

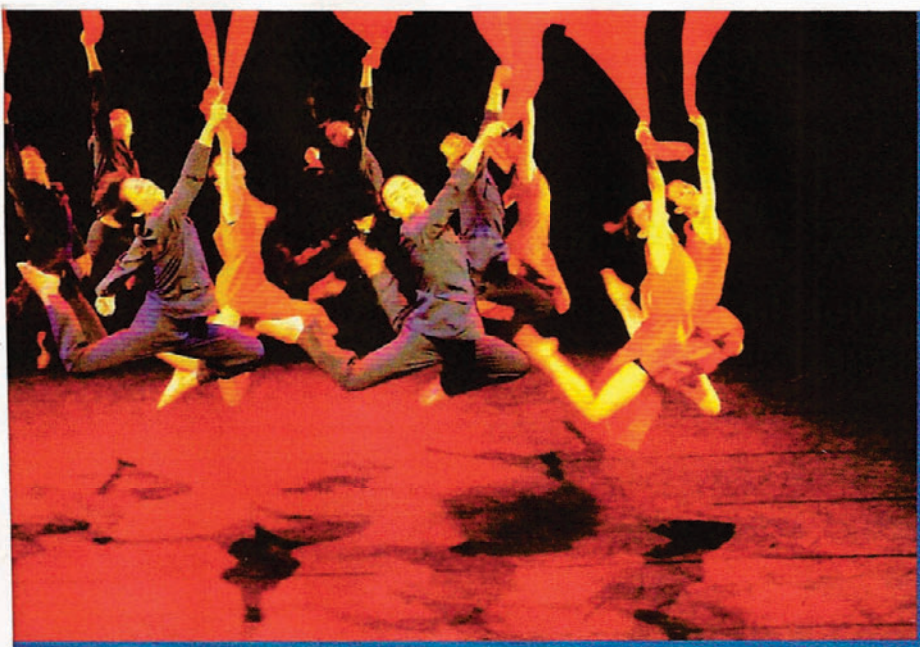
Houston

For many years, Houston's splendid Dance Salad Festival has been organized with an intent of "serving you a fusion of East and West contemporary and classical dance," among other things. That effort came through with startling clarity this year, April 21-23, and it was more than just a fusion. It was rather a kind of lightning collision, proving that Beijing, for example, is a significant hub of activity and holds major players in the international contemporary dance scene.

Houston has a long-standing appreciation for Chinese dancers, beginning perhaps with *Mao's Last Dancer* author and former Houston Ballet principal Li Cunxin, and continuing into the present with Shanghai-born Jun Shuang Huang,

who became a principal at Houston Ballet just last year, winning critical acclaim. Aside from the occasional appearance of a touring company, however, contemporary Chinese dancers are mostly unknown here in Texas. Imagine how overwhelming it was, then, for Houston audiences to enjoy three evenings featuring the stunning artists of Beijing Dance/Li Dong Tian Xia, a name that means "thunder rumbles under heaven." We were like the just-awakened courtiers of *Sleeping Beauty*, oblivious to all that's been going on as we slumbered peacefully, ignorant of just how much thunder has been rumbling on the other side of the planet.

Willy Tsao, Beijing Dance/LDTX artistic director, has cultivated a large ensemble of highly versatile dancers trained in a variety of dance techniques and traditional Chinese acrobatics, as well as a cadre of choreographers with limitless imagination. Themes ranged from the personal to the political, and it was liberating to see choreography well outside the influences of American neoclassicism and northern European tanztheater. One's expectations linger, nonetheless, and it's likely difficult for a pair of Western eyes to see the dancers in Li Han-Zhong and Ma Bo's *All River Red* (set to a recording of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*) binding the Chosen One in bright red rags without thinking about China's cultural revolution. Cui Tao's *Pilgrimage* was a heartfelt, spacious cortege of similarly dressed spiritual devotees in one long horizontal swoop, set to traditional Tibetan Buddhist chants. It's safe to say that contemporary choreography in Beijing doesn't shy away from controversial issues,



but rather addresses them with sophistication and subtlety.

At first glance, Tibetan choreographer Sang Jijia's *Standing Before Darkness* appears to embody certain strategies of William Forsythe, with whom Jijia worked in Germany for several years. With 14 dancers and just as many chairs, it is without doubt a spectacle. The level of unison work each night at the festival was extraordinary, especially in light of Dickson Lee's electronic score, which gives the dancers little in terms of structural meeting points despite its steady, heartbeat-like pulse. For me, it was a choreographic paradox, suggesting that conformity is at once a social problem, but also the ultimate victory. It is this tense ambiguity that made the dance just as fascinating to watch three nights in a row.

Zoran Markovic and Maša Kolar, two dancers from Zagreb, Croatia, were the other big news of this year's festival. The idiosyncratic pair offered two ardent duets, their own *Bonnet* and German choreographer Stephan Thoss' *No Cha-Cha-Cha*. Both works provided evidence of their intensely close relationship onstage and perhaps in personal life as well. For each, they wore similar identical skirts, but with something slightly different on the upper body, a corset or a vest, making them an improbable pair of individuals.

As regards *Bonnet*, programme notes said simply, "Venetian Snares' contemporary score inspires graceful and hard-edged images created with hands, bodies, fingers and gestures of mime." It was gesture, carried to its utmost extreme that was most daunting here. Kolar, in particular, is deeply comic in a way that makes you want

to cry as well as laugh. Parading across the stage with one finger pointing to the sky, as if she perceived herself to be the ruler of everything, was both humiliating and hilarious. The *No Cha-Cha-Cha* was described also in deceptively simple terms: "... comically shows how difficult it is for people to find balance between distance and intimacy." The point here is that these dances attempt to "show" anything emotionally honest in the first place. Their etiology as movement and theatre is a place of deep subterranean meaning, well-explored, which is already quite an accomplishment.

Aki Saito and Wim Vanlessen from Royal Ballet of Flanders gave a perfectly precise interpretation of Maurice Béjart's fiendishly difficult *Sonate*, set to Bach. Decades from now, when many of the Belgian master's more extreme works have vanished from memory, this little gem will burn bright, I'm convinced. Even though it has a lot of tricky partnering, the dancers appear more often as equal players with highly contrasting movement styles. Its clearly defined trajectories give it an almost Zen rock-garden quality, which Saito and Vanlessen captured beautifully.

Daisy Phillips and Daniel Proietto of Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's company Eastman gave an impassioned performance of his vigorous, erotic *Faun*, set to Debussy with additional music by Nitin Sawhney. This piece made a good companion for Staatsballett Berlin's Vladimir Malakhov in Mauro de Candia's *La Morte del Cigno*. Both dances are evidence of a striking trend in contemporary ballet toward severe yet skillful fragmentation.

Theodore Bale