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Dance Review: Yin Mei Dance, *Nomad: The River*

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## Summoning All the Theatrical Crafts

**Yin Mei Dance, *Nomad: The River***

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA

March 27, 2007

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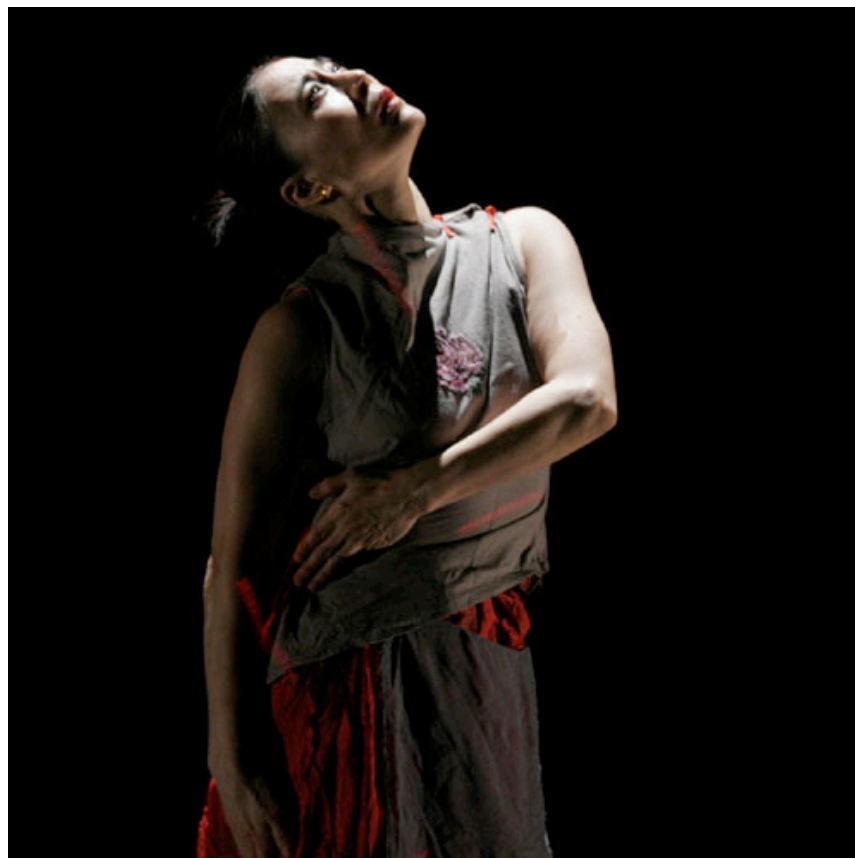
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Yin Mei Dance in *Nomad: The River*. Photo by Paul Goode.

Yin Mei's art is, as a man once said, a puzzlement. The dancer-choreographer, who was born in China and resettled in this country many years ago, revels in images, the kind of images that summon all the theatrical crafts and invade your dreams as they have, evidently, disturbed hers.

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But Yin's calling-card piece for San Francisco, *Nomad: The River*, wraps

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oddities within enigmas, and for all the massaging of the senses, leaves you vaguely dissatisfied at the conclusion of its uninterrupted, 70-minute span. The artist and her three dancing collaborators made their local debut over the weekend at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, under the auspices of that organization and it was a case of extraordinary promise not quite fulfilled. The audience was not as large as it has been for other YBCA presentations this season; one presumes the missing folk had been lured to Berkeley by the vastly and inexplicably overrated (at least, by the New York Times) movement pageants of Shen Wei. But he's fashionable in a multiculti way, and Yin, a superior choreographer, hasn't yet allowed herself to be exploited in that manner.

In any case YBCA's admirable presenting series, now in its second year, seems, unwittingly, to have adopted the practice of booking first-tier artists in second-tier dances; more meticulous curating seems in order. The handout press kit at the Friday performance (March 23) bulged with rave reviews of two of Yin's earlier pieces, but there's barely a word about *Nomad*. Suspicious aroused, I pursued the matter, only to find (no surprise) that, at its New York premiere in 2005, the piece received kindly, but definitely mixed notices.

But Yin certainly possesses an exquisite vision of dance theater and she has pursued her gift for allying all the theatrical trappings in a way that guarantees us that she knows what she is about, even if her audience does not. *Nomad* is a memoir of the choreographer's girlhood during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The work begins with Yin posed motionless, feet dramatically turned in, while we hear her voice reading a portion of her youthful diary. The episode closes the piece, conferring a tenuous unity. The monologue suggests an old-fashioned contrarian lurking under all the political postures; it would seem that indoctrination, in some way, liberated this artist.



Yin Mei Dance in *Nomad: The River*. Photo by Paul Goode.

Yet, *Nomad* is a work to which one must abandon oneself, allowing the

images to confer their own logic. Yin's brilliant designer Chris Salter, has furnished a series of fiberglass panels, hung from horizontal bars. Upon these curtains, lighting designer Lea Xiao projects Chinese characters. Mists envelop the stage at the opening as the dancers seem to uncurl from fetal positions and struggle to rise. In other hands, this has become one of the postmodern movement cliches of the moment, but Yin deftly avoids formula.

Within the sensitive movement scheme, the dancers emerge from what be a primeval swamp, stretching their limbs and supported by their associates. Two of the women, Lindsay Gilmour and Marilyn Maywald wrap themselves in aluminum sheets, Yin stands behind one, as Pedro Osorio courts her with bouquets. Soon, the women deploy the sheets to create the sound of a thunderstorm. Meanwhile, there's the sound score, which juxtaposes Philip Glass with the chattering of crickets, as well as some rather techno sounds, which, I suppose, signifies a measure of turmoil and is the most severe miscalculation of the evening.

Suddenly, it's high noon on the stage, the light is blinding and the women freeze in their tracks. Osorio, toting a can of red paint, brushes the women's legs with the hue before smearing himself. From this point, the movement, which I gather was improvised over a long period and is dotted with the fixed, extended limbs familiar from Asian martial arts, grows diffuse as the three women emerge from obscurity, their natural expression hidden behind Noh masks. Osorio sprinkles with a golden powder, which I am told is green tea. The substance fills the nostrils. Yin may be the first choreographer to introduce smell-o-vision into her work. But her more significant accomplishment lies elsewhere; the symbols in her quasi-narrative may not achieve clarity, but they propel us down interesting paths. That may be enough.

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For more information:

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\*Disclaimer: The views of Allan Ulrich are not necessarily the views of Voice of Dance\*



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