

This is a news article interview with Mike's sister Kimi who explains the facts surrounding Mike's death.

Choreographing Memory and History in Flight to Ixcan An interview with Kimi Okada and Claudia Bernardi by Toba Singer March, 2004 ODC/San Francisco resident choreographer, Kimi Okada, and artist Claudia Bernardi began their collaboration on Flight to Ixcan after having met at Coalition Missing, a human rights group created to provide support to relatives and colleagues of those tortured, murdered, and "disappeared" in Guatemala. Okada's brother, Michael, was killed in 1976. Bernardi participated in 1995 in the exhumation of the massacre of the 2Rs in El Petén.

Toba Singer : Please describe your work, Flight to Ixcan. Kimi Okada: The piece, Flight to Ixcan, was inspired by death of my brother, Michael Okada, over 20 years ago. In 1976, Michael was a 29-year-old doctor, an internist, at San Francisco General Hospital. He was my only sibling; our mother was still alive in 1976, but we had lost our father to cancer when we were much younger. There had been an earthquake in Guatemala, and Michael volunteered to help with relief work. He was unfamiliar with the political situation there, where the anti-dictatorial government of Jacobo Arbenz had been overthrown in 1954, and a military dictatorship, supported by the U.S. government, came to power. Michael knew none of that when he volunteered. His intention was to offer medical aid and enjoy a reputedly beautiful part of the world. Going there was not a political act, but dying there became one. He worked for a week in Guatemala City under the direction of a Maryknoll Jesuit priest, Bill Woods. Woods had been active for 18 years in the agrarian reform struggle centered in a rural area known as Quiché, where he had helped poor peasants establish a thriving farming cooperative on previously unoccupied land. [In a May, 1979 Mother Jones article, "The Strange Death of Bill Woods," Ron Chernow writes that this region was referred to in Guatemala as "The Zone of the Generals" because generals favored by the dictatorship planned to parcel it out amongst themselves in order to monopolize the mineral and oil drilling rights. The article goes on to say that for a decade, Father Woods had piloted a small Cessna to travel from Guatemala City to Quiché. With 2,000 flight hours to his credit, he had used the plane to gradually resettle approximately 10,000 peasants from tiny hillside plots to the jungle cooperative over a period of six years.] Bill Woods invited Michael, along with a U.S. journalist and two U.S. doctors to join him on a flight to Ixcan to visit the cooperative on a cloudless November day. At just after 11 a.m., the plane crashed into a mountainside in a remote part of the jungle. All the passengers were killed. Within less than an hour, the Guatemalan military was at the scene of this remote crash, and by the time the official investigation began, the plane had been moved from the crash site, pulled down off the mountain, with key engine parts that normally would have been intact, reported missing by the investigative team. There was a 12-hour gap period that began when my uncle called to say that Michael might possibly be dead. My uncle made the call because my mother could not bring herself to do it. At the end of the 12 hours, he called again to confirm that Michael was one of the passengers and that he was dead. When the first call came, I was in the kitchen with my then-husband, Bill Irwin. He and I were cooking breakfast. I remember every detail: the omelet in the pan, the way the light was in the kitchen, that sequence of indelible memory marked by a dreadful suspense that ended with another phone call to say that my brother was dead. My mother didn't want to know the circumstances of his death, and I think that as a third-generation, Japanese-American daughter, out of deference to her, I subconsciously decided that, though I knew the details, I did not want to dwell on or examine them, let alone in a dance work. My mother died of cancer several years later, and following her death, I slowly began to let myself absorb what had happened. Eventually, I read an article in The Guardian about an organization of survivors of missing or "disappeared" individuals, called "The Coalition of the Missing." [Members include such individuals as Jennifer Harbury, Meredith Larsen and John Wolfe.] I decided to attend a meeting, a forum, where I heard Claudia Bernardi speak. It opened up a whole new world for me. The report issued by the government of Guatemala blamed the crash on bad weather. Witnesses said and weather reports confirmed that it was a beautiful day. An eyewitness reported seeing a sniper shoot at the plane that went down as if struck by lightning. [The Mother Jones article reports that it was fairly widely known among human rights workers that Bill Woods had been the object of several death threats and received warnings that his life was in danger, including from the American ambassador to Guatemala, shortly before the crash. In a talk Woods had given before some Texas elementary school children, he had predicted that enemy forces intent on killing him would post a marksman on that last mountain ridge before the Ixcan coop.]

TS: What prompted the collaboration? KO: I was very close to my brother, and therefore devastated personally, and for 20 years I couldn't deal with it on a political level. Joining the Coalition of the Missing changed that for me; my world opened up to the many horrible things that have been happening in Central America. Claudia Bernardi was invited by the group to speak about the work she did at the invitation of her sister, participating in forensic exhumations of mass graves at

the sites of massacres. To make sense of the horrific experience and communicate its message, Claudia drew on her sensibilities as an artist and painted interpretations of what she saw, experienced, and felt. She opened a path for me, and I thought, "I know how I can get at this now, trying to make a work of art centered on something deep and personal." Before meeting Claudia, hearing her talk and seeing her work, I was too vulnerable to put this experience out there. She inspired me, and offered me a vision of how I could do something. I didn't want to do something about loss and grief, I wanted to do something on memory, personal memory of the loss of my brother in the larger context of the numbers of people who have been lost due to political circumstances, something that went beyond my personal circumstances, remembering those who are not here in a way we can honor them. That's what my piece is about. The framework of memory is more abstract. I am asking the question, "How do we remember?" Is it abstract or more episodic? It's not linear. There are 14 sections and the piece is 32 minutes long, using a wide range of vocabulary: pedestrian, theatrical, and visual dance movement. Claudia Bernardi: In 1994-95, I participated in exhuming bodies from the Massacre of the Two Rs. I want to clarify that I'm not a member of the Forensics Archaeological Team, and have only participated in a few exhumations. The team has done many, but 2Rs in Guatemala City revealed the most profound level of calamity. The survivors said that in that massacre children were thrown into a well. Sure enough, there was a well that hadn't been completed. It was in the process of construction and hadn't yet been plumbed to the source. From what the forensics team was able to discover, the children were killed last and put in the well, verifying the survivors' accounts. No other word serves but "calamity" to describe the collapse of the human spirit exemplified by these massacres. I am thankful that I had art in my life to help me connect such calamity to our daily existence, to express how such realities affect what our lives become. Father Woods was working for a lucid proposal, agrarian reform. It is truly perplexing that such a person should have been killed, and that the happenstance of the killing of those on that plane opened up a window on a world that none of their families or friends would have otherwise encountered back in 1976, given the political situation then. I have been involved in other collaborations, which have not worked well because the other artist sees things differently or has vastly different tastes and aesthetics. I immediately responded to Kimi's generosity as a choreographer and her openness to suggestion. There was a confluence in how we saw the world, poetry, film, and many aspects that contributed to the success of our collaboration and this work. KO: After hearing Claudia speak and seeing her slides, I could see that she had potential to be a true collaborator, share the same taste. There was a strong kinship in how we see things and what we value in life. We didn't have any conflicts. The physical contribution she made was use of earth, seven wooden boxes that became set pieces that change constantly; they are variously receptacles, coffins, chairs, abstract visuals, illuminated. There are garments that are child-size and adult size, dipped in paraffin that hold their shape with nobody inside, as garments were found at the exhumations. I am happy to keep Claudia's sensibility to the look of the piece: It's what drew me to the project in the first place. It's hard to collaborate on set and props because dancers need space. Pina Bausch used two tons of dirt. I'm using 18 cubic feet. I'm a Japanese-American whose brother just happened to end up killed in a political situation in Latin America. Claudia kept me close to a situation that is foreign to me. Being third generation Japanese-American isn't germane, so much as interesting culturally in this context. CB: In 1976, there weren't many human rights organizations or information sources on the situation in Guatemala. That lack of information must have made the experience even more disorienting, because to the families it must have had the bizarre feeling of something devastating coming out of nowhere into their lives. KO: My brother had no idea. He didn't go there to fight for human rights, nor to fight injustice. He went there to heal, yet he was the victim of injustice. CB: How it must have been perceived by the family members of those who were in that Cessna makes me think of the events today in the Middle East. We are similarly in the dark today about the Middle East. There's the enormous pain of missing Michael, and then when you open the huge Pandora's Box of human rights abuses, there's no escaping it. KO: At first I dealt with the physical pain of his loss. I still remember my uncle calling after 12 hours of not knowing whether he was on the plane. My mother, in Minnesota, couldn't call me because she was too devastated. My uncle called me and he was the one who went to Guatemala to retrieve his body. My mother didn't want to know the circumstances, and I couldn't delve into it in deference to my mother and the Japanese practice of retreating in grief, showing no demonstrative emotion. I didn't consider making a piece on this subject. After my mother died, I tried to do something on my mother, but it was a failure. It didn't happen for me, and so I was wary about doing something on my brother. Claudia's work was an inspiration to me, a way to deal with emotions, history, and aesthetics. TS: Speak personally about what you are saying out loud for the first time through this medium

and collaboration, what are you offering to your families or countrymen and women? "Women" is in part deliberate because you are two women and I'm wondering what that meant in this collaboration. KO: I have no immediate relatives left in my family of origin. I have a vast extended family. I'm bringing them my vision, a tribute to my brother, but also a kind of offering to them of what I've experienced, and whether it's similar to their experience, I don't know, but I'm offering an expression of the huge emotion I felt about his loss in an artistic way. CB: I have no family, except a sister. We have both worked round human rights. I don't think you have to be Freud to realize that being in the vicinity of death, makes it seem like death is visiting us. It's hard to hear what Kimi feels. I hope that I'm not being immodest if I say that for me my art brings forward the best version of Claudia that is possible to share. What is any art piece about? Art is abstraction. The aspect of memory is very passionate. In a way, there is a militancy here in not having to succumb to what the violence held as a plan for each of us. Making art is always a tender process for me; it's about creating and not destroying. I would not be honest if I told you my work fell within the paradigm of resistance in the political sense. It may happen to do that, but I do it because it rescues me, it's very maternal. Interestingly, that was the sentiment I felt working on the exhumations, working with such care gave me an opportunity to confront the violence. As part of the process of working on this piece, I took tapes of "ODC Unplugged" to my friends, to see what they thought. Kimi was there and I was translating her words. It was very comfortable for them to hear her speak. They asked, "When is the piece coming?" TS: What is most challenging in doing this work, different from previous efforts? What will be the possible challenges to the audience? KO: I felt that I had to have dirt in this piece. A friend of Claudia's from El Salvador said memory is the future for our people. The piece is a reflection of the past and a way to be able to continue, and I hope that's what this piece will have at its heart, that it will be regenerative in that way. I was afraid it would just be a piece about me, and I hope that it isn't. For those who are not Americans, it does speak to a larger audience. It's so interesting to have a piece with this kind of context. CB: The 12-hour lapse segment: I heard Kimi explain it in personal terms to the dancers. There's something about the way the choreography works without saying anything except translating Kimi's words, that has agitation as Kimi's most core expression, and I have great admiration for her being able to share, but that is not only Kimi's experience. KO: There's a solo by Yuki that is followed by The Invasion, fear of noises, a string of women listening for noises you don't know how to interpret. It's my jump from loss of knowledge to the state of emergency in your heart. It's worse than anything and ultimately the reality is terrible, but that state of mind is somehow worse. CB: There's a voiceover segment that is a response to a question that's actually based on an exchange in a journal on Guatemala that a photographer had. The answer to the question "Who in your family has disappeared?" is 15 people, all named Morales. It's a concrete connection to the reality of Guatemala. The choreography here is just beautiful. KO: There's text from FOIA (Freedom of Information Act) documents defining national security. We read the bureaucratic, legalistic language describing what defines national security for a minute and a half, as dancers open boxes. It's very timely, today. I have never done a piece that has such political implications. It's really about reflections, and I was attracted to using dirt because it's a metaphor about excavation, retrieval, finding things that are secret, excavated from the mind, drawn from the memory. I did a lot of reading about memory. Memory can be comforting, insistent, traumatic, elusive, and we create untrue memories. One section, the dance section, right before the very end, represents a culmination of different kinds of memory I've had regarding my brother. I used the full company, a larger whole. I read clinical books that explained which parts of the brain are used, scientific books that are fascinating in analyzing how people remember, books that explain the loss of memory, memory of traumatic incidents and how they are etched in your brain. I was in the kitchen making an omelet, and the picture of that burned into my memory. I know exactly what it looked like. A lot of the sources tried to explore the sense, smell, arrangement of color, and I used that choreographically. More than is usually the case, this was very process-oriented, including a lot of exploratory work. ODC has many young dancers who fortunately haven't experienced loss. It took some work to get them to relate to this piece, because it was just not in their experience. CB: Monique [Strauss, who is pregnant] is no longer in the piece. She is older, and there was a way about how she caught things--Kimi and I would burst into tears. Something about the way she got it. KO: KT [Nelson, a retired member of the company, who is now co-artistic director] is performing because I wanted an older person with that experience, and she's very wonderful in it and an amazing performer. She said she'd be a performer in my piece and I have gotten so attached to her in it! CB: It is so noticeable, the younger the dancer, the more flexible the body is, but the mind is not seasoned - it's a paradox. KO: It's really about a state of mind about reflecting on an experience that's bigger than you, and seasoned performers have an easier time, not to say that the young dancers

aren't doing a wonderful job. We started working on it a year ago, and then did an "[ODC] Unplugged," and then started working on it again in September, with an informal showing of it. I think I feel that one of the good things about the collaboration with Claudia is that it took me out of the realm of being an individual with one story to tell, and realizing that there are hundreds and thousands of people who have similar stories, and this brought me into a stream of experience where I heard so many stories of what people went through that I went into alignment with support and strength from those other stories, feeling an emotional and political communion with many people who I don't know. In terms of going back to the piece, it's a real luxury to be able to do something for a set amount of time, have time away to absorb comments, have time away to see if you agree with them, and more importantly artistically, to let settle what you think about the piece. The mistake in the piece that I did about my mother was being too general about mothers and daughters and loss and grief, not being particular and specific. Here there are direct allusions to real things from my memories about my brother growing up as a child. The same goes for political references: I am capturing real, concrete images in my head from documentaries and photos. CB: The basic piece hasn't changed, but there have been adjustments. It's important to honor the paradigm that when art is good art, it emerges through the personal. The more personal it is, the more universal it is. We can see that in art from the Middle Ages. You can partake because it is personal, even if you can't comprehend it. Kimi and I were very moved by the slides. In 2001 and 2002, there was a ceremony in which the boxes containing the human remains were returned to the surviving families, and you could see the people you knew coming with the box of remains that you knew about. [from the El Mozote Massacre in El Salvador]. We went to see a photo exhibit at New College that had boxes. What we carry in that box is our art, our ability to create memory at the same time that we are retrieving it. We are building something communally that makes a lot of sense, and makes it universally understood. That's the multi-layered aspect of the piece. That's its massiveness, its resonance. Kimi was propelled by that reality. The majority of important things that happened in my life, I wouldn't have chosen, but if I hadn't had those unfortunate experiences, I wouldn't have this belief system that is now the center of my life. That's the connection between the personal and the political. KO: Jay Clويدt did the music. It's very eclectic, episodic, electronic, but really not "techno," so much as beautiful. It incorporates indigenous marimba music and Claudia speaks in Spanish in her beautiful voice, reading the Guatemalan newspaper version of the story, and government documents. The lighting is by Alexander Nichols. CB: I gravitated in an uncomplicated way toward the conception of the piece. All my collaborations have been wonderful, but this is uncanny because we come from two different worlds. I would not believe it if I were not saying it myself. For an audience, visually, what may be the challenge is that somewhere in the cerebral cortex people believe art should be decorative. This is not the "Velveteen Rabbit." We have a very aware audience in the Bay Area; the challenge is that this is not about entertainment. Not that that's wrong, but that's not what this is, and this piece is certainly not that. If I were the audience, uninformed, the earth and the music might be disorienting. The challenge is to take away the membrane that separates our emotions and plunge into something that is hard to look at. KO: To make something meaningful is the challenge - so many things apply. This wasn't my goal, but the challenge is to create a piece that people can share an experience with, and see that it relates to their life as well, and getting young dancers to experience something they haven't, connecting many different vocabularies. Choreographing memory is a pretty conceptual idea...how do you get at that? You come up with ideas that would reflect the many guises that memory comes in. For the audience, it's very specific, but nonlinear, episodic, and not a story. It's a story, but you don't go from one part to another. It's fractured and demanding in that you have to experience it without making a story out of it by putting puzzle pieces together, and you can lose them [the audience members]. I have the good rationale that memory is not linear, but I do have to fashion a whole piece out of it with a life of its own, and that's one of the challenges: to craft a piece that stands on its own, and not entertaining, because there are many images of violence, not easy on any level, but they were necessary: Bodies falling, plane crashes, and military violence. CB: How hard it was for dancers to do military movement! "I don't like this!" And truly, there is no reason why such movements should exist. It's unnatural for the body to acquire that shape. KO: I had to find a line between not being too literal and not too abstract. It's hard to portray the military abstractly. That part is somewhat literal and I made the choice to keep it that way. It's a challenge to keep the identity without becoming generic. The dancers are huge; they brought a lot of themselves into it, and I wouldn't have projected that they would have brought so much into it. In large part it was Claudia's presence, her direct experience, an artist's eye. We did exercises with objects, retrieving a toy from a child's garment. The dancers brought their own objects that meant something to them. We said, "Make a two

minute piece about this." Monique brought a passport from a time when she was freer. Daniel [Santos] brought a memento from the Great America-Free Fall to capture the fear he felt. Another dancer brought a red envelope that had contained college tuition money from his grandmother. Private [Freeman] brought a ring from Brazil. The work around this required the dancers to be really vulnerable. Everything had to do with the feeling, if not the piece as a whole. On the first day of rehearsal, Claudia showed slides of the exhumations she participated in. It was very hard to start rehearsal after that. Since we started this piece, KT's mother was killed in a hit and run accident, then her father died, and my favorite uncle died. All of these losses were magnified by working on this. It feels scary to be putting a piece like this out, but I wouldn't have had it any other way, never having put anything out so directly in my life. CB: And this was all during the time that Brian [Fisher] and his partner were becoming the foster parents of triplets. You'd like to say that's the other side of this, but because that too is complicated, it is not totally the other side, and we should be cautious about saying that. Having children, wanting to adopt is all interwoven with the loss. Edited by Jenai Cutcher Want more? Check out Toba Singer's review of Flight to Ixcan Please join the discussion in our forum. ODC/San Francisco Dancing Downtown The Personal and Political Portrayed through Collaboration 'Flight to Ixcan' by Toba Singer February 20, 2004 -- Yerba Buena Center for the Arts/San Francisco, CA Catastrophe holds us in its thrall against our will. It both invites and strips away rationale. Basic elements such as fire, water, lightning, thunder, and the ionic charge of the air we breathe all register with greater force when catastrophe turns what we take for granted into the gravest of losses. Calamity, nature's exterminating angel, forges a singular memory into a pictogram. An instantaneous glimpse of an event cuts a backward zigzag against the forward march of time and the inner archive of aggregating memory. In Flight to Ixcan, Kimi Okada, in collaboration with Claudia Bernardi, come as close as may be possible to redressing and redeeming catastrophic loss through a work of art. The two artists (one dance, one visual) harness the disorientation that cloisters human sensibilities from brutality. Then they unburden what lies beneath a foggy zone of disbelief. In the soil, the bared bones of remains, the reliquary of findings, and in what the earth retells, they locate release from the horror that attends catastrophe. The found items are the mute witnesses and humble evidence revealing the arrogance of political and military carnage. They confirm a tried and true historical paradox: a few rich latifundists will destroy thousands of the rural poor, the class of people whose very labor has enriched them, and for no other reason than that in this stage of history, they can. The dancers' task is to unfurl and embroider a kind of story quilt, part of which is representational. They dance the planes, the mercenary soldiers, and the collaterally-damaged individuals who are shot execution-style, hands tied behind their backs. Then they become the disdained corpses, left in the positions they assume when they fall, as carrion, as if no creatures but vultures would care about their fate. Ms. Okada is telling the story of her brother's political murder as part of a larger story. She has chosen Yuki Fujimoto to portray her own character. Fujimoto dances the role with tremendous power, shadowed by grace and elegance. A hub segment marks the 12 hours of torment that begin with a Cessna's mysterious crash into a remote mountainside. The Fujimoto character's brother was a passenger in the Cessna. She is forced to wait for official word from afar, confirming his death. She waits seated on a pine box. Later, she and the other dancers use her sitting box and other pine boxes to construct a small shrine. In another sequence, the pine boxes will be coffins. But for now, she marks the time as a reluctant witness, turned partially away from the terrifying action unfolding onstage that tells a story she'd rather not know. There are reveries derived from her memories of childhood play with her brother. There's a moment that relies on a shared glance with Daniel Santos (who dances the role of Okada's brother, Michael), combined with tussling arms, that captures the unique empathy that develops only between brother and sister. Memories of brother-induced frustration echo what she feels as she waits: girls left waiting by boys, girls hating waiting for boys, girls hating themselves for waiting for boys, but nonetheless, waiting and waiting and waiting, even for spirit-sucking confirmation of a brother's hair-trigger demise. The score by Jay Clويدt introduces an arc of electronic music and sounds, from thunder and lightning to telephones ringing in 1970s-style tones, to the delicate warble of jungle birds. The company dances under the voiceover of Claudia Bernardi recounting "El Accidente" in the dispassionate prose of a Spanish-language newspaper account. The setting is elucidated by the flute/xylophone waterfall sounds of indigenous instruments marking the passage of time. Dancers spit out a military drill that overlays two women comforting one another in the aftermath of a massacre. We see the brother who was Fujimoto/Okada's earliest playmate transformed into the deer in the headlights of this grotesque, death-belching machine, the boy who runs from a game with his sister one last time, as the sun of his last day sets on the jungle, where calamity changes a geoscape forever. A tableau vivant steps out of the

pandemonium. It includes all the visible parties to this tragedy: mercenaries, massacre victims, and surviving family members. Slowly, one after another, family members drop out of the posed photo-tableau. Names of an entire extended family are spoken by a single voice, citing sisters, brothers, a father, a mother, cousins, aunts and uncles, all with the last name of Morales. All massacred. Brian Fisher dances with an empty wedding dress that still holds its human shape, as if an invisible mannequin were wearing the dress. A voice reads an official U.S. Government Freedom of Information Act memorandum detailing (U.S.) national security protocols. Its innocuous jargon is intended to shield the listener from its true purpose. It serves as the government's official apologia for the slaughter of those who lay claim to the land of their birth. Survivors peer into coffins. The Okada sister runs to her brother and reunites with him in a lift, but he falls away and she stands alone with empty arms. K.T. Nelson dances an elder witness. She dances with gentle, but unshakable authority. Okada's decision to accept the retired Nelson's offer to dance is an outstanding choice. Her character represents what the mind and body have come to know over a lifetime. What is the role of an elder in a catastrophe? Victim? Leader? The person with the most to lose? The person with the least to lose? Is she a repository for the social history that has led to this defining moment? As the piece reaches its denouement, huge mounds of loam-like soil surface downstage and up. As the lighting becomes more oblique, we see the adult's white wedding dress and a child's white ceremonial dress suspended side by side in the background. They are stark against the soil in the foreground. Bereft dancers sway, seated before the mounds. They are grieving, their hands sifting through the dirt in a quiet ritual of retrieval. A disturbing answer appears to emerge to the brave question that asks, "What in the spiritual continuum of humankind has died and been buried here?" Edited by Jenai Cutcher Find out more about Flight to Ixcan in Toba Singer's interview with Kimi Okada Please join the discussion in our forum. With dance, Kimi Okada takes her brother's death beyond politics and personal grief February 18, 2004 | Jesse Hamlin, Chronicle Staff Writer • o o Three dancers in "Flight to Ixcan," choreographed by Kimi Okada, caress mounds of dirt in the piece about suspicious killings in Guatemala. Several months after the deadly 1976 Guatemalan earthquake, Dr. Michael Okada, a 29-year-old resident at San Francisco General Hospital, went to Guatemala to offer his services. A week later, he was killed in a suspicious plane crash in the Ixcan jungle of northern Guatemala. Okada died with the four other Americans on board, including the pilot, Father Bill Woods, a Jesuit missionary who'd received death threats for helping Mayan peasants organize agricultural cooperatives in the oil-rich province. The plane's windshield was never found -- a witness reported seeing snipers on the mountaintop -- and the Guatemalan government issued conflicting reports about the cause of the crash. The families of the deceased tried vainly for years to get information about the incident from the U.S. government; when they finally did some 20 years later, parts of the 25-page document they received were blacked out for "national security."