

The New York Times

VOL. CLIX . . No. 54,841

© 2009 The New York Times

NEW YORK, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2009

THE Arts

Japanese-Style Horror, On Screen and Stage

Speaking inside boxes the size of coffins, the haunted souls of “Americana Kamikaze” inhabit a world that depending on the moment, appears impossibly vast or claustrophobically intimate. Refracting a Japanese ghost story through an American experimental sensibility, Temporary Distortion, integrating mind-blowing video images and theatrical tension, has created a nightmarish pop aesthetic that deserves your attention.

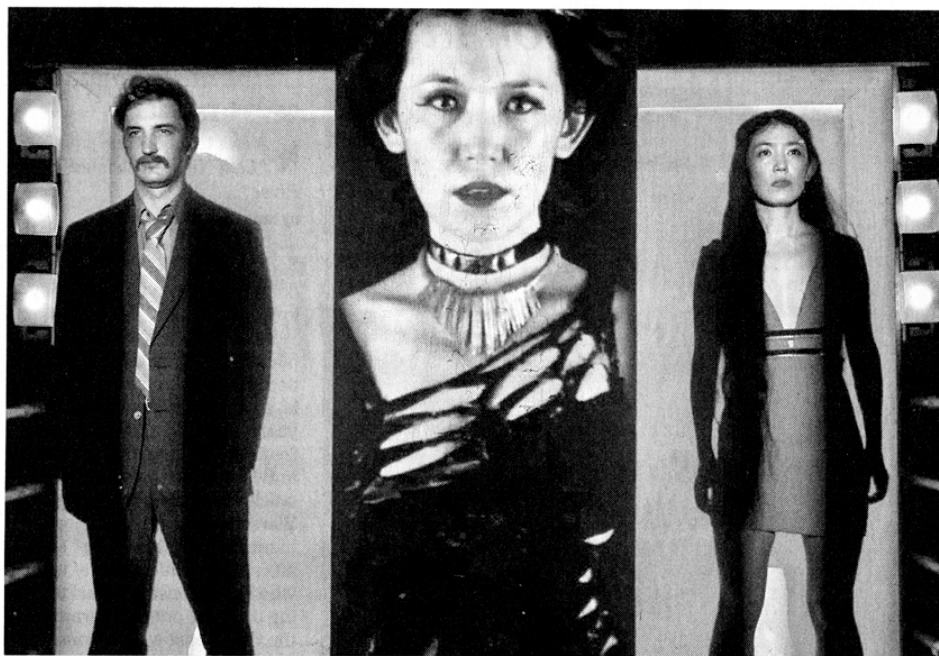
In a review last week spotlighting horror plays — my term “Theater of Blood,” sorry to say, has yet to sweep the nation — I suggested that directors look to Pinter and Beckett when spinning tales of terror. Kenneth Collins, the company’s auteur and agenda setter, didn’t need my ad-

“Americana Kamikaze” is playing through Nov. 14 at Performance Space 122, 150 First Avenue, at Ninth Street, East Village; (212) 352-3101, ps122.org

vice. Telling a twisted story about an affair of a businessman (Brian Greer), he relies on power games and pregnant pauses straight out of “The Caretaker.” That he has cited “Waiting for Godot” as the play that influenced him most comes as no surprise.

Mr. Collins’s focused set features three boxes, the outside ones holding actors talking into microphones in enigmatic, poetic flourishes, while a video screen sits in the middle, where inner lives explode in elegant vignettes by William Cusick (the co-creator, who did projection design for “The Coast of Utopia”).

“Americana Kamikaze” opens with an accelerating tracking shot of a hotel hallway, and that image echoes later with a feverish glance into the depths of a subway tunnel. And then there’s the chilling glare of Yuki Kawahisa’s Yuki, a despairing woman at the edge of sanity who describes marriage as a “long-term mutual torture.” Her disintegration in person and on screen is as simple and brutal as a knife to the throat.



JON WEISS

Americana Kamikaze Brian Greer, left, and Yuki Kawahisa, center in video and right onstage, at P.S. 122.

This is the first play I’ve seen in the style of the ferocious Japanese horror movement known as J-Horror. For those unfamiliar with this subgenre, this compari-

son might help. In the original script of the American movie “Misery,” a crazed woman cuts off the feet of a paralyzed man, but since this act of violence was

deemed to be too, well, much, it evolved into a mere breaking of ankles with a sledgehammer.

Less than decade later, in the Japanese cult classic “Audition,”

Video images and theatrical tension create a nightmarish pop aesthetic.

a crazed woman not only chops off the foot of a paralyzed man but also sticks needles in his eyes. It makes “Misery” and the American torture porn that imitated it (chopped feet are now old hat) look like children’s birthday party entertainment.

“Americana Kamikaze” aims for the visceral impact of “Audition,” backed by the eerie, less graphic mood of “Ring,” and at times, amazingly, it succeeds. There are missteps, including a country music song that earns laughs from the crowd but betrays the show’s spirit. Outside of this interruption, there isn’t much relief, comic or otherwise.

Hard-core horror fans should take notice, because with Hollywood’s rarely risking something truly upsetting anymore, preferring funny zombies and by-the-numbers remakes, you might have to go to the theater to see death performed live to really test your limits.