

# Dance Review: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan at the Kennedy Center



By Sarah Kaufman  
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If you've ever watched tai chi, the relaxed, slow-motion martial art, you know why those languid movements could inspire a dance. Tai chi's inner calm and outer poise, its unhurried elegance and pliable movement can be beautiful and even uplifting to watch.

Set tai chi to Bach, perform it on a stage sopped with water and lit with moonlight, and you have the singularly transporting experience of "Moon Water," performed by Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan over the weekend at the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower Theater.

Cloud Gate, which calls itself the oldest contemporary dance company in any Chinese-speaking community, got its start in 1972 with an aha moment that makes for a great story: Its founder, Lin Hwai-min, at the time a novelist in his mid-20s, wandered into a dance class one day while enrolled in the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. An epiphany struck: Silent physical expression trumped the written word. Inflamed with his new passion for movement, Lin returned home to Taipei and within a year he had launched a dance troupe.

"Don't ask me why," the diminutive Lin said with a laugh in his dressing room after Friday's performance. "I was crazy."

Now he's an institution. Cloud Gate, named for a 5,000-year-old ritual considered to be China's first dance, has gone on to international renown. That it has not appeared at the Kennedy Center since 1995 is a head-scratcher; that it will return soon ought to be inevitable.

"Moon Water" offers an answer to Western notions of forcefully athletic virtuosity in dance. Here is an aesthetic that strikes universal chords of supreme human achievement and refinement, that represents the ennobling ideals of balance, harmony, spiritual elevation and inner goodness that you find, say, in classical ballet. It does this by drawing on deep wells of Chinese philosophy and cultural history. Watching Cloud Gate, you are gently seduced into rethinking your ideas about dance. On the expressive landscape of the human body, "Moon Water" tells us, there is ever so much more to be discovered.

The piece starts with a long solo that sweeps other examples of the genre firmly to the side: Dancer Tsai Ming-yuan drifts across the stage in a series of tai-chi postures, sinking deep into his hips. Does he have any bones? Or are his insides girded in steel rebar? His joints seem to melt away as he lunges and folds, then, as he is still crouching, a leg will lift, spiral, slice the air around him like a blade and slowly, slowly descend with the weightlessness of tissue. It brought to mind that staple of the ballet gala "The Dying Swan," a solo of great pathos and no small degree of virtuosic flexibility in the arms and upper body.

Tsai's gradual journey across the vast Eisenhower stage, with its own thrilling measure of rippling energy and quiet intensity, told us something about the absorptive and transformational powers of meditation. And about the mysteries underlying the ancient practice of tai chi, where movement and consciousness entwine, and where serenity is a unique form of power.

We spent 10 or 15 minutes with Tsai as he plunged into those bottomless joints, his effortless focus drawing us deeper and deeper into his realm -- was it heaven? I could be convinced. He was joined by a woman, Huang Pei-hua, his equal in pliant strength but lighter, with an eagle's wingspan. A group of dancers formed around them, as many as 15, and eventually the stage was covered in a film of water, which the dancers sloshed in and sent flying in arcs of silvery droplets. The black backdrop slipped away to reveal angled mirrors, reflecting the wet activity onstage with a slight distortion, as if it were all happening underwater -- an especially poetic stage picture.

And the Bach? I can't say I loved this element of "Moon Water" as much as I did its concept, dancers and set design. Lin chose excerpts from a recording of "Six Suites for Solo Cello" performed by Mischa Maisky, sarabandes, preludes and allemandes. The problem wasn't with the baroque style -- an interesting counterpoint to the Eastern movement-- or the instrument, but the selections: They were overwhelmingly dark and serious, and the whole work had to fight against the accumulated heaviness of sound.

Still, the cello was an evocative choice. I happened to have had a tai chi master at my elbow for Friday's performance (my multitalented older brother, who has studied the

form since I was a wee lass roped into practicing "push hands" with him in our back yard). He was struck by the instrument's rich, deep vibration, which to him echoed the internal feeling of "chi," the metaphysical energy that one cultivates in tai chi. Lin, when asked about this later, agreed and added that the cello had a "weight and substance" he liked, as well as a pure and meditative quality of sound.

What is undeniable is that Lin has lit the way to a new vocabulary in dance, one that reaches back to ancient wisdom and ahead to future fruitfulness, with a cool, unforced yet insistent power. Like water. "Moon Water," indeed.