Song in motion

Choreographer joins Eastern and Western forms for a moving experience.

By Beaud Mea
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Think of two opposing trains coming from opposite directions — each having their own sound and rhythm as they roar through the landscape. When they meet, the combination of all the sounds creates a new song.

That's how choreographer H.T. Chen describes what happens when he blends Western and Asian dance. In this, the H.T. Chen & Dancers company performed in Fresno. Since then, the Manhattan-based group has become one of the leading Asian-American dance companies in the nation. Shanghail-born Chen, who was raised in Taiwan, has lived in New York since 1971.

The company returns to Fresno with a public performance Sunday that marks the opening of the second two-week session of the California State University Summer Arts program. A few tickets are available at 4 p.m. July 28 at the John Wright Theatre at Fresno State. We caught up with a email with Chen's longtime associate director, Dan Van, and asked her about the company's second visit to the city.

Question: What do you remember about that first Fresno performance?
Answer: It was quite a long time ago! We have fond memories of being in town for the performance, of meeting very nice people, and a warm reception.

Can you tell us what Fresno has changed a lot in the past 30 years. Beyond personal changes, how has your company changed during that time? Has your mission or style evolved?
Since that time, the company has expanded its repertoire and toured throughout the U.S. and Asia.

The dance company's last performance in Fresno took place in 1983. This visit brings an expanded repertoire and touring experience throughout the U.S. and Asia.

H.T. Chen & Dancers will perform the West Coast premiere of "Shift" at Fresno State as part of Summer Arts.

Our mission: to provide meaningful experiences in Asian-American performing arts and contemporary dance is realized through the performances and outreach of the company, and through our theater and school in Lower Manhattan.

H.T. Chen & Dancers is known for infusing Western modern dance with the strength and beauty of Asian aesthetics. It is accurate to describe it as a hybrid between two cultures?
H.T. Chen's work reflects his background in Chinese Opera, movement, experimental theater and Western modern dance. It takes years of training to create these forms, and then years of honing to break through these forms.

If you go

What: H.T. Chen & Dancers
When: 7 p.m., Sunday
Where: John Wright Theatre, California State University, Fresno
Tickets: $10-$25
Contact: (559) 278-5028, www.csussummerarts.com

Which skill set is it harder to find in the dancers who audition for you — that of Western modern dance or that of Asian aesthetics?
Most modern dancers in the U.S. do not have extensive Chinese dance and martial arts training. As our choreography embodies these aesthetics, our dancers are "re-trained" in this style to perform the work.

At Fresno State, you'll be performing the West Coast premiere of "Shift," which is based on the poetry of Yusuf Sehadjal. Tell us about this poet and the piece.
See BEECE, Page F2.

Dance: 'Shift' premieres

Continued from Page F1

H.T. Chen has not been around about YuSehadjal's work until after he selected the choreography of "Shift." This work before the premiere, we come upon this beautiful poems with several phrases that seemed powerful connections to the imagery of the new. "Shift" centered on the themes to be used as section titles for this work.

The first part of "Shift" is called "Street Scene." It begins with the lines: "The job of Restonians, with its angels and lamplighters, races into the morning. What does this mean to you? How do you represent it on stage?"

Our working title for the first section was originally "Provenance Manhattan." The evocative and visceral feel of "Angels and Lamplighters" is both harsh and surreal. Fine fabrics, electronic sound, dance, music and percussion. "Jackie" set for "Shift" is very sparse — just four white lamplights, "Nancy Brown" costumes help create the black and white world, and through Joe Derrane lighting we are transported into another dimension.

Another element of "Shift" comes from traditional Chinese opera, where "pro-" means dressed still in black, moving and rearranging the stage furniture as if they were invisible. Each arrangement is symbolic of a landscape or interior. For instance, two chairs at a table could be a meeting scene, but a chair on top of a table might represent a mountain. However, in "Shift," the "real" people are dressed in black and the "imagery" persons are in white. What does the title of "SHIFT" refer to?

There are many meanings to the word "shift," it can mean a job, a change or transformation, or perhaps another way to look at things. The work is also a reflection of J.T. as a creator. Over the years, he has choreographed a body of works celebrating Asians in America, works based on story lines, and beautiful and abstract works that blend Chinese dance and martial arts in contemporary expression.

But for this new work, he wanted to focus on and find the "ghost" behind the movement. The work is like a snapshot journey with five sections and no story line. The viewer brings to "SHIFT" their own interpretations. The poems from the poem are markers seeking insights. In addition to your public performance, you'll be working with students at Summer Arts in an intensive two-week workshop.

What skills will you be teaching them?
The workshops at Summer Arts will take dancers through the foundations of H.T. Chen's movement vocabulary. The classes present traditional Chinese dance and martial arts exercises, and variations of these aesthetics. The first day of classes begins with calligraphy and movement, followed by the use of props and body percussion, leading to technique and repertory.

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