

Summer 2012

Ballet Review



From the Summer 2012 issue of *Ballet Review*

Scattered Clouds:

Dance in Taipei by Joseph Houseal

Cover Photograph by Paul Kolnik, NYCB: Sterling Hyltin
and Robert Fairchild in Peter Martins' *Romeo + Juliet*.

**Ballet Review 40.2
Summer 2012**

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Cover Photograph by Paul Kolnik, NYCB: Sterling Hyltin and Robert Fairchild in Peter Martins' *Romeo + Juliet*.

*Francis Mason's interviews about Martha Graham date from the mid-1990s.

Scattering Clouds

Joseph Houseal

Vibrant innovation and technical excellence characterize the dance scene in Taipei. Recently I was honored to be a guest lecturer in the Dance Department of the Taipei National University of the Arts, a curriculum originated by Lin Hwai-min, director of Cloud Gate Dance Theater. The brilliance of this university's dance department is its focus on the profession of dancing. Training in Peking Opera, Graham technique, classical ballet, aboriginal dance, and modern dance is required of all majors. Because all majors at TNUA have shared this basic dance training, they do not dwell on their high level of proficiency. From an outside perspective, this is extraordinary.

The academic component of TNUA's dance department similarly places primacy on the profession of dance, while developing and setting the highest academic standards for dance scholarship in Taiwan. A core team of women professors, all with doctorates, from Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States keep the topics timely, the expectations high, and the range of material broad. All this occurs in an environment of robust creativity among faculty, guest artists, and students.

It's probably no wonder that a place founded by Lin Hwai-min would foster, train, and incubate some of the most interesting dance artists today. His ability to create a truly Taiwanese identity in dance, judged on its own terms, remains his cultural legacy. TNUA has since thrived on its own with superb teachers, broad-minded scholars, and talented students.

But the figure of Lin is large on the cultural landscape and the presence he provides is one of national cultural pride and encouragement, and also one demanding excellence. While Cloud Gate is avant-garde as art, it is the Old Ancestor of the Taiwanese dance scene.

It's the source of the pervasive high quality in dance.

There's been an effort over the years, spearheaded by Lin, to educate the Taiwanese about dance, to include all forms of indigenous dance (in Taiwan there are at least ten local, non-Chinese, peoples), and to train generations of dancers along with the population to love and understand dance.

One of the professors from TNUA, Ping Heng, directs a company, Dance Forum Taipei, featuring a former Trisha Brown dancer now choreographer, Yang Ming-lung. He is bringing release technique to traditional Chinese Opera movement, both to make a new contemporary form and to reinterpret classic stories for today's audiences.

Another group of three dancers led by Cheng Tsung-lung, inspired by Jack Kerouac, performed *On the Road* as an exploration of young Taiwanese male identity. All the dancers in the piece were TNUA graduates. Cheng is also a choreographer for Cloud Gate 2. Both these performances were finalists in the prestigious Taishin Art Award; *On the Road* won.

The Taipei Museum of Contemporary Art created a display for each performance finalist, based on their live performances over the year, designed to highlight the qualities that made them finalists. They were overseen by J. J. Shih, the MOCA director and former Taishin Arts Award director. There was a dance element in very nearly every entry, even among visual art finalists who used dance and performance art as media.

The exhibition for *On the Road* was designed by Chen Pin-hsiu in collaboration with the original stage designer, Russ Kao, and was made of four screens facing one another making four walls inside of which people would stand. The seventy-five-minute work was brilliantly shot, edited, and displayed, retaining salient qualities of the dance in part by having different movement on each screen. The installation showed the charm, artistic ease, and intellectual joy with which the Kerouac classic influenced the entire concept and dance. It was ambrosial.

My good fortune extended all the way to the empty factory where Cloud Gate now rehearses. Their former studio burned down in 2008, and until the new one is completed, it is rain on the sheet-metal roof. Lin has me sit next to him at the table where he directs the company.

I've seen him at work choreographing in years past, but this time he was reviving a 1993 work, *Nine Songs*, inspired by the shamanic incantations of earliest China, also called *Nine Songs*. Arthur Waley did a fine translation into English of the original texts. The costumes, sets, production, and lighting schematic notes were ruined in the fire, so this revival is also a reconstruction and a new production. I went to the studio three times for two or three hours at a stretch in order to see the Cloud Gate dancers in training by a tai chi master one day and by ballet master Graeme Collins the next.

Collins, who created the ballet-training program at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts, is now ballet teacher for Cloud Gate and TNUA. "They don't come with a preconceived notion of ballet," he told me, "and they have a well-developed, very low center of gravity. So ballet technique for them is all about body knowledge, and they know their bodies so well. Ballet uses a higher center of gravity, so these dancers get very good at working from different centers of gravity."

Later, rehearsing a scene for the Sun God, a masked dancer leapt from a pair of stilts, upward, falling in an arc to the ground below – a god landing with elemental authority. It is dangerous, and difficult. Lin was coaching the young and excellent dancer how to get through this and still be dancing while landing. The earnest young man tried and tried again, never quite exploding in mid-air, which would physically make the difficult feat simpler, cleaner, and more organic, counterintuitive as that may seem.

"There is something about this generation of men dancers," Lin leaned over and said to me. "At the end of a long day of rehearsal, they smell good." I nodded sympathetically. "They are too concerned with how they smell. They

are too concerned with themselves generally. It's the fashion: they want to be pretty. Men here used to be more raw."

I protested. "Taiwanese young people are so fashionable now. It is dandyism, sure. It's kind of nice. One fellow told me that it was the modern version of a Confucian expression: dressing up before going out, before seeing a teacher, looking groomed and showing respect." Lin ultimately left the table and choreographed a new way for the young dancer to leap off the stilts, exude a primal solar power, and land dancing.

Another young dancer, the tall and talented Yu Chien-hung, also portrayed the Sun God. The solo is complex, spirit-like, and powerful. It inspires awe. He is in one of three casts for the revival. After the dance was completed, Yu approached Lin's table, panting, looking up at him from a lunge position, his eyes wide open and direct like a devoted student. Lin looked directly back, and proceeded to critique his dancing in the minutest detail and artistic depth, all the while fixed on the receptive gaze of the young dancer.

It reminded me of a Buddhist mind-to-mind "transmission." Yu then thanked Lin, and backed away. He repeated the solo, which this time took on a larger-than-life quality and an unselfconscious display of skill. Lin said to me, "We pray to the gods. They never come. The gods demand sacrifice; we give them our lives. Who are these gods? But the rituals never cease. I find what each dancer is open to while I am choreographing, teaching, coaching through this revival. He is much better now. The appearance of the god is disconcerting. Good."

In an exquisitely beautiful scene, the masked River Goddess appears as a shamanic trance dream, while ritual maidens evoking ancient shapes toss flowers in the lotus pond at the front of the stage. I found the River Goddess the eeriest of all, an inhabited ritual shaman, borne on a rude palanquin, standing erect, wearing the plainest of masks. In her, beauty and purity become frightening. The story and tribal ritual give over to abstraction as a way for society to move forward.

These vestals, like those in Robbins' *Antique Epigraphs*, evoke ancient ideals through imagery, but Lin goes farther than Robbins, connecting the modern and the ancient in real consequential understandings. Throughout the work, Magritte-like men in suits ride in on bikes, offering a modern context for the ancient sacrifices, which remain like some psychic anchor that cannot be pulled up. Another section about the Gods of Fate – which could stand alone as an essay on destiny – is brutal and brilliant. The ritual fate of people, for all their piety, has often been cruel and unpredictable. Lin does not shy away from profound questioning of human behavior.

The serial sacrifice to the gods ends, as in the ancient poems, with a homage to those fallen in the name of the ancient gods. Lin updates this with an audioscape naming the fallen Taiwanese from the war against the Japanese occupation: those fallen to the modern God of War. Chinese names. Indigenous names. Endless names. For each a floating candle in a bowl is brought onstage and set on the floor, making a twisting river of flickering light.

It is sobering to contemplate those fallen to the gods of war. Finally, this becomes a grand homage to all the fallen everywhere, as the backdrop of the nighttime sky lights up with uncountable stars and the river of lights flows forever into infinity. In rehearsal, the piece is moving and shocking, compassionate and insightful. I would like to see the revival of this piece onstage. A two-year tour of this work traveling through Asia and to Moscow and London is slated to begin in August 2012.

Diane Baker is the dance writer for the *Taipei Times*. A resident for thirty years, she has seen the dance scene in Taiwan develop. She credits the seminal role of Cloud Gate in establishing a climate of creativity and originality, and for demonstrating that there is a Taiwanese national character in modern and contemporary dance. Rather than imported ballet reaching a kind of cultural primacy, or imported modern dance setting roots, Taiwanese originality instead was the fountainhead.

She also noted, "You really should see the

Focus Dance Company. That would be the TNUA graduating class dance students. There you'd see a slice of the employment pool. Cloud Gate employs more dancers than anyone else and, sure, it is a lively, engaged dance scene with government support and promotion at several levels, but the fact is that there are more qualified dancers than can be employed. Some smaller groups are established and there are many performances not by companies, but by artists and groups of artists. If you really want to see how great the training is here, go to a graduation concert.

"The other factor is that Taiwan is still a traditional culture. Your parents might let you study dance in college, but afterward, you'd better get a real job. So, in the Focus Dance Company, you will see dancers who have been selected and will be hired by Cloud Gate, dancers who are qualified but face uncertain futures, and dancers who are wonderful but are forced to stop by their families."

An example of just how healthy the dance scene in Taipei can be found in 8213 Physical Dance Theater, founded and directed by Sun Chuo-tai. Among the other definition-stretching performance art and movement 8213 performs, it also hosts a Not Dance Festival, a twelve-day performance series now in its second year. I asked Sun about this notion, and he said that his original inspiration was people saying that they could not understand dance. He thought was, "But this is not dance! Please come."

Audiences did come, and various municipal governments paid to have the festival travel around. Here, an excerpted evening of seven solo artists was shown. We were in Tamsui, end of the line at the ocean's edge where old village houses still stand, and people working the river command the outlying area. After the first piece I was a believer. Performed by Chan Tien-zhen, *Wearing a Nightgown* was an electrifying and horrifying dance-theater portrait of a woman who has been exposed to the radiation of the recent Fukuyama nuclear reactor meltdown during the Japanese earthquake and tsunami.

Among several scenes, two are impossible to forget. In the first she is tied at the waist by an enormous rope that extends offstage into unfathomable darkness; she cannot get away from the rope. In the other, she is washing and endlessly washing her hands in a bowl. It was Not Dance but it was spellbinding, serious, and expressive. In an era when no one really knows how to respond to such horrors, Chan has used art to convey total compassion by revealing the heartbreaking, inescapable realities being faced by the victims of this disaster.

Choreographer and dancer Christopher Chu performed *A Twelfth of Me*, created for the original twelve-day festival by being a different "me" every day for the twelve days. Responding to the notion of Not Dance, Chu turned everything toward the immediacy of the dancer. It was completely improvisational, accompanied by improvising instruments like bells and bamboo flutes. The lighting design, too, was an improvisation in amber and blue. Chu is a highly accomplished dancer and practitioner of tai chi. He made the whole event an ineffable artistic effusion of cosmic energy. He seemed a young Lao Tzu.

At one point, sliding open the large delivery door at the back of stage to reveal the Tam-sui River below flowing out to the sea, Chu stood teetering, absorbed, moonstruck (for the moon was reflected in the water and the commerce of Taipei was all twinkling lights). Something heady and atmospheric was occurring and the entire audience fell into a kind of peaceful atmospheric connection with the moon and the breeze. Then somehow, Chu was gone. The stage with its open back door and amber sheaths of light had kept us all mesmerized.

Next came a "Dan," a female impersonator in the classical Kunqu Opera style of singing and dancing, the oldest extant style of Chinese opera. Chao Hsin is a dance major Ph.D. student at National Central University of Taiwan. He performs Peking and Kunqu Opera, specializing in Dan roles. In 2012 he received a prestigious award from CCTV in Mainland China for his performance of Qian-dan. He has

performed extensively for Chinese Opera companies in Taiwan, including Jing Explorer Theatre. Although he is comfortable in edgy contemporary performances, this one was a surprise to everyone attending.

He performed *Wang ZhiJia*, a new work about a Dan from the time of the Ming Dynasty who was celebrated and praised onstage, but in real life had no support, no money, and no position in the world. Chao Hsin sang the song in authentic Kunqu style, with an electronic soundscape added that he sang against, like simultaneous bands in a Charles Ives composition. His beautiful, elegant costume by a hot Taiwanese fashion designer provided glamour and line as well as a cloak of darkness and a shroud of despair. While it was new, he used it in traditional ways, like the rhythmic unfurling of the long sleeves.

I spoke with Chao Hsin briefly after the performance, asking him where his dance training came into play. He answered that aside from his Chinese Opera studies here, he has traveled to Beijing to study professionally. He explained that when in Kunqu style there is a pose struck while holding or delivering certain notes, he would extend and stretch out the poses into much deeper backbends and more dramatic figures on the stairway, for example.

Indeed, during the backbend he performed while delivering a piercing note of despair, his back arch was so deep as he twisted to face the audience that his face was nearly upside down. It was porcelain, raw pain, universal. No particular foreknowledge was needed to comprehend what was going on with the tragic performer. Pure art that reached all.

The evening closed with 227 choreographed by an American, Casey Avant, who completed her master's degree at TNUA after working with Yunyu Wang in Colorado. It is a "man-vs-the-system" piece, in the vein of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. She had this to say: "227 is a twelve-minute solo performed by Sun Chuotai and examines the male perspective as being suppressed by society and the typical work environment."

The piece begins with a man wearing a suit and holding a briefcase. He hears the number 227 called by an authoritative voice and enters from downstage. The man is given orders in both Chinese (female) and English (male), and he readily complies. While some of the commands are easily understandable, some are more absurd.

“At one point the voice orders the man to dance but is subsequently displeased and requests another movement style. A table and chair appear, as well as a bottle of beer, which the voice orders him to drink. The music then changes to cliché bar music, and the man is made to feel as if he can enjoy the moment and relax. The man is finally ordered to get into an empty box, as the final word is the voice requesting number 228, indicating that the man was simply a number, reducible to a box.”

In one wonderful not-dance scene, Sun drinks an entire bottle of beer without stopping, exactly timed to one whole song. (Drink-

ing as art, in which I’ve not seen such mastery since a sixty-seven-year old cowgirl drag queen in Portland downed eight shots of bourbon while lip-synching to “Bang Bang.”) It was not dance, but it was also excellent dancing by Sun Chuo-tai, the inspired leader behind 8213 Physical Dance Theater.

My final day in Taipei, I returned again to Cloud Gate’s studio where Lin was rehearsing a young man, Chen Wei-an, in the role of the Cloud God in *Nine Songs*. Remarkably, this solo is done entirely on the shoulders of two other dancers moving around the stage, as if the “god” is walking on air. Even a run-through where the dancer performed as if he were on others’ shoulders was airily done by planting his legs with the force of great trees and thereby affording his body total freedom of expression. It was transporting and a technical feat bordering on virtuosity. I went over to the young man afterward to compliment his exceptional dancing. Lin Hwai-min was right. He did smell good.