

The Dance Center presents Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan

"CLOUD GATE DANCE THEATRE OF TAIWAN 'MOON WATER'"



By: **Laura Molzahn**

The words used to describe the body-ankle, nape, forearm, small of the back-are like well-worn, much-loved stones to me. But even when combined with muscular verbs, they are completely inadequate to describe what the body does, how it moves not as a collection of parts but as an integrated whole.

Clambering over the disjunct between language and the moving body is something I attempt all the time. But "Moon Water," which Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan will reprise Saturday night at the Harris Theater, has left me in a sorry spot for a writer: nearly speechless. How to put clumsy words to this irreducible experience of the ineffable?

My husband fell asleep. Two or three times, he said. But for once that didn't make me mad. Ten years ago, watching a performance of Merce Cunningham's "Biped," I struggled to keep from dozing off. But when my eyes flew open-which fortunately they did at times-I felt not just awake but reborn, both tranquil and bedazzled by what I saw onstage. It seemed miraculous.

Cloud Gate artistic director Lin Hwai-Min is the Eastern version of Merce Cunningham. Like the West's dead darling, he articulates the body at every conceivable joint-and adds a few we haven't heard of. But where Cunningham's choreography is all awkward angles, Lin debones his dancers, except for the rare cocked elbow or toe, like a trigger on the rifle of the leg.

And like Cunningham, I think, Lin aims for contemplation, even meditation, both for his dancers and for his watchers. That's why sleep is no shame: It is meditation's sibling. It is an honorable response to such a work.

Lin bases the movement in tai chi and sets it to selections from Bach's Six Suites for Solo Cello. These selections differ, but many of them sound like breathing as the bow moves back and forth over the strings. The sound moves the same way the body does in tai chi, with an ebb and flow that's unpredictable, intuitive, organic, responsive to the inner and outer worlds.

I can see how the 70-minute "Moon Water" might be perceived as monotonous, amorphous, but it has a strong structure, a skeleton that moves the piece from here to there almost imperceptibly, hidden under the slow transformations of the movement, the flesh. Each of its eight sections is devoted to a discrete piece of the Bach music and separated from the others by short periods of silence. Yet Lin also knits them together, with entrances that transgress on the previous section and exits that linger.

In general "Moon Water" expands and contracts but with a gradual enlargement of scope and interaction. Touching-or rather, not touching-is a motif. The second section, a male-female duet, creates the illusion of touching and suggests the impulse to touch, but it's not until a trio in the fifth section that any man lifts or moves a woman about the stage. And in the sixth section, a quartet for two couples, men and women purposefully wrap their fingers around each other's forearms or join hands. There are no embraces or caresses, but then "Moon Water" isn't about romance.

Three solos punctuate the piece. "Moon Water" opens with a powerful male solo-but not in the usual macho sense. Instead Tsai Ming-yuan uses his man's body to move like a woman, in undulating collapses like a ribbon falling to the floor in slow motion. The fourth section is a female solo, to me the most anomalous part of the piece. Chou Chang-ning is a surprisingly regal, almost confrontational presence, and she swims upstream, exiting quickly stage left when everyone else has exited stage right in a slow, relentless procession.

The third solo, the seventh section, was for me the evening's miracle. Set to the prelude of Bach's Suite No. 4, the most moving selection on the program, it isolates dancer Huang Pei-hua in a golden pool of light so bright that it bounces off parts of her body and slams into our eyes. The energy concentrated in her movement, the music, and the light fills this section with a drama foreign to the rest of the piece, especially when she slips out of the light and her face is in shadow.

The final section returns us to a quiet place, the quietest place in "Moon Water" despite the size of the scene, which includes 15 dancers, and the grandeur of the scenic design. Lighting designer Chang Tsan-tao paints every section with

simultaneous subtlety and power, transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary and back again. And set designer Austin Wang has created an environment of astounding beauty, especially in the last section, when multiple mirrors and dripping, splashing, and silent water unite clouds and pools, sky and earth.