



A new dance rite, in time for spring

BY MATHEW SANDOVAL

Last week, from the vantage point of the Winter Garden's magnificent grand staircase, 20 dancers converted the site's 16 giant palm trees into a forest inhabited by ghosts and phantoms. They encircled the trees with a swirling vortex of frenetic energy, punctuating each movement with a martial arts-like grunt — a sound that belled all the way up to the Winter Garden's glass ceiling. Holding giant saffron-colored banners atop bamboo sticks, dancers marched down the center hall with all the majesty of a royal procession.

Acclaimed choreographer H.T. Chen's latest dance event "Apple Dreams" at the World Financial Center Winter Garden is more than site-specific, it is site-transformative. Through Chen's artistic vision and the efforts of his 36-person cast, which includes 16 neighborhood parents, children, and senior citizens, one of the city's most glorious spaces has become a whole new world.

For three decades Chen has not only created award-winning dances, but also made a career of contributing to his local community. He has been a major force in the Chinatown district, establishing the Arts Gate Center, a year-round performing arts school, and the Mulberry Street Theater, Chinatown's first performing arts venue for modern dance.

After many visits to the Winter Garden and dialogues with local artists and residents, Chen's focus has now extended to Battery Park City, where he is once again trying to fulfill community needs. "I wanted to find a way to help in the revitalization process of the neighborhood, where the arts can come back into the community," says Chen. The best way to do this, he thought, was to put the community back into the arts. So, in mid-January Chen began a search for local participants via emails to the local parents associations, bulletins in the Winter Garden, postings on the World Financial Center website, and old-fashioned word-of-mouth. By early February he was able to gather a participatory cast of ex-dancers, non-dancers, retirees, and local mothers from the Battery Park Neighbors and Parents Association. "Apple Dreams" features everyone from six-month-old Samuel Tsui, performing with his father Johnny Tsui, to Milton Kerr, who at 84 years young, still makes it a point to take ballet class three times a week at the 14th street Y.

The choreographic process has been a learning experience for all involved. "The participants have had a chance to see how much effort it takes to make a dance," says Associate Director of H.T. Chen & Dancers, Dian Dong, "and we have learned to choreograph by working within their comfort ability and time-frame as parents." Amisha Mehta, a Battery Park City parent who, along with her children, is featured in the dance, explains that she became involved in the production because it "was a great opportunity to participate in something different with my children. I thought it would be a great way to expose them to modern dance and the arts." Because the rehearsals have primarily taken place at Chen's studio in Chinatown, she is also delighted that her children have been exposed to a different culture. Karen Magon, another participating Battery Park City parent, agrees that the cross-cultural exposure has been valuable, adding, "Even



Photo by Joshua Bright

A rehearsal of "Apple Dreams" last week in the Winter Garden.

at home, my daughter is now practicing her Lotus Hands," a basic hand gesture from Chinese classical dance.

For both of these parents, one of the biggest joys of their involvement has been the opportunity to bring something special

DANCE

"APPLE DREAMS"

Choreographed by H.T. Chen

Free

March 23 and 24, 7 p.m.

World Financial Center Winter Garden

220 Vesey Street

to the community and the World Financial Center. After all, the Winter Garden, says Magon, "Is a space that we practically live in." For H.T. Chen, the Winter Garden will become a spiritual place, where the mountainous palm trees act as temples, a barrel-vaulted glass atrium offers a panorama to the heavens, giant fabric banners waved by performers invoke the god of wind, and expressions of hope radiate through the bodies of old and young alike. For the neighborhood, and participants like Mehta and Magon, the familiar and everyday are transformed into a site of sacredness and make-believe — a site of dreams. "This dance above all" says Chen, "is a celebration of new life."



Downtown Express photo by Joshua Bright

Downtowners dance between the palms

Dancers — as well as parents, children, and senior citizens from Battery Park City — are rehearsing this week for "Apple Dreams," a dance event designed for the Winter Garden. Created by acclaimed Chinatown-based choreographer H.T. Chen, the free performance will feature members from his troupe, H.T. Chen & Dancers, and 17 "lay" dancers from the Lower Manhattan. It premieres next Friday and Saturday, March 23 and 24 at 7 p.m. The troupe's remaining rehearsals in the Winter Garden are also open to the public and are tentatively scheduled March 16 from 12:30 p.m. to 3 p.m., and March 18 from noon to 5 p.m.