

DANCE

He's Got Rhythm, They've Got Moves: It's a Fit

By A. J. HEWAT

WASHINGTON, Conn.

THE opening piece in a new program by Pilobolus Dance Theater represents a new kind of collaborative effort from a dance company long known for group groupings. Call it a meeting, not so much of minds or bodies as of gestures. In late April, Leonard Eto, a master of the large, ceremonial Japanese drums known as taiko, had traveled from his native Tokyo, marginally equipped with English, to work in this tiny New England town, which Pilobolus calls home, with people who spoke not a word of Japanese. As the taiko master tried to get his ideas across to the choreographer Allison Chase and the six Pilobolus dancers — and vice versa — hands twirled and cleaved the air with symphonic grace.

"Which do you like best, Leonard?" Ms. Chase asked, and Mr. Eto drummed the air by way of answer. Constrained by language

Leonard Eto, working with Pilobolus, turns the thunder of his taiko drums into dance music.

and to some extent by cultural differences, Mr. Eto resorted to pantomime. He crossed his arms and frowned clownishly to suggest polite disapproval. He stuck out his tongue to poke fun at an idea. He brought his arms crashing down to suggest volume. He imitated the dancers, then pranced like Mick Jagger. Often, amusingly, he said: "Ah so." He would laugh at himself, then retreat behind his drums, sipping coffee and waiting, intent on his craft.

Although Pilobolus often commissions original music, and Mr. Eto often performs with dancers, this latest match was distinctive, "an arranged marriage." In the words of Ms. Chase, several years ago, Mr. Eto had gone to Jeremy Alliger, the director of Dance Umbrella, for advice on a new venture. Because of its hyper-collaborative style, Mr. Alliger proposed Pilobolus as an interesting fit.

Like Pilobolus, Mr. Eto, 37, has gained an international reputation and a devout following. He has worked with everyone from the Chieftains to Max Roach to Bob Dylan to

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The Japanese drummer Leonard Eto and members of Pilobolus Dance Theater will present their collaboration "Tsu-Ku-Tsu" at the Joyce Theater this week.

the dancers Nina Ananiashvili, Patrick Dupond and Julio Bocca. His taiko compositions can be heard in the movies "The Lion King," "J.F.K.," "The Hunted" and "The Thin Red Line." Originally trained in classical Japanese music by his father, Kimio, Mr. Eto fell prey to Western rhythms at age 10, when, for better or worse, he encountered a videotape of Woodstock.

During high school in Tokyo he played rock 'n' roll drums. Soon after, he came under the spell of taiko, a popular form of

Japanese drumming that is typically performed during harvest festivals and other celebrations. In 1984 Mr. Eto joined the renowned Japanese taiko drum group Kodo, and made his United States debut at the Los Angeles Olympics festival. He added more than 25 works to Kodo's repertory before leaving to pursue solo work as the Leo Project.

In his solo work Mr. Eto departed from the standard taiko repertory to create an entirely new kind of sound, fusing African,

Asian and Western music. In recent years he has performed his compositions with dancers, and even with painters. Pilobolus marks the first time he's started from scratch. He chose the name for the new piece — "Tsu-Ku-Tsu," a verbal rhythm traditionally used to train taiko drummers — but undercut the weight of his own contribution by writing a mock translation for his new friends: "Ho Ho Iia." ("Tsu-Ku-Tsu" had its debut last month in Boston and will open the Pilobolus season at the Joyce Theater on Tuesday; during the three-week run, two other new works as well as many old favorites from the company's repertory will be performed.)

Leonard would come and drum and we would start moving," said one of the dancers, Benjamin Pring, explaining how the creative process worked during several weeks of improvisation. "Then he would look at us and drum more in response. It's been like a relay race. It was a tug of war

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sometimes. Sometimes Leonard would say, 'I can't stop there, I'm in the middle of a sentence,' or we'd say, 'We can't stop there, we're in the middle of a movement.' So then we'd have to come up with something new. All six of us might have a different idea, then Alison would mediate."

Ms. Chase picked up the story: "It

was a shock to him to see our creative process, because we don't have a standard repertoire. There are times when he'll look at us like—" She imitated a skeptical look. "We've had to really grope in the dark to feel, to find what imagery would really work. His music is incredibly abstract. So we've done a more abstract piece than I would normally do. I'm sort of a melody lady. It's been an intense journey to figure out

what we're doing. Each of us has had to bend in very different ways."

On the last day of rehearsals before the work's Boston premiere, the dancers were doing what they call cleaning up, working out the thorny parts of the new piece. Their rehearsal space, the Washington Club Hall just off the village green, all wood inside, with a high vaulted ceiling, made for impressive acoustics. The floor vibrated during Mr. Eto's drumming. Sound boomeranged off the walls.

They practiced the "helicopter part." Mr. Eto, wearing yellow silk-screened drawstring pants, running shoes and a T-shirt emblazoned with his name in Japanese and English, placed his feet wide apart in a fighting stance. Facing his largest drum (the barrel of the giant o-taiko is made from one enormous tree), he began a rhythmic attack on its surface with two large sticks, pouncing like a tiger. The drumming was so intense that the dancers couldn't match it, and one of them said just that. So, next time, Mr. Eto watched the dancers more closely and, with a forward thrust of his head, urged them into a drumroll the way an

equestrian takes his horse over a jump.

At midday, a small group of Pilo-bolus staff members and friends filtered into the hall to see a first run-through of the piece. As the dancers crouched in a posture of unbeing, Mr. Eto's opening drum notes, a resounding, cosmic explosion of rhythm, galvanized six bodies into quivering, tumbling, reverberative life. The Big Bang must have sounded something like that.

The makeshift audience, spellbound, watched Mr. Eto leap upon his o-taiko with furious intensity, then carefully draw his tempo down. There was eloquent silence as he carefully set down his o-taiko sticks and took up a smaller drum, played with a harness slung over his shoulder. He moved out onto the stage, drumming, becoming one with the dancers. A female dancer darted through his legs while he pounded. It was a very charged, sexual moment, almost kinky. And as the piece continued to develop, Mr. Eto summoned an astonishing emotional range from his instruments — hopelessness, euphoria and everything between. Toward the end he used cymbals to create a plaintive wail, while the dancers writhed in sympathy.

After the rehearsal everyone milled in a congratulatory crowd. The dancers were being fitted for kimonos and Mr. Eto was prevailed upon to show the proper way to tie them. He obliged, but in Japan, he teased, you would never wear a kimono and spread your legs. The Pilo-bolus dancers, whose spread legs are one of their trademarks, looked unconcerned. In any arranged marriage, especially one between cultures, you expect to make a few compromises. □