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'Bian Dan' celebrates immigrant experience

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Dance review



"Bian Dan" by H.T. Chen & Dancers is a joyous affair at the Dance Center of Columbia College.

This weekend's premiere of "Bian Dan" by H.T. Chen & Dancers at the Dance Center of Columbia College is an occasion for celebration. The 90-minute piece, using Chen's multicultural company of eight dancers and augmented by 21 plain citizens, from toddlers to senior citizens, is a joyous affair. It has only one performance left, at 8 p.m. Saturday, and if you care anything about dance and/or community spirit, you should see it.

"Bian Dan" gets its name from the Chinese word for the bamboo pole used to carry heavy loads, and these poles figure prominently in the dance, not only for that primary purpose, but as yokes linking the dancers together, as rhythm instruments that are pounded on the floor and as building sticks in constructing symbolic shrines and homes.

A theme carried throughout the dance is the immigrant experience, the shifting from one culture to the next. In this story, Victor Bob Hom, a Chen dancer of speed, grace and elegant technique, is the chief character, engaging in the rites of his Asian heritage while yearning for the experience of American pleasures (and also zipping a scooter through the crowd scenes).

The dancers of Chen's New York-based troupe lead this ritual, but the local community participants, well drilled right down to the tiniest tyke, give it the

breadth and size it needs. Chen, who makes a buoyant appearance in the dance's curtain call, beautifully mixes the citizens' troupe into the proceedings, and they respond to his direction with great zest.

He has designed the piece so that both the skilled dancers and the amateur participants are integrated in one exuberant mass of movement.

The adults go through their steps with measured precision; and the fearless children, whether riding on the backs of or being twirled through the air by the dancers, go through their paces like old pros.

Slide and film projections of family scenes, touches of bright color in ceremonial costuming and props and an abstract backdrop resembling the outline of an imperial palace contribute to the general festiveness.

An essential part of the dance's exhilaration is the propulsive, full-bodied music composed by Bradley Kaus and played, live, by a four-man group using ancient Chinese and contemporary electronic instruments.

"Bian Dan," co-commissioned by the Dance Center and Arizona State University, is the last event to be held in the Center's current home at 4730 N. Sheridan Rd., before its move next fall to a new facility at 1306 S. Michigan Ave.

It's a wonderful way to say goodbye.