



From *Trans-Siberian Excerpts* "Junko's Song," Marsha Paludan. Lip-sync parody of Japanese T.V. pop-teen-singer performed against binocular-shaped double-image slides of Japanese women playing Russian roulette. Performance photo by Roger Shimomura.

Notes and Observations on Roger Shimomura's *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*

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To his performance art work, *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*, Roger Shimomura has brought both a deep sense of history and an intense personal commitment to political change. Through dance, music, film, and slide projections Shimomura has created a work that is uniquely his own. There is a sensation of mystery and magic about the work which counterpoints the tongue-in-cheek humor that weaves in and around it. There is also a feeling of sadness and, at times, even anger.

Shimomura and his family were among the thousands of Japanese Americans relocated in camps by the United States government during World War II. This experience haunts *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*, but the work does not dwell in the past. Ancient and modern perceptions of experience are in constant juxtaposition. It is a work that bears close examination for it is very much a reflection of our times.

According to Shimomura, *Trans-Siberian Excerpts* was written during a one week trip on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Eight of the twenty pieces were incorporated into the present work. Marsha Paludan, who created the choreography, brings to life the various characters in the piece. It has been performed at Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois, at the Lawrence Arts Center in Lawrence Kansas, and at Cleveland State University in Cleveland, Ohio and Tulane University in New Orleans.

Trans-Siberian Excerpts is not a story. It is rather a flower unfolding in many directions yet always connected at its root. That root is formed by the Japanese-American experience in all its many manifestations.

One of the pieces, "Moon Seen As Exiles," is closest to the heart of this collection of "excerpts" from Shimomura's life; that is, it is at its center, its autobiographical and political heart. It is here that we begin to get a sense of



From *Trans-Siberian Excerpts* "Set Me Free," Marsha Paludan. The central figure twists, writhes and dances in a kind of striptease act intermittently juxtaposed with a film depicting the life of a young Japanese girl at work as a domestic in an American family home. Photo of video image by Roger Shimomura.



From *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*, "Moon Seen as Exiles," Marsha Paludan. An ironic re-enactment of a tea ceremony is performed with a doll operated by puppeteer Joe Reichlin. Photo of video image by Roger Shimomura.

the dual nature of the performance as both public and personal history. The title poetically conjures up the image of those who see the world and are prevented from being a part of it, those who are imprisoned and cannot comprehend their crime, and those who live with nothing more than the hope that someday their freedom might be justly returned to them. In the darkness the masked figure of a woman enters. We hear violent, echoing drumbeats followed by the searching sound of a flute. Cymbals clang. A pulsating strobe is the only source of illumination. The woman sits at a small table from which she performs a kind of tea ceremony with four flat stones. A projection behind her depicts an elegant pitcher. There is a contrast implied here between the delicate, beautiful image on the slide and the hard and barren truth expressed in the tea ceremony. During this ceremony we hear recorded music and a voice reciting a poem in Japanese. The poem tells of the plight of those who were incarcerated during World War II in the concentration camp known as Minidoka in Hunt, Idaho. Shimomura's family was relocated in this same camp. The poem expresses the great sadness of those cut off from their past and present. But the poem also signifies hope for the future, even in the midst of suffering. Its end is somewhat optimistic:

When the breeze of peace blows,
spring with blooming flowers will come around.
Then our pains will become a tale of past dreams.¹

The masked woman then moves to the small table set up at the right of the stage. She is met by a doll; a small boy dressed in flowered shorts and wearing sun-glasses. The doll is manipulated by one of the attendants. A sad kind of parody of the tea ceremony is re-enacted. In this version of the ritual the boy is served a hamburger with ketchup and mustard (again they are only flat stones). This part of the excerpt is accompanied by another poem in Japanese. But it is somewhat different in nature from the former. Electronic music repeats over and over again the opening strains of the University of Kansas school song. This second poem tells of the "hardships" of ticket-holders in the "Big 8" who have come to see the Jayhawks. It is an ironic burlesque of the previous poem which conjures a kind of contrast between the camp in Shimomura's past and the relatively carefree environment of the present. This comparison may seem a pessimistic or frivolous gesture. There is certainly some just cause for the victims of Camp Minidoka to feel rejected, their plight forgotten by the majority of Americans. On the other hand, it might also be viewed as a kind of celebration of happier times that are now enjoyed by present generations. The action on stage, while seeming to at least partially support the former idea, is sufficiently open to allow for either (and other) interpretations.

The second poem ends with the humorous statement:

When the end of the season comes,
winter will be upon us. Then our pains will
be eased by Larry Brown's basketball team.²

An important aspect of the performance to keep in mind throughout this description is that, for the most part, it is performed entirely in Japanese for a predominately English-speaking audience. This certainly adds several interesting dimensions to the work. We hear, but cannot fully comprehend; in much the same way, we cannot fully comprehend the suffering of those imprisoned within their own country. A kind of distancing takes place--a Brechtian alienation. We are aware of what is being said in a few of the poems only through second-hand sources, such as the English translations printed in the program. What is remarkable is that some sense of the meaning of the poetry comes across even without these secondary sources. The visual and aural sensations of the work magically express what might have no expression if the works were to be performed in English. "Moon Seen As Exiles" is indicative of both the great sadness and the wry humor that are among the work's finest qualities.

In another poetic excerpt the performance once again swerves toward its autobiographical and political heart. The focus again returns to the concentration camp. The sequence is as follows: "When we came from far, to Minidoka by train,"³--is accompanied by projections revealing civilians being loaded onto trains by soldiers. A figure appears to our right in a devil mask. He shakes a rattle as we hear the line: "Snakes came to see us, shaking their rattles." Another figure appears in the center of the stage and we hear the line, "Minidoka girls need no powder. From dirt and dust they become white." She claps two powder puffs together and the cloud settles around her. A marching tune with drums and flutes builds to a climax and we hear, "'Hot!, Hot!' We came out of the house. At the moon the coyotes were howling." A coyote howls in accompaniment. Spoken poetry, recorded sound, projections and live action merge to form a striking enigmatic evocation.

What begins to unfold is a vision that is at once deeply personal and intensely political. This dual nature of the work is a thread which ties the varied sequences together. What we experience is certainly not blatant propaganda; nor is it mere biographic reminiscence.

Excerpts asks many questions, but the answers, though often implied, are never actually stated. These pieces are shrouded in ancient mysteries while being at the same time drenched in contemporary pop culture.



From *Trans-Siberian Excerpts "3 Haiku,"* Marsha Paludan. Masked and anonymous, the work's central figure performs a ceremonial suicide. Photo of video image by Roger Shimomura.



From *Trans-Siberian Excerpts "3 Haiku,"* Marsha Paludan. The piece concludes with a kind of recapitulation dance in which this demonic figure juggles a beach ball world to a popular Japanese rock and roll song. Photo of video image by Roger Shimomura.

Notes

1. "The Moon Seen As Exiles" appears in English translation in the program for *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*. It is as follows:

Here at Minidoka in Idaho
on the high plains with sagebrush,
packs of coyotes roam at night.

Even though spring comes, no flowers bloom.
In summer, strong winds whirl
In winter, snowstorms hit our windows.

Bearing on our backs the word "enemy,"
we ten thousand, wire-fenced in,
endure a wretched life severed from yesteryears.

In fifty years of endeavor and work,
we had built a foundation.
Abandoning it, we watch the moon. Exiles.

No matter how hard our pains,
we sacrifice under national policy,
taking each other's hands, vowing to endure.

When the breeze of peace blows,
spring with blooming flowers will come around.
Then our pains will become a tale of past dreams.

2. "Untitled." The following poem is a parody of "The Moon Seen As Exiles." This English translation is taken from Roger Shimomura's working text of *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*.

Here in Lawrence, Kansas
near farms planted with wheat,
packs of dogs roam at night.

When spring comes, flowers bloom.
In summer the heat and humidity comes.
In winter the snow piles high on our flat top roofs.

Bearing on our backs the word "Jayhawks,"
we ten thousand season ticket holders
endure another season in the Big 8.

In over 100 years of competition,
we have yet to build a tradition.
Still we come back to watch the team.

No matter how easy the schedule,
we continue to lose.
Taking each other's hands we vow to continue our support.

When the end of the season comes,
winter will be upon us. Then our pains will
be eased by Larry Brown's basketball team.

3. "Minidoka Girls" appears in English translation in the program to *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*. All other references in this section are from this poem.

When we came from far, to Minidoka by train,
 Snakes came to see us, shaking their rattles.
 Minidoka girls need no powder.
 From dirt and dust they become white.
 "Hot!, Hot!" We came out of the house.
 At the moon the coyotes were howling.
 Don't you know the Minidoka specialties?
 Snakes, coyotes and sandstorms.

Program Note for *Trans-Siberian Excerpts*
 by
 Roger Shimomura

I have often told my students that if making art is of paramount importance in their lives and that if they are willing to commit themselves to hard work and maintaining an engaged mind, they will eventually be able to free themselves of everything they learned about art. I know from my own experience that I have found this out to be true. After years of studious concern over content I feel that I have either reached or sunk to a level of security where ideas for my work flow, unconsciously. It seems that at some point I no longer felt compelled to project my own point of view toward the things that concerned me. I found myself more interested in creating a visual forum that expressed ironic and contradictory attitudes towards these concerns. This direction required many new resources and led me to practicing a form of self-legalized visual larceny. Using images from my past and immediate environments, from earlier and current work and using them as cultural metaphors, I became a dispassionate viewer of my own layering system.

My writings in performance art have provided me an opportunity to extend some of these ideas through a new medium. With the added features of time, sound and linear logic, interfaced with film, poetry and video, I discovered new possibilities in which to play with a lifetime's accumulation of images. Suddenly I saw the relationship between the merchandise I used to covet and draw from old Sears catalogues and the bizarre collection of objects that now fill my house. So did I see the relationship between misleading reproductions from art history books and my mom's old issues of *Women's Day*, between the music of the John Coltrane Quartet and the Salvation Army Band, between the stories that my grandmother left and the editorials in the local newspaper, between a meal of steamed black cod and the Colonel's Wingdinger, between vintage Kurosawa and Johnny Socko, between Masterpiece Theatre and Pee-Wee's Playhouse, between an Oreo Cookie and a Chiquita Banana and between Minnie Mouse and one of Utamaro's beauties.