

Dance Salad Festival April 21-23 2011, Houston Texas, Director Nancy Henderrek

By Maggie Foyer

Texas evokes many images but seldom the image of a cutting edge dance festival. This is what makes Houston's Dance Salad Festival, now into its 19th year, so very special. Add to this the range of talent: worldwide and sky high from China to Croatia and topped by stars of the calibre of Vladimir Malakhov and Daniel Proietto. The 14 items from the 11 companies are selected, trimmed and tossed into a mouth-watering Salad by master chef Nancy Henderrek, a powerhouse of energy, who spends the time between festivals scouting the globe for new choreography. A side benefit of the festival is the shared morning class where dancers from quite different backgrounds get to work out together creating an inspirational sense of community: a sort of UN without the acrimony.

One of this year's highlights was the Beijing LDTX, Chinese contemporary dance stands poised to conquer the world following in the footsteps of Chinese contemporary art. LDTX (Lei Dong Tian Xia translated as Thunder Rumbles Under Heaven) is directed by Willy Tsao, a Renaissance man and the driving force behind this phenomenal growth. Each dancer is also a choreographer adding a wealth of creativity to the mix of artistry and technique. It is the only independent dance company in China giving Tsao greater artistic freedom as well as the burden of fund-raising. Fortunately he is one of the rare choreographer/ directors who also holds an impressive MBA.



Members of Beijing Dance/LDTX performing *All River Red*.

Choreography by Li Han-zhong and Ma Bo.

Image by Zhang Heping

LDTX presented three works at the festival. Choreographer Sang Jijia's rich heritage; Tibetan born, Beijing trained plus a four years top-up with the Forsythe Company was evident in *Standing Before Darkness*. The 14 dancers capture the essential Tao: following their unique inner nature while working in harmony with the group. Jijia's seeming artlessness in the placing of the chairs, (the only props) is revealed to be precision based; maintaining and developing the structure while their modest functionality contrasts with the fluid human dynamics. Every dancer seems to possess limitless energy and phenomenal technique, talents which Jijia exploits in his rich choreographic language. Cui Tao's *Pilgrimage* achieved its effects through simplicity. The dancers traversed the stage in a mesmeric unadorned walking pattern heads bowed and arms stretched in supplication. In this abridged version it ends on a solo by Liu Yi-Feng, slow and powerful, the light catching the angles of his cheek bones and carving his body with sculptured beauty. However it was in Li Han-zhong's *All River Red* choreographed with his wife Ma Bo, that the company achieved its full potential. This work, set most convincingly to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, is a hymn to humanity. Red is a colour of deep meaning in China and the red scarves are used imaginatively and powerfully to show the passage of the nation; the conformity, the fierce individualism, the sharing and the standing alone. Han-zhong will not be drawn on specifics but the message of human dignity and rights is so fervent it is impossible not to be moved.

Taiwanese-born but working in New York, choreographer Nai-Ni Chen offered a Chinese American perspective presenting *Temptation of the Muses*. While the Beijing dancers were hot-forged in the fire of censorship, the questionable freedom of commercialism seemed conversely, to soften and dissipate. Chen's choreography, gently pleasing and a little misty eyed was given a boost by the fabulous Ahn Trio, three sassy sibling musicians from Seoul - so much more than just accompaniment. Tapping their stiletto heels and tossing their glossy hair, they coax music from their instruments with a gusto that blasts every stereotype of Korean demeanour.

Three distinctive duets were evidence of the inclusive nature of dance today. For classical form there was *Sonate* danced with laser precision by Aki Saito and Wim Vanlessen from the Royal Ballet of Flanders. Both in choreography and in performance this Bédart gem was the acme of the art; crafted, faceted and polished to jewel-like brilliance then spiced with a subtle touch of irony. Bridgett Zehr and Zdenek Konvalina were radiant in Derek Deane's *Impromptu*. They were the very essence of romanticism; embodying the ebb and flow of Schumann's passionate music. Zehr has an exquisite line and is incapable of an ungraceful move while Konvalina, although given less opportunity to show his form, partnered faultlessly. In Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's *Faun*, Daisy Philips and Daniel Proietto proved a cast made in heaven. Except this duet is of the earth; primordial, pre-Eden, a world not yet born in which the movements are so natural that only Cherkaoui could have initiated them. In the speckled green ambiance they discover each other, enfolding limbs with the innocence of kittens so the moment of awareness, when it comes, is riveting.

Mauro de Candia's *La Morte del Cigno* not only changes the title from the original French to Italian but the gender from female to male. The poignancy is still there but the iconic Romantic silhouette is stripped of its feathers and death becomes painfully real. Vladimir Malakhov brings a wealth of artistry to Saint-Saëns precious minutes as rippling arms and stretched feet are poignantly re-visited into tormented contours in keeping with a harsher age.

Croatians Maša Kolar and Zoran Markovic brought Stephen Thoss' brilliantly clever *No Cha-Cha-Cha* and their own piece *Bonet*, written in a sort of absurdest expressionist style that constantly catches you off guard leaving you helpless with laughter. Solar in particular is a brutally funny exponent of this form. Oksana Titova and Taavet Jansen's *Dissolution* was given a committed performance by Marika Muiste and Anatoli Arhangelski of the Estonian National Ballet, however in the company of such heavyweights it came across as too insubstantial. However the choreographers had created interesting possibilities in the themes of leaving and returning that would be worth developing. BJM Danse from Montréal presented *Locked up Laura* by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Céline Cassone partnered by James Gregg, gave a painfully honest performance. Despite Ochoa's best intentions, and she is one of the most exciting choreographers around, I didn't feel the angst of the dancer preparing to go onstage was fully realised.



Members of Ballet National de Marseille, France, performing *Metamorphoses*.

Choreography by Frédéric Flamand.

Image by Pino Pipitone

Larger narrative works came from Ballet National de Marseille and the Jasmin Vardimon Company based in Brighton. Frédéric Flamand's *Metamorphoses* turns Ovid's tales into a timeless world of myth and fantasy. The essential human elements in these stories make them fertile source of inspiration and together with designers Humberto and Fernando Campana, Flamand fashions a brave new world of fabulous shapes and colours where the choreography shares honours with design. The visual images are memorable: the waterfall necklaces of shimmering beads that mirror the dance movements, the Gorgon, Valentina Pace, in a tangle of red wires, Katharina Christl's Arachne weaving her web suspended in space on a twirling disk and a surreal finale as the Velcroed costumes are forcibly unraveled. Vardimon's *Yesterday*, was more down to earth exploring 'the healthiest way of being ill' but finds a wealth of humour in terminal states. It covers much ground from the gritty washroom to the quite the most artful heart transplant with sterling performances along the way. Pity poor Mafalda Deville who as the embodiment of disease gets the stuffing knocked out of her in some extraordinarily physical theatre.

Three intense days of Dance Salad are an exhilarating roller coaster experience, demanding and uplifting, and quite the best dance treat of the year.

Maggie Foyer