994, performing at LaMama and The Joyce Theater in New York City and on tour throughout Asia and Europe.

Since 1993 she has been an instructor of choreography at New York University's Experimental Theater Wing. She was a mentor for the Joyce Theater choreographer's development series in October 1999, and has also taught in the Master's directing program at Julliard and for the Bessie Schoenberg Master Class in Choreography.

**Paul Lazar, Co-Artistic Director, Director**

Since founding Big Dance Theater with Annie-B Parson in 1991, Mr. Lazar has created and/or directed such works for the company as Plan B, Shunkin, Antigone (written by Mac Wellman), Another Telepathic Thing, The Gas Heart (written by Tristan Tzara), and Mac Wellman's Girl Gone. He received a BESSIE for Sustained Achievement in 2002 and was nominated for a CalArts/Alpert Award in 2000 and 2001.

Outside his work with Big Dance Theater, Mr. Lazar has performed with The Wooster Group, acting in Brace Up!, Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape. Other acting credits include Marie Irene Fornes' Mudd, and Richard Maxwell's Cowboys and Indians. He directed Major Bang for the Foundry Theater in 2005, and has directed Len Jenkin's The Country Doctor and Botho Strauss' Big and Little for NYU's Experimental Theater Wing. His film career includes roles in The Host, Silence of the Lambs, Beloved, Lorenzo's Oil, Philadelphia, and Henry Fool. He has taught at the William Esper Studio and Rutgers University, and currently teaches at New York University's Experimental Theater Wing.

PRODUCTION	DATES	VENUE
The Other Here	Sept. 20 - 29, 2007	Dance Theater Workshop, NYC
The Other Here	July 12 - 15, 2007	Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, MA
The Other Here	June 12 - 13, 2007	FILO Festival, Londrina, Brazil
The Other Here	June 4 - 6, 2007	MIT Festival, Brazilia, Brazil
The Other Here	April 30 - May 4, 2007	University of Houston, TX
The Other Here	April 26 - 29, 2007	Yuerba Buena Center, San Francisco
The Other Here Lecture Demonstration	April 5, 2007	Connecticut College, CT
The Other Here Educational Residency	March 26 - 29, 2007	University of Houston, TX
The Other Here Lecture	February 12, 2007	Performance Study Program / Tisch School of the Arts, NYU, NYC
The Other Here Premiere	Jan. 29 - Feb. 10, 2007	Japan Society, NYC
The Other Here Previews	January 23 - 27, 2007	Lafayette College, Easton, PA
The Other Here Previews	January 20 - 22, 2007	Works & Process Series at the Guggenheim, NYC
The Other Here Lecture Demonstration	January 18, 2007	World Performance Project / Yale University, CT
The Other Here Educational Residency and Previews	September 25 - 30, 2006	Clarice Smith Performing Arts / University of Maryland
The Other Here Residency	August 31 - September 4, 2006	Jacob's Pillow Festival, MA
Songs and Dances from The Other Here	August 17, 2006	Lincoln Center Out of Doors, NYC
The Other Here Residency	July 31 - August 4, 2006	Dance Theater Workshop, NYC
The Other Here Work-in-Progress	October 1, 2006	Prelude Festival, CUNY, NYC

photo: Stan Barouh



## Mixing and Mingling

*Big Dance Theater combine cultures, and may be sell an insurance policy*

by Debra Jowitt

In postmodern art and scholarship, disparate "texts" often combine—sometimes to produce enlightening new ideas, sometimes to mess with our heads. Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar of Big Dance Theater are two of my favorite mix masters. How, for instance, in their *Plan B*, 2004, did they come up with the idea of interweaving the subterfuges surrounding Richard Nixon's Oval Office tapes with the diaries of the 19th-century "wild child," Kaspar Hauser?

Their new *The Other Here* braids together two short stories by Masuji Ibuse, Okinawan traditional dance and pop music, and speeches drawn from a conference of life-insurance salesmen. These elements slip around one another as fluidly as a video image of the carp from one of Ibuse's tales swims in a portable monitor. Takeshi Kata's beautiful, spare set—magically lit by Jennifer Tipton—suggests a traditional Japanese house, with red bamboo blinds that operate on pulleys, translucent screens, and a twisted tree; but branches that signal the changing seasons—now budding, now red-leafed, etc.—decorate a microphone, and Claudia Stephens's costumes mesh kimonos with contemporary attire.

Parson and Lazar mingle cultures with neither pomposity nor condescension and sympathize with human frailty. From the poignant, absurd, sharply funny goings-on among six characters, themes emerge: trust, deception, love, commitment. Medhi (Lazar) sells insurance in a Japanese village, focusing his efforts on a widow (Heather Christian), who's carried onto the stage as if her feet were too precious to touch the ground. He's also the recipient of a prize carp, given into his care by a neighbor (Chris Giarmo) who's leaving town. Medhi frequently tangles with his longtime servant, mainly because Yosuji (Molly Hickock) seizes every opportunity to laze around smoking his pipe.

Yosuji's wife (Jennie Mary Tai Liu) arrives after a long trip to advise her husband to shape up and serve his master properly. All of them, including Tymberly Canale, as the widow's servant, join the emcee of the sale conference (Jess Barbagallo) in a bizarre session during which they sit on the edge of the stage and solicit questions. Audience "plants" present technical queries such as, "How do you make cold calls?" and receive answers like, "The truth of life lies in its impermanence." That Barbagallo, a small woman with a shock of red hair dressed in a tight man's suit, looks like a precocious 11-year-old boy makes her authoritarian manner all the more surreal. "I'll take it from here," she says, snatching the mic from one of the earnest, often inarticulate salesmen, who believe an insurance policy is the best gift you can offer your loved ones.

No attempt to clarify the various strands could convey the charm of the production that Parson and Lazar have devised and directed. Music and dancing appear unannounced, yet never seem anything but perfectly appropriate, however surprising. Suddenly master and servant break into a version of Okinawan folk dance, with its delicately shuffling steps; Lazar looks beguilingly like an old guy remembering rock 'n' roll. Christian, a small, pretty blonde, grabs the mic to deliver the high, fluttering, slightly nasal sounds of Okinawan popular songs. When Hickock speaks of a long-ago love song, Giarmo, seated in the background, strums a zither and sings softly.

Medhi is troubled by his responsibility for the carp, whose owner has died. As he debates the ethics of releasing it into a bigger pond, the other performers tilt the white tables that serve various purposes in the piece—combining them to display projections of increasingly large bodies of water. In the last of these, the lake of a public park, the fish will surely prosper. The need to ease one's burdens and those of others is just one of the ideas that unfold in this entrancing work like painted fans.

Saturday, September 30, 2006



photo: Paula Court

The Washington Post

## Style

### *High Risk Pays Dividends in The Intriguing 'Other Here'*

by Sarah Kaufman

Put a spare Japanese narrative about duty and honor alongside a feverishly delivered sales pitch from a Million Dollar Round Table insurance seminar -- and you'll have a colossal train wreck. That is, unless you're Big Dance Theater, in which case East and West, and the surreal and the sublime, will be expertly layered into a provocative work called "The Other Here." With a handful of convincing dancer-actors, an artfully loopy concept and first-rate production elements, the result is funny, smart and unexpectedly moving.

Also, it's daring. Choreographer Annie-B Parson, who founded the Brooklyn-based Big Dance Theater with director Paul Lazar 15 years ago, adds great, colorful splashes of Japanese imagery, music and dance to this hour-long production, with not a smidge of reverence. In Thursday's performance at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, Okinawan pop songs served as accompaniment to ancient dance steps (speeded up to serve the work's brisk pacing). Wide silk obis were tied around tweed jackets, and overcoats were buttoned over kimonos. In our ultra-sensitive era, where anything other than obsequious tiptoeing around other cultures can ignite instant offense, Parson has helped herself to what intrigues her without apology.

The result feels bracingly fresh. "The Other Here" does what art ought to do: It shows us something new. (A caveat: If you've never sampled Okinawan rock bands from the disco era, with their tremulous vocals and rumba-style downbeats, don't say you weren't warned. They're addictive.)

"The Other Here" starts out as a flurry of images, intersecting in inscrutable ways. The effect is a bit like the film "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind," whose fragmented story was told in reverse. Except here there are two stories, inspired by Japanese writer Masuji Ibuse. One concerns an insurance salesman and his lazy servant; the other, a man obliged to care for a fish given to him by a friend who has since died. The stories are intimate and touched with fateful sadness, recalling Chekhov -- whom Ibuse admired, Parson writes in a program note.

This is no dry literary exercise, however; that's clear from the cast members' ironic portrayals. (Lazar's salesman as a transplanted and evolved Willy Loman was especially fine.)

In a true touch of brilliance, there were frequent cut-aways to performer Jess Barbagallo's delivery of modern-day American insurance-selling tactics. The diminutive, delicately featured and somewhat androgynous Barbagallo looked like a well-scrubbed schoolboy dressed up in a suit, but she had an iron grip on our attention when she launched into a recitation of why insurance matters. Her words, she explained in a post-show discussion, were taken verbatim from audiotapes of sales techniques.

"It's a contract of love," Barbagallo purrs into her microphone at one point, summing up the lofty pact between the insurance salesman and his client. "There is so much magic in what we do."

What emerges from the whole culture- and time-shifting affair is an exploration of passion and risk. What explains the earnest energy behind a successful selling system but passion? How can you hope to close a deal, hook a client, hook a fish, without passion? And what is an insurance policy, or a love affair, or a promise to look after something so small and vulnerable as a carp, but a life-affirming acceptance of risk?

"Only a person who risks is free!" Lazar bellows, in an ecstatic, Julie-Andrews-bursting-into-song moment.

"The Other Here" lacks only an ending -- still a work in progress, it fizzled to a close Thursday, which, as Parson explained, was the first time all the elements had ever come together. Some essential sharpening needs to happen before its New York opening in February.

But a good deal of power is there already. Of all the wonderful things that happened in "The Other Here," the way videotape of a bone-white goldfish was used was perhaps most moving of all (credit video artist Peter Flaherty). Wiggling around in a searching, restless way, it anchored the otherwise bizarre happenings in the realm of poetry. Whatever you made of the tangents and juxtapositions that the six performers embarked on, there was something real at the core of "The Other Here," and it found its fullest expression in that little fish: alive, fragile and beautiful.

# NEW YORK PRESS

## *Big Dance Theater draws on Okinawan dance*

by Susan Reiter

photo: Stan Barouh



Not many of us would discover rich metaphorical potential in the speeches from a global conference of life insurance salesmen; or feel they fit into a theatrical construct that incorporates stories of Japanese rural life in the 1930s. But in Big Dance Theater's latest work, *The Other Here*, these and additional elements intermingle and weave together in a manner both poignant and sly to explore and illuminate a world where "cultures exist in global free-fall."

Co-directors Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson acknowledged, during a recent advance peek at *The Other Here* as part of the Guggenheim's Works and Process series, the "far-flung elements" that went into their latest opus. "We create a chaos of material. At the start of the piece, you see many threads of people and events; by the end, they're woven together," said Parson, who also contributed the

choreography. She studied and drew on traditional Okinawan dance, which she worked into contemporary structures. "I wasn't trying to be authentic but to bounce off it and see how our cultures collide," she explained.

Two stories by the celebrated Japanese writer Masuji Ibuse were an initial impetus for the work, and Okinawan popular music from the 1970s and '80s (some of it performed live) also plays a significant role. Parson said they were drawn to "the contemplation of death and mortality in Ibuse's stories," and then, when looking for inspirational speeches to add to the work's delicate yet rich mix, discovered the verbatim transcripts from the life insurance conference. Layering together such diffuse yet potent elements is a Big Dance Theater specialty, as is the inclusion of delicately refined visual elements—including lighting design by the great Jennifer Tipton. Their body of work has established their unique flair for layering and juxtaposing a seemingly unlikely mix of materials, blending and transforming them with a sureness of vision and an astute sense of both dance and theater.

Feb 7-10, Japan Society, 333 E. 47 St. (betw. 1st & 2nd Aves.), 212-715-1258; Wed.-Fri. 7:30; Sat. 3 & 7:30, \$35.

JULY 14, 2007



by Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent

DANCE REVIEW

## *Sweeping themes, and a search for connection*

BECKET -- Big Dance Theater does, in fact, think big. The New York company's latest piece, "The Other Here," touches on love and loss, memory and aging, ambition, regret, responsibility, class systems, commercialism, the burden imposed by the things we care for and care about . . . you get the idea. It's a richly layered, multitextured work that sometimes overreaches and often befuddles, but always engages and greatly entertains.

It's easy to see why the company has created only one work per year during the decade and a half of its existence. The Obie Award-winning troupe, under the co direction of Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, crafts its distinctive amalgams of dance, music, text, and drama through intensive experimentation and company collaboration. The festival just presented its first ever Jacob's Pillow Award for Creativity to the company in acknowledgment of Big Dance Theater's imaginative vision.

So the works themselves can be forgiven a little messiness and digression. "The Other Here," commissioned by Jacob's Pillow and New York's Japan Society, is perhaps at its core a rumination on the meaning of existence and the quest for purpose. And though the themes are broad, the specifics are intimate: six characters in search of meaningful connection.

The production starts as the enactment of what seems like a Japanese fable. (Some of the text is drawn from the short stories of Masuji Ibuse.) It involves Medhi, a legendary insurance salesman (Lazar), his loyal manservant (Molly Hickok), the servant's slightly ditzy wife (Jennie MaryTai Liu), a faithful friend (Chris Giarmo), and the friend's devoted widow (Heather Christian.)

But fragmented and reconfigured in Big Dance Theater's vision, time is warped and East and West are intertwined into an inventively skewed scenario involving Medhi attending the annual Million Dollar Roundtable conference of insurance salesmen. As the text begins to incorporate transcripts of the gathering, the material turns both metaphorical and provocatively contemporary, with comparisons between the business of selling and the business of living.

Sporting both fedora and kimono, Lazar's Medhi offers a convincing diatribe on the importance of taking risks. A smoothly smarmy emcee /motivational speaker (the remarkably effective Jess Barbagallo, an actress who comes across as a precious 12-year-old boy) works the audience like a self-help guru, reminding us, "There is so much magic in what we do." Periodically, the lights come up on the audience for questions from plants about such topics as the right time to buy life insurance and how to deal with the fear of making a "cold call." It all comes down to a simple statement: "The truth of life lies in its impermanence."

Big Dance Theater's performers are vivid, charismatic actors and terrific dancers. Though there's not enough of it, the choreography, which spontaneously erupts every now and then, brilliantly fuses Okinawan folk dance with contemporary idioms -- the movements of hip-hop, the energy of street dance. Christian imbues the Okinawan pop tunes that occasionally arise with soulful, heartfelt edge.

Takeshi Kata's evocative set design (beautifully lighted by Jennifer Tipton) combines spare Japanese elements -- tatami mats, translucent screens, a large white branch that changes leaf color -- with some high-tech touches. The video image of a white carp given to Medhi as a gift of friendship seems to swim first inside a bucket, then under a frozen pond, a symbol of both the burden of responsibility and the perennial dream of freedom.

**BY SETH ROGOVOY, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF AND CRITIC-AT-LARGE**

**JACOB'S PILLOW**  
Big Dance Theater  
The Other Here  
Doris Duke Studio Theatre  
July 12-15, 2007

(Becket, Mass., July 13, 2007) – Like some bastard offspring of David Mamet and David Lynch, Big Dance Theater's *The Other Here*, playing through the weekend in the Doris Duke Studio Theatre at Jacob's Pillow, defies easy pigeonholing as dance or theater at the same time it utterly entertains and provokes.

One of the funniest performances you're likely to see at the Pillow—or anywhere—this summer, the avant-garde theater piece blends Okinawan music, dance, and stories, with motivational talk drawn from transcripts of an annual gathering of top insurance salesmen.

While this isn't a dance performance per se, there is dancing within it, which mostly appears and disappears organically as part of the "plot," such as it is. But in a greater sense, the entire piece, which takes place on multiple levels and in layers of innovative movable staging, is strictly choreographed as a movement piece, such that even when people are ostensibly walking, talking, or gesturing as actors, they do so with clear, dance-like intention.

The piece features actor Paul Lazar, a co-founder of Big Dance Theater with Annie-B Parson, and who is perhaps best known for his work as a film actor in *Silence of the Lambs* and *The Host*. But there's not a weak link in the six-member cast that seamlessly morphs from insurance salesmen to characters in a mythic Okinawan tale about a servant and a fish.

With brilliant staging, intoxicating music, fun dancing, evocative lighting, audience participation, and dialogue so good it could only be real, Big Dance Theater's *The Other Here* is one of the summer's greatest hits.

## *Not Made in Japan*

Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson are storytellers with a fondness for irony and a sharp eye for imagery. Their collaborative group, Big Dance Theater, has tackled with zeal the likes of Flaubert, Twain, the Bible, and Tanizaki, creating movement theater saturated in beauty, humor and soul. Their latest effort, "The Other Here," a co-commission by the Japan Society in New York and the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, is no exception. Lazar and Parson interlace modern fables by Japanese writer Masuji Ibuse with traditional Okinawan dance, Japanese pop music, and the pseudo mysticism of a contemporary insurance sales conference. Dance theater and a sales conference? Yes indeed. Lazar and Parson morph one of Ibuse's protagonists into a hawk of life insurance and, taking inspiration from the transcripts of an annual gathering of top life insurance salesmen, probe the hokey underbelly of corporate financed motivational speaking. These are strange bedfellows, but Ibuse's tales of a master's maltreatment of a lazy servant ("Life at Mr. Tange's"), and a friend's guilt over the stewardship of a valued carp ("The Carp"), somehow parallel the irony of pumping up insurance salesmen to sell policies to the unwitting. Lazar and Parson use the prodigious talents of their company, and almost every performing art there is, to make an engaging East meets West riff on mortality.

Critical to the success of "The Other Here" is Takeshi Kata's mutable set, Claudia Stephens' clever western takes on the ukata and kimono, and Jennifer Tipton's delicate lighting design. Each element contributes to what feels like an early 20th Century Japanese silk screen designed for export to the west. Kata uses two long, low tables evocative of the raised floors of Japanese pavilions, but wheels allow the performers to move the tables like hovering tatami stages for dancing, singing and speaking. Kata transforms standing microphones into high tech ikebana by attaching sprays of seasonal leaves and flowers that Tipton highlights in soft, clear light like museum displays. At one point, white painted reed mats descend at the back of the theater, and a ghostly white carp floats by with mysterious calm.

If these images sound as peaceful as a zen rock garden, don't be deceived. Lazar and Parson know how to throw the sand around. The performers enter in a line at the front of the stage, remove their shoes and step into the performing space as though entering a traditional Japanese house, then break into a hip hop tinged dance to the pop sounds of Shoukichi Kina and Rinke. That's just the beginning of the shake up. The company: Jess Barbagallo, Lazar, Molly Hickok, Jennie MaryTai Liu, Chris Giarmo and Heather Christian are required to act, sing, dance, play musical instruments, move scenery, create visual effects with petals and fans, and take questions from the audience. Christian, as a lonely widow, delivers impassioned renditions of what I assume are Japanese torch songs, and these moments alone are worth the price of admission. Barbagallo is relaxed and droll as the Narrator/Emcee endeavoring to show us the spiritual side of insurance sales. She breathes earnestly into the microphone what I can only assume to be a direct quote from the transcripts, "There is so much magic in what we do."

The only weakness of "The Other Here," is the power of one of its strengths. The danced sections choreographed by Parson are so concise that the tenuous correlation between Ibuse's stories and the wonders of the insurance business starts to feel hazy. Consequently, when Barbagallo asks for the lights up on the audience for a second chat on the tao of insurance, one wants to truncate the talk in favor of more dancing. "The Other Here," however, is a fascinating theatrical experience and a delight to watch. The Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival is to be commended for supporting and presenting this unique group of artists (Lazar and Parson have been awarded the first annual Jacob's Pillow Award for Creativity), and one waits in eager anticipation of Big Dance Theater's next offering.



Photo:  
Heather Christian in "The Other Here." Photo by Stan Barouh.

Volume 5, No. 28  
July 16, 2007  
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JUNE 18, 2007

# The Sun

## *Big Win(s) at Jacob's Pillow*

BY AMANDA GORDON

The Brooklyn-based co-directors of Big Dance Theater, Annie-B Parson and her husband Paul Lazar, received the first Jacob's Pillow Award for Creativity at the dance festival's 75th anniversary gala on Saturday.

The award, established by an anonymous donor, is a \$25,000 cash gift with no strings attached and is to be awarded annually to a choreographer. The executive director of Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Ella Baff, made the selection in consultation with leaders in the dance field. Big Dance Theater, which until this spring had studios in DUMBO, is known for its melding of text, video, performance, and movement. Ms. Parson told the New York Sun that the company will use the funds either for production costs for new pieces or to rent a studio.

"Maybe we'll even be able to move back into our old space, Ms. Parson said. From the stage of the Ted Shawn Theater, Ms. Parson said the Pillow had given the company a space to be creative. "Creativity is a word so overused, it feels stretched out of shape," Ms. Parson said, "but I don't think anyone has earned it more than the Pillow."



# AMERICAN THEATRE

## More Like a California Roll

When Japan meets America, cultural dissonance is welcome—  
as part of the conceptual glue

**BY PAMELA RENNER**

There are many different ways to cross the threshold of a dance-theatre work like Big Dance Theater's *The Other Here*. In the piece, which premiered at the Japan Society in New York City this past February, the cast and creators braid together a skein of influences—Western and Eastern, American and Japanese, commercial, terpsichorean and literary. In part, the work deals with dreaming about another culture—while people from that world are simultaneously dreaming of you. But—sorry, Edward Said—it's not what you'd call Orientalism. Nor is it Occidentalism. It's more like a conversation between friendly antitheses.

A choreographic hybrid, *The Other Here* draws from the stately Okinawan dance tradition, whose roots go back three or four hundred years, and from the pulsing, up-to-the-minute pop music that bubbles out from the same volcanic island chain today. The piece also spins off into a hypnotic impression of American life—insurance salesmen. Its script generously samples the actual speeches and audience



photo: Paula Court

questions from the annual meeting of an association called the Million Dollar Roundtable. A barefoot, androgynous narrator in a business suit (Jess Barbagallo) delivers the pitches of the sales gurus in a rapid-fire patter. Signing on the dotted line means entering into a "contract of love."

It's the hurtling velocity of the piece that first strikes an observer. It pulses along between bits of Chaplinesque physical comedy and eggbeater-quickened Japanese dance, suddenly opening out into a rehearsal of emergency evacuation procedures, or a smoky 1930s cabaret number, sung in Okinawan dialect by a blonde American chanteuse with cherry blossoms in her hair—her every note freighted with far-away longing.

Then there's the recurring video image (designed by Peter Flaherty) of the carp, swimming through the scenes on a bright, portable plasma screen—and growing larger in each new incarnation. By the final scenes, the fish has morphed into an enormous floor-to-ceiling projection across the slats of a bamboo screen—white fins flaring.

The Japan Society's performing arts director Yoko Shioya commissioned *The Other Here* to celebrate the society's 100th-anniversary season. Selections from the piece previewed at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center in fall 2006, and were showcased Jan. 21-22 at the Works & Process series at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. It runs May 2-3 at the University of Houston. Then, July 12-15, the piece travels to Jacob's Pillow in Massachusetts. In September, it returns to New York for 10 days at Dance Theater Workshop.

Annie-B Parson, the work's choreographer, first bumped into Okinawan dance from many latitudes away. She was combing through dance tapes in the New York Library for the Performing Arts when she encountered this colorful tradition. "I liked the way they'd lined up the eyes, the

shoulders and the pelvis," she says. The dancers' posture seemed "homey," to her, though it spoke of a homeland she didn't yet know much about. What Parson was intuitively responding to



photo: Paula Court

were courtly and popular traditions dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries, in which crouching classical dancers would spin out quick fan-flares. With one peacock-bright fan clasped in each hand and stomping leg lifts, they looked almost like sailing vessels churning up the seas between their native islands and their various destinations: the Japanese mainland, ports in Southern Asia and China.

Spiritually speaking, the aquamarine seas connected the robust island people of Okinawa with a realm of the gods, thought to hover in the air above the waters. As Okinawan dance scholar Ritsuko Sakiyama writes, "The spirit of prayer is expressed in stylized gesture, while prayer itself becomes manifest in song, thereby opening the way to development of the performing arts."

## MORE LIKE A CALIFORNIA ROLL CONTINUED

Figuratively though, Okinawan dance formed a bridge between the island kingdom, Ryukyu, and its old colonial masters: The people of Okinawa paid tribute to their Chinese colonists, but they also prospered themselves. Trade brought wealth to the sun-drenched chain of islands.

Such cross-cultural alliances meant that dance, song and other entertainments would be required to delight distinguished foreign visitors to the court. Globalization—at least of an early, South Asian variety—played a central role in the cultural evolution of the Okinawan islands.

None of this history is explicitly present in *The Other Here*. Yet it settles over the moving limbs of the dancers, who are garbed in an attractive hodge-podge of silk brocades, Japanese kimonos, obi sashes and hobo tweeds; it's a kind of subliminal force. Parson explains: "During the rehearsal process, we create a fruitful chaos that comes to order." The members of Big Dance Theater share a long-standing interest in Japanese dance, and one of its dancers, Molly Hickok, learned about traditional dance in Kyoto and continues to study it in New York, under master teacher Sachiyo Ito. Hickok says, "It's not about self-expression—it's about embodying a form. If you do that over time, maybe an expression will happen."

Much of the script for *The Other Here* is unapologetically Western and postmodern in sensibility. Co-director Paul Lazar (who performs the role of Medhi, another insurance salesman) explains that a central part of the group's creative process is to yoke disparate forms together—and then see what resonates.

Inevitably, one returns to the plangency of that carp, an image with a distinctive literary origin. It appears first in an early story by Japanese writer Masuji Ibuse: one of two short fictions from a mostly 1920-'30s collection called *Salamander* that's integral to the script of *The Other Here*. Lazar, Parson and Hickok (the piece's dramaturg, dance researcher and performer) share an abundant enthusiasm for Ibuse's stories. They hear echoes of Chekhov's artistry in the tales. They've discovered that the Russian writer was an important influence upon Ibuse, who's best known for his late novel *Black Rain* (inspired by the diaries of Hiroshima survivors). In fact, Lazar and Parson made a literary pilgrimage to visit Ibuse's house, about an hour's drive outside of Fukuyama. Though the writer died in the 1990s, his elderly nephew continues to live in his house. And, yes, there's still a white carp swimming in Ibuse's pond.

photo: Paula Court



Lazar recalls how he and Parson spent a day at home with the late writer's nephew. Now a man of almost 80, he's made a career teaching literature. During Ibuse's lifetime, the two were kindred spirits. They spent many hours together, and shared a penchant for literary conversation. Lazar says, "The nephew lovingly complained that his uncle would want him to sit up all night drinking, and he had to get up and teach in the morning. Ibuse often talked to him about Chekhov, this great writer." Ibuse's story "The Carp" is refracted—kaleidoscope style—in the dance-theatre piece. In it, a dying man gives this fish to his surviving friend as a sentimental token that also carries a deep responsibility. After his friend's death, the recipient tries to pass the carp on to a university pond or, eventually, back to the young man's widow. The gesture is not without an accompanying sense of regret and loss.

Lazar explains, "You're aware when you read the Ibuse that when the protagonist sees the carp through a university fence, surrounded by students, it's a somebody in this distinct state of isolation looking somewhat longingly at a society, a culture, a group that has its own language and upbeat jargon; it's got a solidity, a fluidity. We could sketch it with authority. Because we're doing two stories and adding a whole other culture, the American, you're seeing it through a fragmented prism."

Big Dance Theater's actual visit to Okinawa to meet with experts in musical and dance traditions came late in their creative journey—a visit which added texture to the performance. Magpie-like, they dropped bits of Okinawan pop music into their soundscape, along with 1920s café ballads. Their cast—mostly young and American—doesn't necessarily understand the Japanese lyrics of their songs. Heather Christian, who sings with delicate melancholy, learned all her lyrics phonetically. The emotional intelligence of the songs (some in Okinawan dialect) comes through plainly.

The sense of earthiness in the Okinawan materials was a kind of counterpoint to the extreme restraint of Ibuse's fiction. Though both were ostensibly "Japanese," the materials were actually quite far-flung—Parson compares it to setting one of Eugene O'Neill's plays to a soundtrack of Hawaiian tunes. In addition, these materials are spliced with the turbo-charged voices of America's top insurance sales force—speeches taken from actual videos and inspirational books that Hickok found in a used bookstore uptown. The composite creates a whirlwind of contrasts. In Shioya's eyes, the Big Dance Theater approach is more like a California roll, offering texture, color and surprise—all in a delicious package. Lazar explains: "Whatever we make, we're in the habit of sifting it through our sensibility. We don't want to pretend we're not who we are."

Parson says: "One thing we had a lot of fun with in this piece is contrasting all that speed and colliding of worlds and centuries with just silence."

*Arts journalist Pamela Renner is a frequent contributor to this magazine.*