

Battle of the wits: "The Cold Dagger"

October 25, 2007

By Carl Hott

No one but the dancers foresaw the sudden death at UPenn's Annenberg Theater on Tuesday. In a few seconds, with barely enough time to take in the stage, an imagined arrow crisply sliced through the air -- and a performer, once part of a group, quickly crumpled to the ground. His comrades stare straight ahead, oblivious. All at once, the stakes in the Beijing LDTX Modern Dance Company's performance "A Cold Dagger" are starkly, instantly drawn: Find strength in numbers, or be prepared to meet your maker.

It may be too simplistic to group the many conflicts that follow, expressed through dance, as a message of political dissent. Under the inspiring, slowly building direction of Hong-Kong born, American-educated Willy Tsao, the company paints instead on the broader canvas of all human conflicts: large, small, and far reaching.



On stage, the "arena" is portrayed as 100 interconnected maize-colored tatami mats, arranged to resemble a chessboard. The 14 "players" start slowly, seemingly testing the limits of their abilities through slow, motion. Then the group suddenly scatters, to be brought together again and again in different, imaginative ways. Several traditional Far Eastern body movements, such as tai chi and the defensive arts, combine with modern dance technique and lighting effects, creating a new type of art form that's fresh, arresting and exciting.

With the ethereal score of American cellist David Darling playing in the background, dancers dressed in stark white and black costumes, modeled loosely after ancient warriors, commence locking horns. Often, two groups materialize from one, then move separately, oblivious of the other, until one is drawn into each other's space and strives to take it. One group is rhythmic, precise, methodical; the other is free-flowing and organic. What each "team" is capable of accomplishing is established through movement; and from that point on, the two groups merge and repel each other, almost at will, until the conflict resolves. Despite this, very little traveling is done on stage -- company members masterfully use a minimum of space for maximum effect.

A highlight early in the performance features four dancers in black making up the corners of a square, with a performer in white in the middle. The center performer is oblivious to the others, and they to her; but she quickly finds herself hemmed in when attempting to leave. In another, a flowing strip of black fabric transforms itself into a whip. Billowing side skirts are repurposed into matador capes, with enemies charging toward them and falling. Finally, at performance's end, the tatami mat itself is slowly torn apart from beneath. In each dancer's struggle to claim an individual piece, the whole is destroyed. The fabric of the group tellingly ends where it started: in complete disarray.

As one of the inaugural acts for the Annenberg's "Pioneers and Innovators" series, the company -- formed only last year in Beijing by Tsao (in partial response to a relaxation of stringent artistic standards there) -- filled the bill more than admirably. Some audience members were moved to their feet, while others murmured excitedly about their favorite pieces while heading for the exits. This is the spirit of what modern dance should be. It makes one immensely hopeful for what comes next.