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## Taiwan's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre heads to L.A. with force of nature 'Rice'

By Julie Makinen, January 23, 2016



Cloud Gate Dance Theatre's Huang Pei-hua, top, and Tsai Ming-yuan are among the performers in "Rice" who embody soil, wind, water and other elements. (Liu Chen-Hsiang)

A dance performance inspired by the life cycle of rice doesn't sound like the kind of sensual show that would necessitate a warning to parents about "mature content" inappropriate for younger viewers. But for four decades the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan has been breaking boundaries and doing the unexpected, and the show "Rice" is no exception.

Tracing the story of the land, "Rice" — at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion from Jan. 29 to 31 — is a visual spectacle with dancers embodying soil, sunlight, wind, water and fire. Their movements are set against a backdrop of breathtaking videography of Taiwan's East Rift Valley that captures the flooding of the fields, the sprouting of seeds, the harvesting of the grain and the burning of the stalks.

Hakka Chinese folk songs, operatic arias, a Mahler symphony and the recorded sounds of natural thunder provide the soundtrack. One crescendo comes in the segment called "Pollen II," which a reviewer for London's the Telegraph called "an almost eye-wateringly suggestive floor-bound exchange ... representing the botanical fertilization process: steamy stuff, but immensely poetic."

Choreographer Lin Hwai-min created "Rice" to mark the 40th anniversary of Cloud Gate, which he founded in 1973 and which remains Taiwan's only full-time, professional dance company, known for blending Western modern dance, ballet, Chinese martial arts and tai chi moves. Cloud Gate is named for an ancient Chinese dance, but Lin's works reflect the complex cultural and political history of Taiwan. The troupe, with dozens of dancers, has performed in more than 30 countries; in Taiwan, its outdoor shows regularly attract tens of thousands.

"I draw from the land, from the people, and they really affect me, they move me," says Lin, perched in his company's new, modern theater atop a verdant hill northeast of downtown Taipei.



Lin

Hwai-min created "Rice," set for the Dorothy Chandler, to mark his company's 40th year. (Gia To)

"Rice" was inspired by the beauty of the Chihshang region and its feisty farmers, who in the 1990s returned to organic methods and staged sit-ins to resist moves by an electricity utility to erect unsightly power poles in their paddies.

An island of 23 million people 100 miles off the southeast coast of mainland China, Taiwan has seen the arrival of Portuguese sailors, Spanish and Dutch colonizers, Chinese rulers and Japanese colonialists. Since 1949, it has been self-administered, first as a one-party state under Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalists, and now a vibrant democracy.

Many of Lin's most powerful pieces, including "The Tale of the White Serpent" (1975), "Legacy" (1978) and "Portrait of the Families" (1997), have dealt with traumatic eras of Taiwanese history and islanders' enduring quest for identity and empowerment. In recent years, he has moved in a more abstract direction, because "there's a bigger span if you get rid of the narrative," he says. "It's more democratic for the audience to interpret."

"Rice," Lin adds, has conjured a variety of responses from viewers. Some take away a message about a return to a simpler kind of life; for others, it draws to mind concerns about global warming and even the choking haze from forest fires on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

"We don't have a story, but our images inspire people to think," he says. "I don't know if that's political, but that's the way that this specific piece works."

### **Speaking to society**

Lin, 68, no longer performs but exudes the wiry energy of a dancer nonetheless, peppering his speech with dramatic pauses, child-like laughter and whimsical interjections like "Yay!" and "Boom!"

Like many Taiwanese, his family history is a cultural melange. His parents were educated in Japan. Though he took an early interest in dance, Lin seemed destined for a career as a writer after publishing two books of fiction.

In 1969, at age 22, he went to the University of Missouri to study journalism and later attended the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, receiving a master's degree. A class there rekindled his interest in dance, and he enrolled at the Martha Graham Center in New York.

"I never dreamed I would become a choreographer," he says. "I just wanted to do something that speaks to society."

Five years after he founded Cloud Gate, Taiwan emerged from nearly four decades of repressive martial law.

"The abolishment of the martial law released a lot of energy," Lin says. "It sounds simple, but in Taiwan, to fight for the well-being of people is relatively new. If the martial law was there, could the farmers put on their white headbands and stage sit-ins? Could they get together and decide to do organic farming and all those things?"

The kids of the Sunflower movement, in which students occupied parliament in 2014 to protest a trade pact with mainland China, were a result of that too, he says. "It's wonderful that they speak up about what they feel."



The Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan performs "Rice".(Liu Chen-Hsiang)

As the public space for cultural discourse in Taiwan expanded, Lin's dance company flourished and began touring worldwide. A second troupe, Cloud Gate 2, was formed in 1999, showcasing the work of young Taiwanese choreographers and performing in local communities.

In 2013, Lin followed in the footsteps of Graham, Merce Cunningham and Pina Bausch, winning the Samuel H. Scripps/American Dance Festival Award for Lifetime Achievement. Such laurels, while welcome, have also focused Lin's attention on an uncomfortable reality as he approaches his eighth decade.

"It seems to be the tradition of modern dance companies, when the leader is gone, the company is gone. And if they survive, it looks horrible," he says. Cunningham, he notes, ordered his own company be dissolved a few years after his death. "So I am carrying out my retirement plan."

### **Blueprint for the future**

For someone who claims he's about to hang up his choreographer's hat, Lin seems awfully busy. In the past year, he's taken "Rice" to Singapore, Germany, Austria, Russia, South Korea and the United States.

Last April, the company opened the new 450-seat theater in a renovated radio station that used to beam anti-Communist propaganda across the Taiwan Strait toward the mainland. The complex hosts dance performances, concerts, puppet shows and poetry readings. "There are more meetings than ever," Lin complains, only half-joking.

The new facility and its expansive programming, he says, are part of his blueprint for ensuring Cloud Gate carries on in some form when he's gone.

But it was a "Rice"-like incident of fiery destruction that catalyzed the company's rebirth and expansion: In 2008, Cloud Gate's longtime home, a warehouse structure, burned to the ground.

Two days after the fire, Lin recalls, the mayor came to visit. He implored Cloud Gate to stay in the vicinity and started suggesting properties that might be suitable. The board had an emergency meeting, and donations poured in.

"My God, this is such a trust, and such an encouragement and such a faith that this whole society had in us," he says. "I take it as a blessing. And as a mission."

The company received more than 4,100 individual donations, including a \$5-million bequest from the Alphawood Foundation Chicago, which ultimately made construction of the new theater possible.

Though it has a contemporary vibe, the complex is suffused with history. It's adjacent to the Hobe Fort, built after the 1884-85 Sino-French war, and the main stage's backdrop is a wall of windows looking out on Taiwan's first golf course — built in 1919 under Japanese occupation.

Now that the facility is up and running, Lin is focused on solidifying the administration and the programming. Who will take the reins once he bows out is not his decision, he insists, but the sooner it happens, the better.

"I'm an old guy. ... I'm ancient, I'm from the '60s," Lin says. "Maybe I'm totally dated. I don't know. I think the earlier I phase out, the better it is for the organization."

Among his new initiatives is the Art Maker project, handing out grants to artists younger than 35 to help create works. They started with awards for dance performances this year but plan to open the applications to theater directors next year, Lin says.

"The choreography and performances have to be really good to keep the conversation going," he says. "I hope in the future, when I'm really gone, that spirit — the dialogue with society — is still in this house."