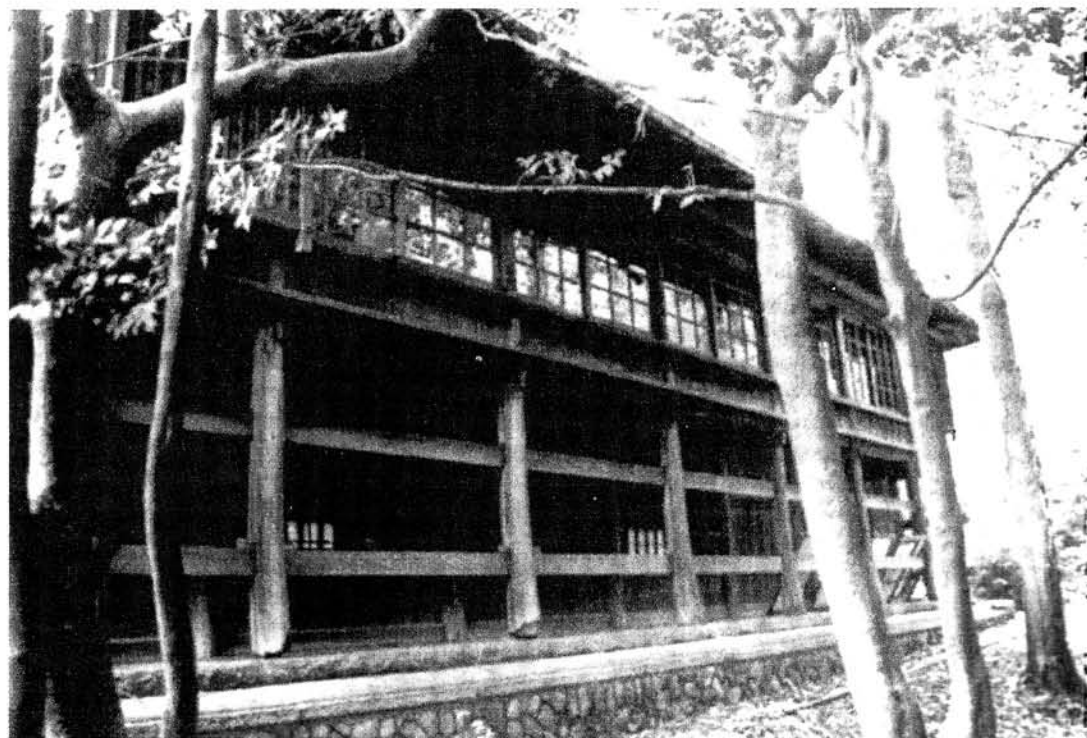


Earth Encounters

Caroline Winstone finds herself among the trees and shadows on Kyoto's most sacred mountain



Shinchihaya, Yoshidayama

Night. A shaven-headed human form stands motionless among the branches, limbs white against the tree's dark shadows. The figure remains still for long enough to establish a relationship between it and the tree before a sudden movement jolts attentions downward. From the surrounding darkness another form moves swiftly to perch on a tree stump. Other figures emerge from the darkness, half crouching, half crawling, approaching in strange, jerky movements through the trees. Hazy lights emanate from somewhere within flimsy garments, conjuring unearthly creatures. They cavort and roll, bare limbs on bare ground, embracing the earth.

Eventually the dancers disappear inside the timber building, and the audience, still standing outside, is left not knowing what to think, except maybe that it's okay for people to roll around in dirt, or be like animals and birds, or that it's the most natural thing in the world for real trees to be the background for drama, dance, and the exploration of ideas. Regulars to this venue come to expect the unexpected, and in *butoh* (a modern Japanese dance form) in particular; it's advisable not to analyse, but just to experience.

Behind screens on the cold stone of the ground

floor, the dancers touch up their trademark white body paint for the next performance. This is an exploration of cruelty, based on the atrocities suffered by Bhutanese refugees in Nepal. Upstairs the structure of the wooden buildings is used with ingenuity; what appear to be wooden window frames become dark figures crawling slowly, eerily in from outside; other figures drop suddenly, terrifyingly, from the roof beams. Through dance, powerful movement, and the rendering of raw emotions, the audience is moved to acknowledge base human behaviour in a way that words could never achieve. By the end, both wrung out and uplifted, many people have tears in their eyes, and are glad their admission fees will go to the refugees.

This performance embodies many facets of Shinchihaya's evolution as an earth-embracing, people-connecting, holistic meeting place. Shinchihaya is an old Buddhist-style structure located on Yoshidayama, reputedly the most sacred mountain in the Kyoto basin, which even today supports an oasis of natural forest in the centre of urban Kyoto. It was built in the first year of Taisho (1913) by the patriarch of the Tanigawa family, a Kansai newspaper magnate. The structure was designed as a pleasure pavilion at the centre of a

complex which included tea houses, a temple, a 'shinbun' shrine, and *torii* marked with the names of newspaper companies. After the elder Tanigawa passed away, and half the mountain was ceded to the government in lieu of inheritance taxes, it fell into disuse and was closed for 27 years. When it was discovered by local resident David Kubiak and his family in 1992, it was filled with rubbish, but basically in good condition.

The Kubiaks approached the landlords, who had no key, and weren't even sure that they still owned it. Happily, it turned out that they did, and they agreed to the building's rebirth as an energy centre, a place where environmental groups, activists, performers, and people concerned with positive change could meet and exchange ideas in congenial surroundings corresponding to their ideologies.

Assisted by dozens of Kyoto performers, artists, and activists, the Kubiaks and their friends restored the building to active use. The ground floor houses KOSAC (Kokusai Shimin Access Centre), a grassroots media and networking office, whose Taoist philosophy is the promotion of change without force, and leadership by ideas. The house was renamed Shinchihaya (new Chihaya) at the time of its resuscitation. "Chihaya" was the rustic mountain fortress of Kusunoki Masahige (genius bandit supporter of 14th century Emperor Godaigo),

who, according to David Kubiak, "defeated the military/industrial complex armies of the time with booby traps, wit, and a scalding deluge of Chihaya latrine sweets" as they attempted to scale the walls.

A maze of trails lead to Shinchihaya, and people who come often have their preferred routes. Coming through the illuminated buildings of Takenaka Shrine after dark, and following the lantern-lit path, is to enter a different world. Touched by the magic of the mountain and its trees (*ki*), regulars commonly feel a sharpening of energy (*ki*) as they approach Shinchihaya. For many, attending events and performances here has a cumulative effect, so that they come to identify with the place, regarding it almost as a second home.

The woods around Shinchihaya have been integral to a variety of interesting events. For those who know what they are looking at, a stand of totems a few metres away from the main door can be identified as the work of local resident and eco-sculptor Pierre Dalem from Belgium. His delightful and sensitive arrangements of natural forms evoke an animistic respect for their simple beauty.

The trees have also become the tools of earth

educator, Steve Van Matre, who encouraged workshop participants to consider the life history of their branches, and to listen to the music of their rustling leaves as one would an orchestra. On another occasion, they offered inspiration for Kyoto-based musician Bob Barraza's vocal improvisation on sounds of life around the trees. Food was hidden in the same trees for hunter-gatherer exercises during workshops on indigenous peoples.

A *taiko* group practices regularly in Shinchihaya, setting up traditional wooden drums on the polished floor and closing the sliding shutters on one side of the building in a neighbourly attempt to soften the sounds. The tricky business of slotting the shutters back into their storage space is, like cleaning the polished floor on hands and knees, a labour of love which enriches the historic resonance of being here. When the players need a break from their high energy drumming, gazing out into the woods provides a welcome respite; the trees are the perfect backdrop for falling snow in the winter and the cooling silver rain of summer.

Attending a Shinchihaya event is likely to be a memorable experience, taking you into a world of original thinkers, authors, deep ecologists and philosophers. Frijof Capra, John Seed, Joanna Macey, Karel Van Wolferen (author of *The Enigma of Japanese Power*), and dolphin expert John Lilley are among its renowned visitors. You might bump into an international film maker and witness the first screening of a new film, or lose yourself in a discussion of the future world. Millennial Moon Meetings provide such opportunities on a regular basis. Kyotoites interested in matters of local and global concern gather on the night before the full moon for what Kubiak describes as an "ancient version of conspiracy; that is, breathing together, to expand the realm of compassion and social concern."

As a place dedicated to such purposes, Shinchihaya has many ardent Japanese and foreign supporters, and possibly some non-human guardians too. A watchful owl sounds in the evening trees, and Yoshida's quartet of tutelary deities (gods protecting agriculture, learning, women and warriors) must surely take a sympathetic interest in its kindred strivings. Mount Yoshida is also known as *Kaguraoka* - "hill of divine pleasure." Its enchanting power was first recognised and invaded in early Heian to exorcise a ghost, and nearby Yoshida Jinja was built in 859 to prevent evil spirits from coming into the city.

While 1200 years have passed, many of Shinchihaya's events still summon benevolent energies to heal and to quell a host of modern ills. Regular events include astrology, women's empowerment, *ki*-energy workshops, yoga, tai-chi, moving meditation and dance; traditional Japanese drumming, belly-dancing, and Japanese language classes; free form concerts and theatre. The building can also be hired out for private events. Call 075-771-2025 for further details or 075-752-1692 for Japanese language classes. •