

SHOWCASE

Chen

H.T. Chen & Dancers
in 'Bian Dan'

H.T. Chen is a choreographer with the instincts of a sociologist. Born in Shanghai, raised in Taiwan and, since 1971, based in New York, Chen creates dances that are a blend of East and West in their movement styles, music and design. But his work also is the product of almost journalistic investigation, as revealed in the full-length "Bian Dan," which received its world premiere at the Dance Center of Columbia College this weekend.

A followup piece to the 1997 "Transparent Hinges," which evoked the painful history of Chinese-American immigration and labor, "Bian Dan" looks at the inevitable process of assimilation as it affects three generations. Using his core company of eight dancers, in addition to more than 20 non-professional participants of all ages drawn from the Chicago community, Chen has explored the classic cycle of leaving the home country, making the difficult journey to a new land, watching first-generation adolescents reject the ways of their parents to become part of the mainstream culture, and then gradually seeing the happy return to aspects of tradition a generation later.

"Bian Dan" is the Chinese word for the bamboo poles placed over the shoulders and used to carry heavy loads, and these poles are the principal props in Chen's new dance. They suggest the old ways, but also, as when a bevy of tiny tots scramble onto the backs of their elders, they

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symbolize the way in which successive generations must inevitably build on the past.

To research his piece, Chen conducted workshops and interviewed members of the Asian community in Chicago and other cities to collect stories. Then, working in his own idiom—a blend of modern dance accented with traditional Chinese dance styles—he translated this information into a dreamlike, almost cinematic work, rich in strong group tableaux, duets and solos.

Among the ranks of Chen's own ensemble, the standouts included Johan Parlagutan and Victor Hom as the rebellious boys, Jennifer Bishop as the tireless interlocutor, and Dian Dong (Chen's wife, and associate director of the company), who moves as lightly and gracefully as a plum blossom branch in a gentle wind. But Chen has a unique ability to shape nonprofessionals into an effective expressive force. Among the greatest pleasures of "Bian Dan" was watching a mature woman and a spry but elderly man move proudly through various scenes, and seeing the joyful concentration of the five pint-size kids who brought charm and spontaneity, as well as discipline, to very complex routines. Composer Bradley Kaus—whose exhilarating score moved seamlessly from pentatonic scales to rock riffs—led the fine onstage quartet that also included Baon Cao, Sylvain Leroux and Scott Morehouse. Projections of archival photos (especially formal portraits from earlier times) added a layer of nostalgia. The audience, many with connections to those performing, contributed a unique sense of community esprit.

Hedy Weiss, dance critic