

Cloud Gate: making dance out of martial arts and meditation

The Cloud Gate dance company occupies a unique place in Taiwanese society and its founder has become a national treasure. Nicholas Wroe talks to Lin Hwai-min as he brings a signature work to the UK

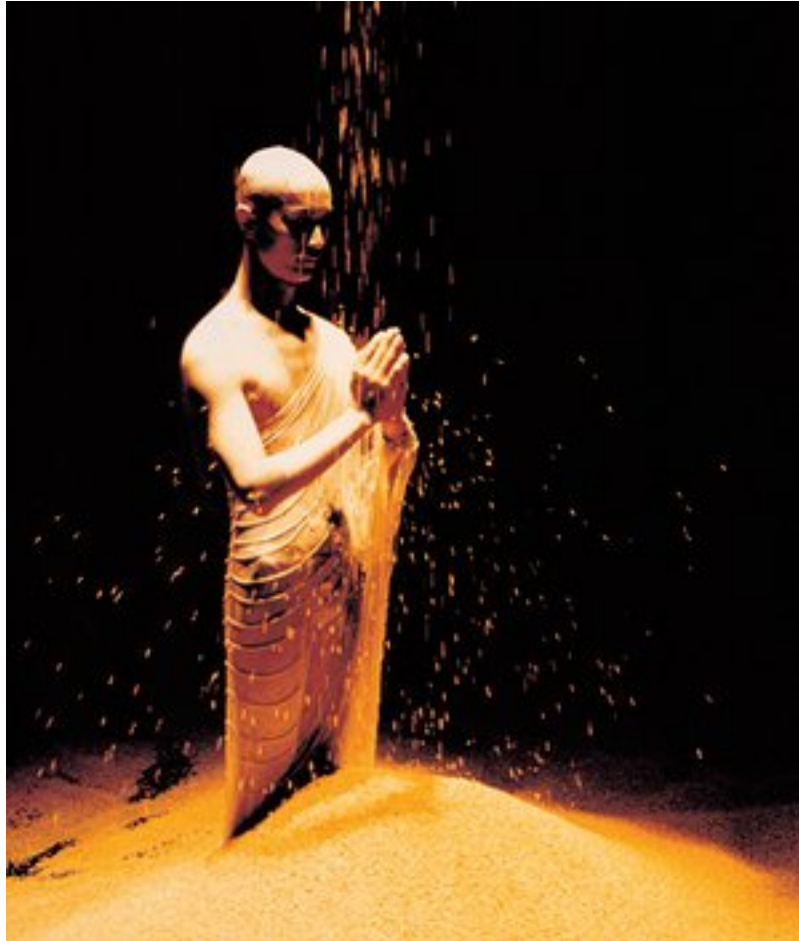


Songs of the Wanderers performed by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan. Photograph: Yu Hui-hung

The Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan arrives at Sadler's Wells next month to give one of the last performances of its signature work. *Songs of the Wanderers* opens with the solitary, still figure of a Buddhist monk standing under a spotlight stream of falling rice. The stage gradually fills with over three tonnes of golden coloured grains – especially shipped in from Taiwan – which form into deep drifts to become the mountains, rivers and desert through which dancers slowly enact the rituals of pilgrimage. Although it draws on Buddhism, the imagery also encompasses more universal readings and the performance is accompanied by the rhythmic chantings of a Georgian choir.

So it is intriguing to learn that this work, depicting a timeless spiritual quest for “asceticism and quietude”, is a characteristic offering from a company that emerged from one of the most turbulent periods of modern Asian geopolitics. For decades following the end of China's civil war in 1949 the Taiwanese regime led by Chiang Kai-shek had claimed to be the legitimate government of all China, but international recognition gradually eroded and in 1971 it was expelled from the United Nations. Cloud Gate founder Lin Hwai-min was

studying in the United States at the time and found himself returning home to an island in which a whole generation were suddenly trying to discover who they were. “There was a lot of energy in literature and the visual arts,” he says. “When I set up Cloud Gate [named after an ancient Chinese dance] we were the first professional dance company. We felt part of a movement in search of its roots. In one respect the mission of the company was to explore what it is to be Taiwanese, as we knew so little about our own home.”



in *Songs of the Wanderers*. Photograph: Yu Hui-hung

Wang Rong-yu in the part of the Monk

At the company’s new theatre, which opened last year on the outskirts of the capital Taipei, Lin gestures in the direction of the Chinese mainland, 110 miles across the Taiwan Straits. “What was important was over there”, he says. Well into the 80s Taiwanese children were taught about Beijing and the Great Wall and how long the Yangtze was. But, says Lin, “we had no idea about the rivers in Taiwan. It just wasn’t in the textbooks. Today you can go to a store and buy half a dozen books on the butterflies of Taiwan, but back then we had to explore for ourselves. City people travelled to the country to see the landscape, the farms, the rituals being carried out in front of the temples.”

Lin’s response was to develop a form of modern dance that, while open to western and other influences, was intrinsically indigenous in its movements and imagery. He notes the

same comparisons between boxing and martial arts as between classical ballet and the work he wanted to produce. "In both boxing and ballet you're tense all the time. In our dance, and in martial arts, you are relaxed in preparation for moments of great intensity. You make a gesture and then you subside again like a wave. And we don't try to elevate and defy gravity. We submit to gravity and attempt to find a harmony with the earth. When we tour abroad the reaction is always the same for new western audiences. For five minutes they are a little confused and fidgety, and then they find the rhythm and become still themselves. This is not work projected out at an audience, it is work that draws an audience in."

Cloud Gate occupies a unique space in Taiwanese culture and society. Its open-air summer shows attract audiences of up to 40,000 people. Its logo has appeared on the livery of China Airlines as well as on Taipei metro trains and buses. Lin, universally known as Mr Lin, has national treasure status and on the streets of Taipei is repeatedly stopped by people simply wanting to say "thank you" to him. He says he has become used to the attention and is proud that his work evokes such public warmth. But even he was taken aback when, as we talk at a secluded restaurant in the hills above Taipei, a fellow diner came over to his table to offer three days' free treatment at a Shanghai hospital, if Mr Lin ever needed it.

Lin was born in Taiwan in 1947, the eldest of five children of Taiwanese parents who had been educated in Tokyo during Japanese control of the island. "We were brought up basically as Japanese kids with quite severe discipline," he recalls. "My parents spoke Japanese. We knelt on tatami. I was a mixture to begin with. A multicultural bastard." His parents brought western, Japanese and Chinese culture into the home. They had pictures of Goethe and Beethoven on the wall and he enjoyed Japanese tales, songs and Samurai films. By his teens Lin was also into Ernest Hemingway, F Scott Fitzgerald and Jackson Pollock. "We were from a village in the south, and although a gentry family we were familiar with the land and rice paddies. That was a part of me too."

Despite this interest in the arts, it was always assumed Lin would go into a profession and he duly studied law at university. But within a year he had switched to journalism, for which he felt better suited having been contributing to magazines since the age of 14. "I always had more pocket money than other kids to buy books or go to movies." He then went to study in America and won a scholarship to the renowned writers' workshop in Iowa. When he eventually returned to Taiwan he taught creative writing and journalism and published several novels. But more significantly, it was in America that Lin began a serious engagement with dance.

His interest was first sparked at the age of five, when he saw the Powell and Pressburger film version of Hans Christian Andersen's tale about a ballerina, *The Red Shoes*, on TV. (Matthew Bourne has just announced that he will be choreographing a new stage version of the story this year). In America Lin began to take modern dance classes, including at the Martha Graham school in New York. When he returned to Taiwan in 1971 he met some young dancers, who wanted him to teach them. "Then of course they wanted to perform, and so in 1973 Cloud Gate began. We had to pay for so many things I was on the verge of a

breakdown after the first season,” he says. “But fortunately we were young and stupid. If we had been sophisticated and calculating we never would have started.”

The company caught the public imagination from the outset, selling out its first two performances in a 3,000 seat venue. “There was a hunger for dance and we connected with people by doing our own thing. This wasn’t *Swan Lake*. Whether we drew on folk tales or history or calligraphy, it was all recognisably part of our audience’s lives.” Lin prided himself on being a “garbage can of a choreographer”, picking things up from India, Europe and elsewhere in Asia as well as from home. “And we were isolated here and that was wonderful. In New York or London there are giants with long shadows. Here I just had to dig to find the things around me.”

Over the years he has instigated innovative forms of training and preparation for his dancers. *Songs of the Wanderers*, which was first performed 22 years ago, came out of a trip Lin took to Bodh Gaya in India, the place where the Buddha attained his enlightenment. Although Lin had been brought up as a Buddhist, the journey, and the realisation that Buddha “was not a god, he was a simple human being who had great compassion and that is why he figured out this philosophy about life”, had a profound impact on Lin’s life and work. He had already asked his dancers to work in rice fields to prepare for roles and now he suggested meditation. “We went on to use martial arts, and qigong, an ancient breathing exercise, in our daily training. At first the dancers hated it. They wanted to do pirouettes and jumps. But I asked them to just stand there and drop their eyes and eventually we came up with the work.”



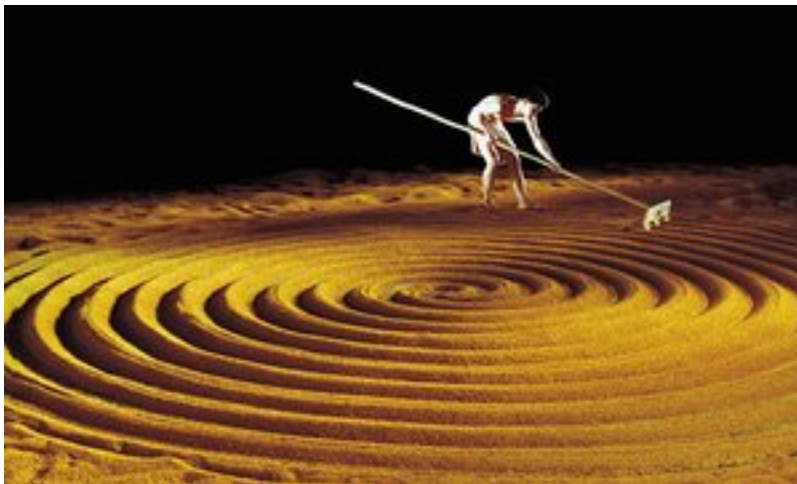
Cloud Gate founder Lin Hwai-min. Photograph: Alamy

The 24 dancers of the company have all come through the Taiwanese system that provides dance classes alongside regular schooling. “From the very beginning we didn’t want performances to be monopolised by the elite,” he explains. “The great majority of our dancers are ordinary kids. Our performances – particularly the big outdoor performances around the country – are a gift and an endorsement and an expectation from the public. And the dancers are connected to the society because it is made up of their cousins and

neighbours and parents, even when we are performing in the country to farmers and melon sellers.”

These outdoor performances have also had a wider impact on Taiwanese life. When there were mass political demonstrations the organisers drew on Cloud Gate’s experience of stewarding, providing toilets and so on. “After our performances there is never a scrap of litter left,” says Lin. “When there were political demonstrations it was the same.” Public support for the company was also demonstrated when its studio and offices burned down in 2008. Without Cloud Gate having to launch a formal appeal, 4,500 private donors – there was no government money – contributed over \$20m to build it a new home. “This is how we keep going,” says Lin. “We don’t have a big grants. It is a people’s company and a people’s theatre.”

The company is also democratic in its makeup, with dancers ranging in age from 22 to 52. The oldest member, Wang Wei-ming, originated one of the key roles in *Songs of the Wanderers* and, after leaving the company to teach at university, contacted Lin asking if he could dance the part again before the show itself is retired. “I was very happy for him to do this, but I wanted him to show me that he was still capable and not kidding himself. So he gave us all a dry version and the other dancers just stood and applauded. At 52 he was dancing better than many of them. There was a real substance to the work.” Lin sees those same qualities in dancers who have become mothers, and he encourages them to return to the stage. “They not only have such awareness of their bodies, motherhood itself gives them a perspective about life that comes through in their dance.”



Songs of the Wanderers. Photograph: Yu Hui-hung

Another long standing – literally – member of the cast is Wang Rong-yu who originated the part of the Monk. “He had no dance background, but is a practitioner of qigong, and I saw him walk into a room and knew he could do it.” His performance, standing nearly motionless for 70 minutes, is a remarkable display of strength, control and concentration. “He is also now into his 50s and that’s partly why I have to wrap this up,” says Lin. “He is so beautiful to look at, but I don’t want to torture him any more, so the work will be performed for one more season in Taiwan and then retired.”

Lin says that he intends to retire too. “The company will go on, even if that doesn’t necessarily mean with my own works. I wouldn’t want it to become a museum. When we began we wanted to perform to, and connect with, the grassroots. Forty three years later we are still doing that, which makes me very happy. This building is the completion of the first stage of my retirement. It is a house to shelter younger artists who can carry on the work. The existence of the company is an accumulation of the energy from society. So long as we maintain that supply of energy, the torch will always continue to burn.”

- Cloud Gate will perform *Songs of the Wanderers* at Sadler’s Wells, London EC1, 4-7 May (sadlerswells.com), then at the international dance festival, Birmingham, 10-11 May. idfb.co.uk.