

Reviews Full

## DANCE REVIEW

'Quest' Musicians Supply Interesting Movement

By JENNIFER FISHER, SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

When the Brockus Project Dance Company and the Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble got together on the stage of the Ivar Theatre in Hollywood for the premiere of "Quest" Wednesday night, the most interesting dance came from the musicians. Odd, but not, unfortunately, entirely unheard of. At the start of the 90-minute performance, the four players were arranged at the edge of the stage, three of them on stools, draped in long black and white robes, their backs to the audience as their arms repeatedly swept overhead and paused. Then, they slowly claimed their drums and built a rhythmic tower of sound. For the several sections of dance that followed, they provided minimal percussion, faint vocalizing and the occasional flute tune, both onstage and off. In two extended musical sections, their dance-like embroidery again rose to the surface.

Often settling into deep warrior lunges beside the large taiko drums, they created individual gestural patterns, sometimes leaping away from a drum, almost seeming to perform an incantation before returning to the majestic, choreographed reaching that preceded contact with the drum. One bit of steely frenzy from Jimi Nakagawa was particularly thrilling, although the ensemble's director Bruce "Mui" Ghent, Ellen Reiko Bepp and Kallan Yoichi Nishimoto also had their moments. The dancer (choreographer Deborah Brockus and five others) seemed caught in a time warp--somewhere between the naive, amateur "interpretive dance" of the early or mid-20th century (ponderous slow-motion and statue poses) and ta-da moments of jazzy flinging.

Throughout, not much space was disturbed by the dancers; all impulses looked surface-deep, tentative, except for flashy brief solos. Whereas the musicians sliced space and made it tingle. This revived the idea of a quest, the title concept approached so flaccidly in the choreography. The drummers channeled energy with adventurous vigor; they sent it out, welcomed it back, built on it and made a moving art form in the process.

Jennifer Fisher  
Los Angeles Times

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Contra Costa Times  
December 16, 2000  
Review: Blair Tindall  
Premiere of "Survival/Phase 1"  
Sara Shelton Mann and Contraband  
ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., S.F.  
"SURVIVAL" DANCE PIECE NEEDS WHITTLLING DOWN  
Blair Tindall

- \* Who: Sara Shelton Mann and Contraband
- \* What: Premiere of "Survival/Phase 1"
- \* Where: ODC Theater, 3153 17th St., S.F.
- \* When: 8 tonight
- \* How much: \$15
- \* Call: 415-863-9834

It's wondrous when a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. But the opposite is baffling especially when the ingredients are of such high quality. Choreographer Sara Shelton Mann's "Survival/Phase 1" premiered at the ODC Theater on Thursday night, combining the talents of eight breathtaking dancers, a videographer, the enthralling Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble and the wildly creative musician and instrument builder Peter Whitehead. Despite the artists' riveting presentation, Mann's 40-minute work dragged on yet may have been truly meaningful if compressed into half that length. Fortunately, "Survival's" dance quality and complexity were

deep and well-rehearsed; because Mann's piece is currently a work in progress, she may weed out the excess for a work that speaks directly. A long evening began with an uncomfortable wait. ODC didn't open the interior auditorium doors until the stroke of 8 p.m., jamming 200 fans of the sold-out house in the lobby on a rainy night. In addition, the one access aisle in the house the sole means of exit for the entire audience was blocked by the many people ODC management allowed to sit on the steps. "Survival/Phase 1" will become part of a work called "Monk at the Met," which will tour internationally and in full starting next fall. It is the result of Mann's 2000 John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship in Choreography. The work started off well, with a formally-dressed woman powdering the nose of a grotesque pig's head while a recording of Mann's own poetry intoned, "We imagine our very best pieces are taken home and fried and eaten by human beings." Interesting stuff indeed, but the fast-paced and fine choreography seemed to express a frustrated nihilism, which fell flat long before the 40-minute mark. Equally fascinating on its own was the tireless and visually stunning Taiko drumming and Whitehead's own impassioned performance on various conventional and found instruments. The dancers of Mann's own Contraband, Abby Crain, Ramon Ramos Alayo, Kathleen Hermesdorf, Jose Navarrete, Austin Forbord, Shelley Trott, Marantha Tewksbury and Yannis Adoniou, presented sharply focused, virtuosic work. They were mesmerizing as they re-created Mann's impressions of human relationships and undulated as great waves of movement throughout the piece. The dancing in itself was so spectacular, it dwarfed any greater intellectual meaning.

Earlier on the program, Adonious' premiere of "Auf deine Hande" was far more compelling as a strait-jacketed figure in a white bustle skirt wove through swarming figures. Pulled against the forces of nature, the dancers writhed with such calculated athleticism, it was hard to look away. "Auf deine Hande" was tight, with little of the extraneous material seen in "Survival." The eight dancers, many of whom also appeared in both works, performed with the same cutting-edge finesse.

A bonus to the ticket holder came with the appearance of the four musicians of the Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble. Drumming with calculated, martial-art-inspired patterns and arcs, the drummers got the blood rushing, while accelerating to a collective blur resembling living Asian brush drawing.

Choreographers like Mann can speak strongly by standing what we expect on its head. But where it's desirable for a choreographer to break the rules, management of a venue like the ODC Theater needs to stay mainstream.

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Abby Crain and Austin Forbord, in "Survival/Phase 1," are part of Sara Shelton Mann's spectacular dance team, Contraband. (Karl Mondon/Times)

SAN FRANCISCO BAY GUARDIAN

May 1, 2000

Review: Sima Belmar

Research/Phase I - Monk at the Met

Sara Shelton Mann

Dance Mission Theater

**Whoa! Mann**

Sara Shelton Mann's return to choreography is powerful.

*By Sima Belmar*

Sara Shelton Mann has become almost as famous for having done little since her performance collective Contraband disbanded in 1996 as for having founded and directed the group. For a critic who reached the Bay Area dance scene after 1996, the mere mention of Contraband elicits feelings of having stepped into faded glory drenched in nostalgia. So, with the exception of a few dark and distant videos, a glimpse of Mann dancing at a recent performance in her honor, and multiple tales of her directorial past, I had nothing to compare with *Research/Phase I/ Monk at the*

*Met: A Community Performance Extravaganza.* But Mann's return — last weekend at Dance Mission Theater signaled the resurrection of the spirit of community through the bodies of some of the Bay Area's finest dancers. Standing on its own, in front of a packed and hopeful house of old friends and new faces, the performance was one of those longed-for moments where the spiritual and the corporeal fuse in one ecstatic burst of energy, a nonlinear whirlwind of unrelenting physicality, gorgeous music, exuberant text, and *power*.

Directed and choreographed by Mann together with some longtime collaborators and several others newer to the fold, the show opened with a high-voltage performance by Yoshino Taiko Ensemble that seemed to welcome the gods and goddesses to the theater. Walking slow patterns across the floor, chanting and clapping, the group established an atmosphere of community ritual that steadily gained momentum as the evening progressed. The four drummers of Bruce Mui Ghent's ensemble formed an octopus of arms waving like a possessed painter, brushes in hand wildly smearing a canvas with percussive and lyrical rhythms.

Krissy Keefer, who co-produced the show and wrote some of the text for it, nearly stole the evening with her daikini/valley girl performance. A Buddhist butcher in turquoise satin gloves, with a carving knife in her hair, Keefer gave a rather alternative dharma talk over a pig's head. A voiceover of a pig's imagining of its existence was interrupted by Keefer's discussion of reincarnation, karma, and forgiveness. As usual, she hypnotized the audience, avoiding heavy-handed preaching through humor.

After Keefer's prologue, flickering images of tombstones (film by Austin Forbord) began dancing behind Kathleen Hermesdorf. Her ghostly presence set the dancers, some in red slips, others in Hawaiian shirts, in motion. The contact duets that ensued, though skilled and exciting, represented the weakest part of the evening. There is something loose and chronically monotone about a standing circle around center action that causes my attention to slip. A sound score of layered snippets of jazz, opera, blues, rap, and EKG beeps kept the action on edge. What followed was some of the most glorious dancing this flawed earth has to offer. Both Mann and Keefer epitomize the strong woman: creative, life-giving, life-affirming. And though a couple of the male dancers (Ramon Ramos Alayo and Forbord) truly shined, it was the women who shocked the pants off me and knocked my socks off. Abby Grain danced a beautiful flailing solo, Marantha Tewksbury showcased her liquid accuracy, and Hermesdorf commanded the stage with intensity and virtuosity. Monique Jenkinson, Deb Taylor, and Shelley Trott each brought a peculiar brand of focus to the ensemble: seductive, ecstatic, and athletic, respectively. The women onstage replanted the seeds of matriarchy and set them to grow right before our eyes. At this point I was thinking, "I'm just sitting here loving every damn minute of the dancing and not thinking one bit about what it all means." When Keefer reentered, her otherworldly goddess voice and expression replaced with that of a California girl, saying, "Wow! That was amazing. I just loved that so much!" I was vindicated. She went on to ask whether beautiful dancing by itself can dispel negative karma, for me that was the crux and the content of the evening. After Keefer's hilarious discussion of the meaning of pig— from the negative self-image of '70s radical therapy to having no manners to the Tibetan definition of wisdom and ignorance— the women of Dance Brigade (Keefer's dance collective) took over the taiko drums with real power: not feigned, not grasped at, but simply grasped. Keefer didn't return with any final words of wisdom. But Mann doesn't appear to be concerned with closure. In fact, an open-ended, continuous being seems more her aim — a sense of connectedness based on faith rather than deliberate craft. Mann chose to close the piece with a marvelous segue from taiko into Norman Rutherford's punky strains of bass, cello, guitar, and banjo. The drummers pounded lightly, and everyone came in to lie face down in the fading light. For Mann, I hope it symbolizes a restful nap and not another deep sleep.

THE NATURE OF NATURE  
SUE LI-JUE  
OACC

“The music, provided by the Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble, is the most thrilling part of the work. The four classically-trained and multi-talented musicians are used not only to accompany the work on drums, but are also featured as participants in it. As part of the set, they are woven into the choreography and interact with dancers, who at one point drum along with them. Seeing the music as part of the visual landscape makes The Nature of Nature sensually overwhelming and exciting. ”

Julie Bloom

**INTERNATIONAL EXAMINER  
ARTS**

**MUSIC:**

**The ephemeral sounds of Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble**

By Stan Shikuma  
*Examiner Contributor*

Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble (SYTE) is an exciting voice in the rapidly proliferating Bay Area taiko scene. "Out of the Box," their first CD, presents us with a seamless integration of taiko with strings, woodwinds, vocals and percussion, providing each a clear and distinct voice. Their frequent and effective use of ma (space) on several pieces helps create a spare and ephemeral sound rare among North American taiko CDs.

SYTE's music is at times elegant and subtle, at times spare and simple, at other times complex, multi-layered and highly nuanced. Their playing is powerful, full and precise, but the sound is not overwhelming or excessively dense, as you sometimes hear with larger drum groups. I thought the straight-ahead taiko piece "So Du So" would benefit from more drums, as perhaps would the closing section of "Dan Dan Batake," a beautiful flute ballad with an insistent taiko tag, but the rhythms stand out well enough on their own. The drums are absolutely mesmerizing on the driving pulse piece "Hitenko."

While all four members of SYTE play taiko on the CD, each also brings a special talent that embellishes everything the others do. Bruce "Mui" Ghent is a modern dancer and choreographer. Reiko Ellen Bepp is a visual artist with a background in painting, mixed media, textile art and art installations (and was a founding member of San Jose Taiko.) Hiroyuki Jimi Nakagawa is a jazz drummer and percussionist who has also studied Edo Matsuri Bayashi. Kallan Yoichi Nishimoto is a composer who plays clarinet, shakuhachi and other woodwinds. All four have studied taiko with Seiichi Tanaka and San Francisco Taiko Dojo.

The CD itself is superbly engineered and gets a full range of sound from the four main players and their guest artists; it is a showcase for their technical expertise, power, precision, and masterful arrangements. The acoustic balance of all the instruments and vocals brings out the true quality of each sound with nothing muffled, missed or overwhelmed by the power of the drums (often a problem on taiko recordings). In order to hear all the subtleties and nuances of the music, I strongly urge you to listen to this on a good stereo system. I listened to the CD several times in the car or through headphones on a portable player and the difference I heard when I played it on the big system in my living room was simply astounding.

The real joy comes in hearing the exceptional integration of Native American vocals, Vietnamese string instruments, shakuhachi, clarinet, shinobue, hammer dulcimer, shamisen, bells, chimes, yotsutake, and other percussion with taiko. From the haunting vocals of Native American singer Jane DeCuir on "Wamblegleshka" (Eagle in the Mist) to the flowing lyricism of the dan bau (Vietnamese monochord) and dan tranh (Vietnamese zither) by Van-Anh Vo on "Omurasaki" to the ephemeral improvisations of shakuhachi master Masayuki Koga on "Tasogare," the taiko is used

to alternately underlay, amplify, complement, answer or interweave with the guest artist.

Some of the most unusual pieces on the CD include "Guardians," a vocal chant accompanied only by yotsutake (bamboo sticks). "Chindonya Medley" shows a playful and comic side of SYTE – chindon is sort of a "taiko meets klezmer" style of street music used by Meiji era merchants to advertise their products and featuring drums, clarinet, bells and even brass instruments. (Somei Yoshino may well be the only group in North America performing chindon music today.) "Utsukushiki Tennen" is best described as a melancholy chindon waltz.

My only complaint with "Out of the Box?" I wish they had included more extensive liner notes on the songs and the artists. To get this, you will have to check out their website at: [www.taikoensemble.com](http://www.taikoensemble.com).

I had the pleasure of seeing Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble in a live performance at the Rialto Theater in Tacoma in 2004, and as much as I enjoyed the CD, the theater aspects, movements and drum arrangements cannot be appreciated in a recording. Some of this is captured in their video, but a live performance is even richer and more nuanced and exposes the full beauty of their arrangements and choreography, visuals and props, movement and expression. Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble truly plays "Out of the Box" and then some.

*Stan Shikuma is a taiko player, teacher and writer in the Seattle area.*

## **Review: Somei Yoshino's Runaway Moon**

**Rolling Thunder**

[www.taiko.com](http://www.taiko.com)

**Written by David Leong**  
**Saturday, 18 November 2006**

Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble (SYTE) has never been afraid to push the boundaries. They have incorporated dance choreography, added non-traditional instruments, and have forged alliances with other performers outside of the taiko community. With "Runaway Moon", SYTE's newest production at the SOMA theater in San Francisco, all of these elements are brought together into something as subtle and compelling as the last taste of dream before you open your eyes to the dawn.

The performance is inspired by a series of sumi-e paintings by Minette Mangahas that tell the story of a horse being chased by the moon all through the night. The paintings form an intrinsic part of the performance, being projected, and sometimes animated on the black backdrop. Guest artist Jeannie Mckenzie adds a wonderful layer of cello and violin playing that fills out the sometimes sparse drumming.

Runaway Moon is a precious, crafted little jewel of a performance. In the closed confines of SOMA, where the stadium style bleachers perches the audience right on the edge of the stage, the effect is encompassing. You feel that the traditional boundary of performer and artist has vanished, and that you are somehow drawn into a dark storyland. This is an effect that SYTE exploits to it's fullest. Ambient sounds fill the dark, performers in black crawl onto the stage, forcing you to peer through the darkness to catch tantalizing glimpses of what's transpiring. Once SYTE has your attention, once they bring you through the mirror, they take you on a journey through story.

Your attention is well rewarded. Performers dancing with uchiwa-daiko turn into fireflies under a projected moon. The horse runs through water and wind, passing by animals (and stranger spirits) dancing on the mountain. SYTE Brings all of this to life with a delicacy of touch and a deliberate exploration of dynamics. They allow the music to breathe when needed, yet don't forget the thundering power of taiko at their command.

Through out all of this, the focus is on the story rather than the performers. SYTES plays behind the curtain, dresses in black on a dark stage, plays in subdued lighting, hides behind masks and costumes. Then, just as when the story ends and the book closes you finally become aware of the storyteller, the finale of Running Moon has SYTE coming to the fore, beaming and playing taiko with all their hearts. It's definitely a satisfying conclusion to this tale.

*Reviews of shows from the Cerritos Center for the Performing Arts published by the Los Cerritos Community News. The writer and paper are in their fourteenth year of covering these events.*

## SYTE/ON Ensemble March 2, 2007



### **SYTE/On Ensemble: Taking Taiko and Cerritos to Another Level**

By Glen Creason

Judging by the full house, mixed between young hipsters and wise possessors of distinguished gray, the talents of the Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble and the ON Ensemble are not exactly a secret. There was a buzz denoting something special about to happen in the big hall on Friday night and audience volume without the fuel of alcohol sometimes means a lot. This being my maiden voyage with both groups I expected a good Taiko performance, which I got, and then much, much more. Both groups are polished and professional and each performed marvelously basing the proceedings on the ancient art of Taiko drumming. Yet, this was an evening of transcendence by both.

Somei Yoshino Taiko Ensemble, henceforth known as SYTE performed most of the first half of the show and stayed close to the Kumi-Daiko or ensemble drumming style while adding visual charm and choreography to their songs. Some of the initial pieces such as “Guardians,” and “Hitenko” were dreamy and almost hypnotic but the precision of the four players alternating from contemplative to an increasing rhythm raised the pulse of onlookers without raising the volume. “Dan Dan Batake” was demanding and took side-by-side drumming at a brisk pace dependent on razor sharp timing. “Ramen Ondo” was light-hearted but almost pop sounding, a refreshing change from the intensity of the opening numbers and even included an into the audience foray complete with gifts to a lucky few in the orchestra seats. “Wamblegleshka” brought out eight musicians and pulled out all the stops and instruments from didgeridoo to the O-Daiko as SYTE and ON got it on together for the first time of the night. The finishing kick of “So Du So” was utterly dazzling with choreography and surgical precision between the four drummers. Despite the sophistication of the art form there was an edgy, primal feel to the rapid drumming in unison. SYTE is probably not a group you would want to follow if you were a performer.

Unfazed, the youngsters of ON Ensemble just simply tore up the second half of the show. This is one of the most innovative and musically fresh groups ever to take the stage in the big hall. From the magical sound of the opening “Gengakki” and its 13 string “okoto” playing to the lyrical and delicious “Watashi Watashitachi” the ON ensemble was playing with utterly esoteric instruments vibrant music you could hear on the radio and really dig. When is the last time you heard taiko drumming on the radio? The group could entertain alone on the fevered, four-part groove they achieve with their drums as in “Yama Song,” “Little Man” or the pure energy and synergy of “Zeecha” but they seemed to reaching for the stars on this night. The risky and totally avant-garde combining of turntable, western drum kit and taiko on “Turns” actually made for beautiful sounds and Shoji Kameda’s powerful throat singing on “After Rain” just expanded the now riveted audience’s musical consciousness. This is a very talented and unique group with the guts to take a centuries old art form to another level. This could never be confused with the sometimes dirty word: fusion. The taiko drumming is at the center of the ON performance but glitters like gold when surrounded by so much enthusiasm and polish.