In Ueyama’s ‘Salaryman,’ it’s a dog-eat-dog

By Rebecca Ritzel

If the 2008 mortgage crisis were a dance, it would look a lot like certain scenes in “Salaryman,” Takehiro Ueyama’s 2011 full-length work that was performed Saturday by his New-York based TAKE Dance company at Dance Place. The title is the Japanese term for corporate white-collar workers, and based on the costuming, lack of mobile phones and surplus of newspapers, the piece appears to be set during Japan’s economic slump, known as “the lost decade.” Following a 1980s boom, the Nikkei stock index took a tumble. Job growth and consumer spending fell. The economy was in recession and . . .

Sound familiar? For dancegoers, few things are more rewarding than seeing a scenario to which everyone in the theater can relate, depicted onstage by people who can move like no one else in the room. In that sense, “Salaryman” never gets better than a scene Ueyama calls “The Game.” The company’s four agile, athletic men appear onstage in business suits. What begins as confident walk-and-talk devolves into a modern-dance slugfest. One guy is thrown to the floor. Another steps on that dancer’s back, then goes flying into the arms of the two men left standing, who promptly toss him away. All rise, straighten their ties, and then beat up on one another again.

These guys got to work by — how else? — taking the Tokyo subway. In a laugh-out-loud series of vignettes, accompanied by authentic recordings, the dancers depict snoring passengers, an oblivious woman boogeying in place, and the clamoring crowds on the Blue Line, post-Rush Plus. (Okay, it’s actually a train headed for Tokyo’s business center.)

There are some talented women in the TAKE company, but this being a piece that casts a negative light on Japanese men, they never shine more than when portraying hostesses in black brassieres. While the women vamp on silver chairs, the guys frantically crabwalk around the floor, staring up at their crotches.

The real-life implications of these scenes are obvious. But “Salaryman” loses steam as the vignettes become more oblique. There’s a section where the dancers stare at the back wall, and there are two innocuous pas de deux that feel disconnected from the rest of the work.

Clever ensemble imagery is a strength for Ueyama, a former Paul Taylor dancer, and he returns to it in the final scene, in which dancers lug around clear plastic cubes partially filled with water. As these survivors of another day immerse heads and limbs, they appear to be washing their hands of cubicle life, wishing they didn’t have to return to it tomorrow.

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