

ARTS | DANCE REVIEW

DANCE REVIEW; Weaving In And Out of Tradition

By JENNIFER DUNNING JUNE 3, 2000

H. T. Chen's new "Bian Dan" builds to a charming finale. Smiling Chinese grandmothers in blue brocade jackets and practical trousers formed and reformed ranks in precision marching about the big stage of La MaMa Annex Theater on Thursday night, with equally enchanting small children darting and weaving among them. The entire cast gradually filled the stage, young and old, professional dancers and nonprofessional performers, finally joining in small familial clusters with red-flagged bamboo poles extending the lines of their upraised arms.

Mr. Chen has long been one of New York dance's most persuasive storytellers, addressing issues of acculturation well before they become fashionable in dance. In recent years his dances have become more abstract.

The title of "Bian Dan" refers to the bamboo carrying poles used throughout Asia, but Mr. Chen uses the metaphorical poles primarily as design elements. His themes, including societal pressures on interracial couples, form a subtext so subtle as to be nearly indecipherable in swirling dances that expertly but rather repetitively blend ethnic with modern dance and ingenious props with movement.

"Bian Dan" is ambitious in every way, the product of several years' work in New York City, where Mr. Chen's troupe is based in Chinatown, and at Arizona State University in Tempe and Columbia College in Chicago. Eric Harritz's white cutout backdrop forms a handsome screen for photographic and video projections.

Bradley Kaus's score, performed live, adds a rich aural texture. In his move toward abstraction, however, Mr. Chen drains most of "Bian Dan" of the juices its last moments have.

"Bian Dan" will be repeated through tomorrow and from Thursday through June 11 at La MaMa, at 74A East Fourth Street in the East Village.