

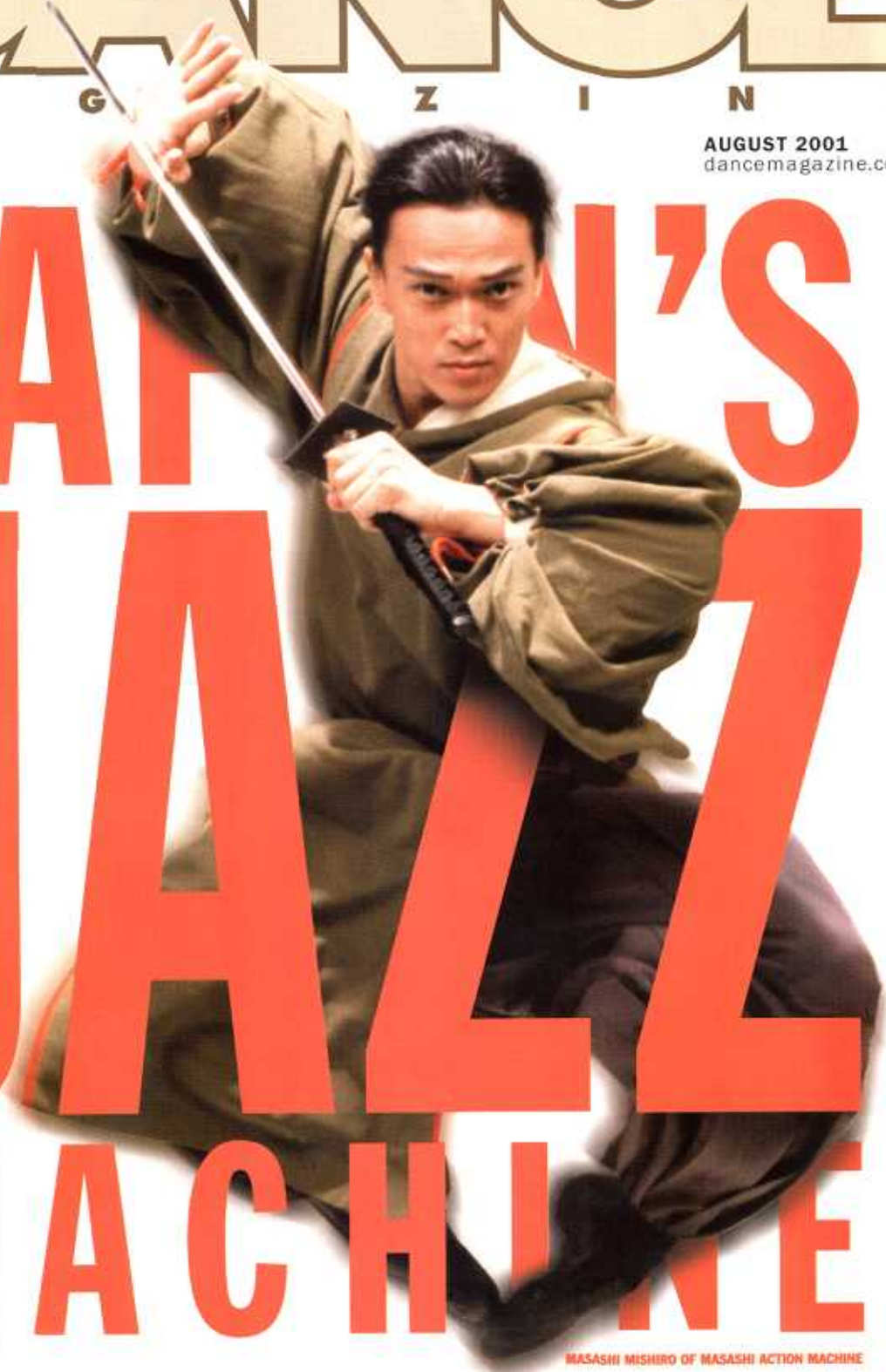
JAZZ DANCE ■ RICHMOND BALLET ■ CHICAGO HUMAN RHYTHM PROJECT & CITY GUIDE

DANCE

M A G Z I N E

AUGUST 2001
dancemagazine.com

JAPAN'S JAZZ MACHINE



USA \$3.95
Canada \$5.50

MASASHI MISHIRO OF MASASHI ACTION MACHINE



Masashi Action Machine characterizes the *Japanese Businessman* as a working warrior who restored the country's economy and now has battle stories to share.

JAPAN'S JAZZ MACHINE

BY MERRILL LEIGH



The difficult choreography performed by Masashi Action Machine, seen here in *Ninja Hanzo*, requires strength and synchrony; All the jazz dancers are also skilled gymnasts.



'While being grateful for taking part in this dance field, I will swear to create dance-art that is memorialized in the heart museum of the audience.'

—Kumiko Sakamoto

THESE ARE no crouching tigers, hidden dragons. It's Masashi Mishiuro and his company of ten dancers, who are known collectively as the Masashi Action Machine. Founded in Nagoya, Japan, in 1985 by Mishiuro and Artistic Director Kumiko Sakamoto, in a whirlwind four years the troupe had been awarded the Japan Cup at the national Culture Festival sponsored by the country's Bureau of Culture. In 1990 they appeared at the Olympics in Seoul, Korea. Further awards followed in 1992: both the All-Japan Jazz Dance Competition grand prix and first prize at the Nagoya City Art Festival.

Masashi Mishiuro is a discreet and intensely private person. But as a youngster he experienced the celebrity that goes along with special talent and achievement. He was a prize-winning gymnast, medalling at West Germany's World Gymnastics Festival in 1979, and he held titles in rhythmic sports gymnastics for three successive years in the All-Japan Student Championships. He is a graduate of the prestigious Chukyo University, enjoys a reputation as a dance and gymnastics teacher, and now operates a studio, Dancepro Ltd., and associated company, Masashi Mishiuro Jazz Dance, in Nagoya. His most apparent passion is his Porsche automobile, and he is a member of the exclusive Porsche club of Japan.

Kumiko Sakamoto is a modern Japanese woman, well educated at private high schools and university, with flawless manners and charm and a classical traditional background as well. She is married to a very successful Japanese business executive and has one daughter; their pet beagle, fittingly, is named Tango. Sakamoto won the gold in the Leo's Choreography Competition at the 2000 Jazz Dance World Congress in Buffalo, New York, with her choreography *Japan Moving Men*.

"We've become great friends over the years," says Frank Hatchett, who introduced the company to his VOP style of jazz dance about twelve years ago. Choreographer Sakamoto and Mishiuro made the jump into jazz dance together. Studying at the Broadway Dance Center in New York, they quickly absorbed American jazz styles and adopted those aspects that might fuse with their company's Japanese traditions and look. "They would come and take my classes for about ten days, then perform with us and us with them—like a cultural exchange," remembers Hatchett. "I sent people over during the year to teach them further in my style. Then I recommended them to Gus for the Congress."

In a sense, Hatchett and Giordano are the American godparents of this jazz company.

Invited by founder/director Gus Giordano to the American Jazz Dance World Congress (the first Congress in 1990 was so named) in Evanston, Illinois, they have performed at every one since. Sakamoto co-presented the Congress in Nagoya in August of 1995 on the campus of Chukyo University.

"[They're] one of the best groups to have at the Congress," Giordano explains. "That's why they're invited back every time. Their work is immensely entertaining, but more than that, their organization, their commitment, and their graciousness make them a joy to work with. On a personal note, encountering Kumiko and Masashi and their dancers since the first Congress in 1990, and visiting them in Nagoya in 1995, has helped erase for me the negative feeling about Japan that had been my legacy as a veteran of World War II."

Dancers for the company are chosen by open audition. They are selected not only for their skills in gymnastics and jazz dance, but especially for their personality and character. The training is extremely rigorous and the performers are expected to grow and form a unit within the studio.

"Practice every day," says Sakamoto by way of a translator, and as with most American dancers, that practice may come after a day of classes or other occupation. With the choreographed risk inherent in their programs, there is little room for error.

The Masashi Action Machine is composed of both men and women, but except for Mishiuro, who is plainly the star, dancers are genderless

when it comes to the synchronous choreography of breathtaking tumbling runs, leaps, and lifts. Often costumed alike, all are expected to perform at the same level of strength and difficulty. This is clearly a company of modern Japan, whose members are seen offstage most often in matching workout slacks and jackets or in contemporary evening wear. Sakamoto wears a traditional kimono when she presents, in charmingly halting English, a gift from her city or its prefecture, Aichi, to the host company, but backstage, she too is a working artistic director/choreographer.

The Machine's enthusiastic reception outside Japan encouraged performances in Singapore in 1994, Hawaii in 1996, and Guam in 1997. Then in 2000, the company toured Europe for six weeks, visiting Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Luxembourg, and Belgium. "The company, their character, art, and tradition, was extremely well received by the European audiences in the six different countries," said Andreas Pfeifer, project manager for Germany's Konzertdirektion Landgraf. Pfeifer arranged Masashi Action Machine's 2000 and 2001 European tours.

"Working with Kumiko-san and Masashi-san is a wonderful experience," he explained. "You don't have to speak Japanese, but you should [learn to] 'understand' Japanese and Japan and not compare with the United States or China or Europe. All people involved, especially the creative team, are great and some are pretty famous, for example, the lighting designer Haruhiko Watanabe. Also, all the performing artists, the dancers, are wonderful people and artists."

Masashi's signature piece, *Ninja Hanzo*, with choreography by Mishiro and Sakamoto, shows "black-costumed secret agents with brilliant brains and superhuman physical strength and agility who played a great part in the history of Japan," according to the program notes. In a more ironic vein, the company makes humorous characterizations of the *Japanese Businessman*. They are "soldiers of industry" who have built the economy during the last fifty years and now drink together, telling battle stories.

"Dance expression in which strengthened body and high techniques are developed," says Sakamoto, "is a reflection of the choreographer's thought and holds audience's souls through the dancers' emotions."

Though defined as a Japanese jazz dance company working with contemporary music, the performances show style and themes that are deeply rooted in Asian traditions. Their great flexibility and gymnastic skills are closely akin to what Western audiences have seen with performances of the Peking Acrobats and Mongolian circuses or gymnasts, but they are also as specifically Japanese as the Noh and Kabuki traditions. In her book *Meditation in Movement*, Asian dance scholar Sun Ock Lee describes Japanese Noh theater as being rooted in a pre-Buddhist era that crystallized in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and continues to this day. She defines four levels of consciousness that have been identified as occurring in performance of Noh: the simple yet powerful stage presence that comes from the performers' unity of mind and body; self-awareness and ability to discriminate between good and bad; an alignment of conscious and subconscious forces that allows the performer spontaneity; and a transcendent level where at some point the performer touches on "suchness" or the Buddha-nature.

While the dancers of the Masashi Action Machine may indeed be part of the Noh lineage—their themes often project mystery if not spirituality—they eschew the simplistic, slow and delicate movement style in favor of big-stage wow entertainment. Their grand finales invariably bring audiences to their feet, applauding and shouting.

The Congress's artistic director, Nan Giordano, says, "They are a pleasure to experience on and off the stage."

With performances of choreography such as *Raijin Thunder* at Jazz Dance World Congress 2001, Masashi Action Machine expects to take Mexico by storm. ■

Merrill Leigh is a freelance writer on the arts and business.

JAZZ DANCE WORLD CONGRESS GOES LATIN

This is the year for the Jazz Dance World Congress to be held outside the United States. Hosting the Congress in Monterrey, Mexico, is Chatre de Godí Dance Center.

"Let me tell you that [this] is a great honor," said de Godí, "and being the first Latin American organization with the responsibility of organizing the Jazz Dance World Congress 2001 is truly a challenge, an accomplishment, and a privilege. We hope and expect that this very significant effort will turn out to be one more very successful Congress. Naturally, this would never have been possible without the most gracious, experienced, willing, and unconditional support granted at all times by Gus and Nan Giordano, as well as Ben Hodge.

"This will truly be an experience out of this world, including participants not only from Latin America, but all over. It will be quite memorable for years to come, as it will strengthen the knowledge and relationships we share throughout this sublime art, profession, and activity."

As usual, Gus Giordano will conduct a three-day pre-Congress event, August 2-4. Faculty at the workshop will include Giordano, founder and artistic director emeritus, Nan Giordano, artistic director, Jon Lehrer, dancer and rehearsal director, and other members of Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago teaching classes in Giordano technique, style, and repertoire.

As in the past, the Congress has scheduled classes in jazz dance by day and performances by professional jazz dance companies by night. Daytime faculty include: Gus Giordano, Nan Giordano, Joe Tremaine, Pattie Obey, Susan Quinn, Randy Duncan, Joe Lanteri, Liz Imperio, and Ted Levy. New to the JDWC faculty this year, and teaching hip-hop, will be Barry Lather, an MTV and Billboard Award choreographer who is out of the Tremaine tradition.

A special age-appropriate Kids Jazz Dance class for youngsters 10 to 12, so popular with children from Latin American countries, will be taught by Jon Lehrer, Michael Williams, and Susan Quinn.

Each afternoon the selected finalists (see www.dancemagazine.com for complete list) in the Leo's Dancewear Choreography Competition will present their work to be judged, and the bronze, silver, and gold awards will be made on the final day. The winning choreographer and his or her work will join the professional companies in performance on the final gala evening. Jazz dance companies from around the world will perform: tapper extraordinaire Ted Levy, Liz Imperio's Instincts Live Media Dance Company, Odyssey Dance Utah, Spectrum Dance Theater, Masashi Action Machine, Andres Estevez and Katia Garza of Southern Ballet Theatre, and, of course, Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago. Also appearing will be several companies that are based in Mexico.

For further information on Jazz Dance World Congress 2001, contact Chatre de Godí Dance Center in Monterrey, Mexico at 528/ 338 8877 or fax 528/ 338 3579, email chatre@infosel.net.mx; or in the United States, Jazz Dance World Congress International Headquarters, 847/ 866-9442, fax 847/866-9228, or jdwconline.com.



Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago shows off its style in *Getting There*, choreographed by Billy Siegenfeld. This year, "there" is Monterrey, Mexico.