

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Matthew Wright

Hope in Song: Kun-Yang Lin Reflects

by Ellen Gerdes

thINKingDANCE writer Ellen Gerdes recently met with choreographer Kun-Yang Lin to discuss his work *Beyond the Bones* which will have its Philadelphia premiere at the Painted Bride Arts Center, March 28-31. *Beyond the Bones* includes Lin's six-member company, guest artist Rhonda Moore, and a chorale of community singers led by Janis Brenner. As a member of that chorale, Gerdes has had the opportunity to see the developing work in rehearsal.

Can you talk about the mask dance performed by Rhonda Moore in *Beyond the Bones*?

I actually performed masked theater when I was a child, and when I went to Indonesia, the mask performance reminded me of a ritual. It isn't you who must play the mask, but the mask that plays you. And the mask chooses you.

When I saw a very famous mask performer in Indonesia, I was so impressed and asked him to take me to buy a mask. Most of the masks were beautiful and finished. There was one mask sitting there and I just knew...it seemed like it was speaking to me. It was unfinished and had the qualities of openness and vulnerability. It was natural wood.

Is Rhonda's movement inspired by movement you saw in Indonesia?

Yes, it is. The movement is so subtle. Sometimes it seems as if the mask performers aren't even moving, but they are. Mask work is like the rehearsal process; it gives you the structure. But then you have to listen further.

So you have performed masks before?

Well, not this kind. I was in children's theater when people thought I had no hope as a dancer (laughs). This was my first professional experience. I wore a big elephant mask.

Can you talk about the use of voice in this piece and your collaboration with Janis Brenner?

I want to share this quote from the piece by T.S. Eliot from the Dry Salvages:

“Music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but
You are the music
While the music lasts.”

This quote speaks to me. The starting point of this piece was September 11th. I remember seeing the first plane crash and I thought it was a movie. And then I saw the second plane crash and I knew it was real, all the crowds and the radios, how crazy. And after, I remember so many vigils. And I had this moment that went beyond my analytical mind.... On the subway, a woman began to sing. She hummed. We were all in this kind of panic and fear, but she just sort of started this lullaby, letting the emotions settle. Across from her, a man started to join. And another. And I started to join. And all our anger and frustration was released. I knew I wanted to create a dance inspired by this day.

I thought that America around that time was going to a new place, caring about one other. On the 10th year anniversary, last year, I looked at this country. As an immigrant, I am very sensitive. I wonder why there are still all of these divisions. I usually listen to the universal vibration – that is how I jump into the creative process.

I worked with Janis very closely even though we hadn't done voice together before. I knew she worked with Meredith Monk. And the community of singers came together for the project. She improvised with the music I already had. With singing, you just have to follow the flow too.

What about the words to the song, “Beauty is Around Us”?

That song is actually performed by Meredith Monk's ensemble, so I asked Meredith if we could use the song. I wanted a song that was positive, a new hope, rather than just about the tragedy itself. She drew it from a Native American song. I used to dance with Janis and Meredith came to see our show once and said afterward, “You are my soul mate.” I knew there was a connection between us.

And could you talk about the branches?

The branches are the human body, like branches of our veins. Our bones are the least destructible, so I thought about what would be the most similar in nature – wood. And after September 11th, there was one tree that survived called, Survival Tree. It is interesting that I used many of the same elements even before the memorial was built because of universal vibrations. Even the pool, there is a bowl of water in this piece. It represents infinity, the void. Without water, the trees can't survive.

And what about Jennifer Rose's part with the bone in her mouth?

The dancers have to be very versatile in this piece. We could say her part is like Greek mythology – the underworld. As an artist, I was influenced by the main event of September 11th, but also my personal life. Shortly after 9/11, my father passed away suddenly. And I didn't immediately cry, which was bizarre for me, but I started to dance out my emotions. In her solo, Jen is in the process of the

underworld, responding to the space. She represents anger, just one of the stages of trauma shown by this piece. The end brings everyone together. I lived in downtown NYC during 9/11 and I saw many people holding hands – I knew that this was the most important part to me. It is the essence, the hope.

Beyond the Bones, Kun-Yang Lin/Dancers, Painted Bride Arts Center, March 28-31, 8pm, www.paintedbride.org/.

By Ellen Gerdes

March 22, 2012