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## Dancing a Dream, From a Child of Mao's Revolution

By **GIA KOURLAS**

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**L**IKE millions of girls who had come before her, the choreographer Yin Mei was staunchly devoted to her diary. But the thoughts she poured onto its pages were drastically different from those of a typical angst-ridden adolescent. She grew up in a town in central China during the Cultural Revolution. At age 7, she, along with her classmates, started a journal to record, as she puts it, "her progress along the revolutionary road."

"We were the children of Chairman Mao," Ms. Yin, now 42, said recently. "We wanted to offer our life to him. It was real. From the ages of 7 to 14, I sincerely wanted to become a farmer or a soldier. During the Cultural Revolution, everybody spoke the same meaningless words. But as I was reading my later diaries, I can tell I started to have other feelings and sensations. I started to think about myself."

Around the same time she began her diary, Ms. Yin watched a ballet film and fell in love with dance. One of her most treasured childhood memories occurred when her father surprised her with a pair of ballet slippers.

"As students, we had to work on the farm to help with harvest time," she said. "We were basically doing all kinds of things except studying in school. I came home from the country and saw this pair of slippers. I was so excited that I did not even wash my feet. From then on, I was dancing."

During the Cultural Revolution, Ms. Yin, whose outward fragility belies a tougher



Charles Martin

Yin Mei said of her new work, whose name refers to two Asian rivers: "I want to establish a sense of place to make the audience feel something, but the work is very abstract."

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**NOMAD: THE RIVER**

Yin Mei  
Dance Theater Workshop, 219  
West 19th Street, Chelsea.  
March 9 through 12.

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inner core, performed with a traditional Chinese company before moving to New York in 1985. In her newest piece, "Nomad: The River," to be performed at Dance Theater Workshop beginning on Wednesday, she strives to resolve the experiences of her childhood, not through a linear depiction but through strange and bewitching imagery that is pieced together like a dream.

"Nomad," a quartet, features a set by Christopher Salter so extravagant it could be taken for an installation. Mr. Salter collaborated with the choreographer William Forsythe and the director Peter Sellars before helping to found Sponge, an art and research organization. He met Ms. Yin last spring at Brown University, where he was teaching a course in performance technology.

He watched a showing of "Nomad," which she had staged with a group of students there, and was riveted.

"I've worked on and seen a lot of dance, and what impressed me about Yin Mei's work was the sheer visceral quality of it," Mr. Salter said. "There's very little work happening where you really feel it in your gut. I was also interested in the mix of vocabulary. You see edges of Asian movement traditions, but you also see a lot of German expressionist dance and European influences. I was struck by the fact that it was very organic. It's rooted in a real place."

The title "Nomad: The River" refers to the Yellow River in China and the Ganges in India, both of which Ms. Yin considers at once sacred and destructive. The work begins and ends with voice-overs taken from Ms. Yin's diaries as well as revolutionary slogans, anchoring the dance in a concrete historical moment. The middle section wordlessly evokes horror and fantasy.

"I use words but not details in the piece," Ms. Yin said. "It doesn't become entirely personal. In the end, I want to establish a sense of place to make the audience feel something, but the work is very abstract.

" 'Nomad' is about a journey on a spiritual path. To me, a journey causes you to look inward, and my experiences are in my memory. I wanted to look deep and to create something that would help me learn about myself."

The set comprises 27 fiberglass screens, each three feet wide and seven feet high, which hang in three rows along bars that stretch the width of the stage. Black-and-white images depict barren trees, snow scenes or light reflecting in a pool of water.

"We've pushed the contrast ratio so they look like Japanese or Chinese woodcuts," Mr. Salter said. "They're very graphic and textural."

The goal is to create something akin to a three-dimensional forest.

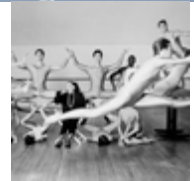
"The screens are both opaque and translucent," Mr. Salter said. "This way, they hold an image but also allow it to seep through to the next screen and the next. We're being very judicious with how we use the images. They materialize very slowly. A white tree appears in a black field and then another and another, until the whole space seems to turn into water. We're using technology to create a set of spaces that deal with consciousness and dreams and a kind of shifting reality."

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Mr. Salter's score, which swells and recedes throughout, flitters between electronic and natural sounds. "It opens up a world, yet you're not sure what that world is," he said. "You hear jungle noises and cicadas, but then there are strange low rumbles. At times, it will feel like there's an earthquake erupting beneath you."

The dancers supplement the score by striking pieces of sheet metal, simulating claps of thunder. While much of the imagery in "Nomad" is purposely mysterious, for Ms. Yin the alarming noise evokes a devastating childhood memory. One particularly hot July day when she was 12 or 13, a young man was executed, and she and a friend, curious, followed the crowd to the scene.

"I saw an old lady hobbling by with bound feet," Ms. Yin said. "I remember the way she tried to run. This was the mother collecting her son's body. Suddenly, very strong thunder started, and the sun started to shine as big raindrops began to fall. Everybody started running backward, because they did not want to get wet. But it was also that nature happened, and they were afraid of ghosts.

"My mother always said when people do not treat others well, heaven will cry. How could the sun come out when it was raining? It really meant that this man, whose only crime was that he was a counterrevolutionary, should not have been killed. So thunder is very strong for me."

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