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DANCE REVIEW; A Monk and His Love: The Opposites Connect

By JENNIFER DUNNING
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Yin Mei has a striking visual sense and an authoritative way with social and literary themes. All that was in evidence in "/Asunder," performed by Yin Mei Dance on Sunday evening at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival here. But the stylish economy of her 1999 "Empty Tradition/City of Peonies," also performed at the Pillow, was missing from "/Asunder."

The new work, based on the Ming dynasty tale of a Buddhist monk in love with an enemy's daughter, explores several issues. One of them, according to Ms. Mei's program notes, is the reconciliation of opposites like man and woman or East and West. Ms. Mei describes "/Asunder" as being about the struggle to connect. But none of that is very clear.

The piece opens with the kind of strong, quietly theatrical image that made "Empty Tradition/City of Peonies" so unforgettable. A pale mask glows in a spot of light on the darkish stage. A young man in a suit (Will Orzo) holds the mask out but is himself motionless, while across the stage a woman in a brown cocktail dress (Ms. Mei) gradually moves closer, her body assuming slowly shifting S-curves that seem to parody a vamp.

Soon after, however, it becomes clear that the man is present in part to serve as a screen behind which the woman can shed her dress and emerge in a turquoise slip and white pants, which cleverly suggest both ancient Chinese and modern Western dress. That parallel is fleshed out further in a lurking male figure (I Nyoman Catra), presumably the monk, and a sternly scruffy young woman (Jeanine Durning), who appears to be the double of Ms. Mei's character.

Much of "/Asunder" is repetitive. The monk's incessant Balinese-derived hand gestures grow tiresome, as does the ambiguity. There are some powerful images, chief among them Ms. Mei's crawling carefully through a forest of red-plumed arrows that have been shot, somewhat ill-advisedly, into a white panel that becomes a path.

The important mix of vulnerability and determination in the character, who might be a young Asian version of Mother Courage, is evoked far more clearly in that one image than anywhere else in the piece.

Robert Een's score for voice, vibraphone, dulcimer, cello and percussion is typically layered and atmospheric. Amanda K. Ringger's lighting creates a dramatic landscape of the mind, but the set design by Cai Guo-Qiang mainly draws more attention to itself than the piece. The masks were designed by Anom. The score was performed live, in shadows at the back of the stage, by Mr. Een, Toby Newman, Jeff Berman and Bill Ruyle. Peter L. Critchell was the dramaturge.

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