

At Harris, Cloud Gate dancers move like water

CLOUD GATE DANCE THEATRE OF TAIWAN IN "MOON WATER" AT THE HARRIS THEATER FOR MUSIC AND DANCE

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All the usual notions of time undergo a dramatic transformation as you experience the work of the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan. Just ask those who attended the company's hypnotic performances of "Moon Water" at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance over the weekend -- a co-production with the Dance Center of Columbia College.

True, choreographer Lin Hwai-min is a man devoted to the two millennia-old Eastern philosophical and religious traditions of Taoism which, among many other things, involves special breath training and the internalized martial art form known as Tai Chi.

But the music he selected for this 75-minute piece is by Bach (selections from his Six Suites for Solo Cello), one of the founding fathers of Western European music. So one of the more fascinating aspects of "Moon Water" -- a work every bit as astral and elemental as its title suggests -- is how these two different artistic traditions have been melded. Lin Hwai-min has created a dance characterized by an amazing continuity of flow, and a ceaseless synchrony of inhalation and exhalation (akin to the essential modern dance concepts of contraction and release). And the unifying factor might just be nature.

Watching this work -- performed on a stage surface that begins dry, but eventually turns into a shallow pool of water reflected by a shiny Mylar wall of "mirrors" -- I kept thinking of Leonardo da Vinci's studies of water in motion, and of Chinese pen-and-ink drawings on the same subject.

Dressed in silky white pants, the Cloud Gate company's 17 remarkable dancers (previously seen in Chicago in a work that evoked the shape and flow of Chinese calligraphy) seem to deny all angles in the human body, and they appear capable of moving with the same swirling, pulsing, swelling and receding motion as water. Their extraordinary technique involves an uncanny level of individual concentration, as well as an intense sensitivity to one's fellow dancers.

Dreamlike though "Moon Water" might be, a certain tedium does set in from time to time as you watch this beautifully lit yet at times relentless piece. But then, almost imperceptibly, you are bolted to attention by the sense that a radical shift has occurred. The undertow is astonishing.