

thINKingDANCE

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Photo: Jacqui Tichenor

Archedream's Dream of What a Dream Should Be

by Eleanor Goudie-Averill

Before the curtain went up on Archedream for Humankind's *Inside Out*, a puppet theater performance that premiered in Taiwan in 2011, its director, Jacqui Tichenor, told the audience that adventures begin when someone is denied something, when there is a "no" where there should have been a "yes." Dawei, the little girl at the center of *Inside Out*'s story, is told "no" to staying up late to play with her father. His quick temper then transforms him from a playful monster behind a scowling cardboard mask into an actual brute.

After she falls asleep with her doll, animated "Zs" float above Dawei's head (a product of Archedream's blacklight technology). Her adventure then unfolds in the form of a dream. Above the stage, animated sketches of the girl appear showing her meeting many strangely clad characters, a preview of those soon to appear on the stage in full psychedelic color.

In the projection, we see nods to Alice in Wonderland. The image of the girl freefalls down a version of the rabbit hole and when Dawei onstage jumps out of bed, now in a mask plastered with a smile and wearing neon garb, she turns into a doll-sized version of herself and is given strange things to taste.

The references to iconic children's stories do not end there. The girl's dancing and pseudo romantic relationship with her doll echo Clara and her Nutcracker. And like something out of the Brothers Grimm, a witchy old woman appears to plant a magic seed after showing the girl an emblem representing the head and the heart. It is as though the plot were conceived in a dream, melding childhood stories together into one universal tale to be understood by children around the world. Sometimes universal can mean homogenized, and the gestural pantomime and musical theater style dancing occasionally feels flat, but Archedream's art direction, by Alan Bell, saves *Inside Out* from blandness. The costumes include elongated masks, kimonos, and geometrically patterned A-line dresses, successfully fusing elements from African, Eastern European and Asian design.

While on a journey in search of her doll, initially taken from her by The Villain (modeled after her father and his mask), Dawei meets a number of bizarre creatures. Some of the standouts are two green Imps and The Unknown Frog, whose legs (animated by dancer Patricia Dominguez's arms) make it look as though he is swimming through the air. The Imps also impress with their acrobatic dancing, performing leaps and flips over each other to Dawei's delight as a huge yet cowardly Ogre spits fire via projections on the wall.

All elements, including the original music by Eric Oberthaler, work wonderfully together in the scene where Dawei meets Tooth and Nail. These two smaller puppets, with their floppy limbs and pasted-on expressions, try to get Dawei to choose the best direction for her pursuit. She gets the doll back and loses him so many times it becomes almost tedious, especially when the Pity Party Baby (a sumo wrestler with a pink baby head) tosses stuffed animals around the stage.

It is a relief when things finally begin to wrap up. The old woman returns, and there is a battle of head vs. heart fought by Unicorn Knights— of course they can both win, giving Dawei the strength to save the doll once and for all and face The Villain/her father. She arrives home by choosing a door marked ME, equating maturity with taking care of oneself. Upon waking, she deposits her doll into a box labeled "Baby Stuff."

Inside Out is a performance with high production values. It was good to see Archedream, an internationally touring blacklight mask and dance theater company, at home in Philadelphia on Halloween weekend—the perfect time to celebrate both children's imaginations and costuming at its best.

Inside Out, Archedream for Humankind, October 20-November 3, Christ Church Neighborhood House

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