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by Silke Tudor

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Rich and Strange

Three Women Ignite Asian Traditions

by Deborah Jowitt November 24 - 30, 1998

Two men smooth their hands over each other's bodies. They slide into an embrace, interlocking as formally as the twin halves of a yin/yang symbol. What makes their actions startling on the stage of the BAM Majestic—a stamping ground, after all, of avant-garde theater—is that these are men of India, a country where the provinces of male and female are defined along very traditional lines, and masculinity doesn't usually involve public displays of interdependency and sensual tenderness.



The work is *Raga—In Search of Femininity* by Chandralekha, a choreographer considered radical in India. Like all Asian artists keen to experiment or to bring new stories to the stage, she has had to labor to come to terms with powerful classical dance and theater forms—querying and probing their strictures rather than abandoning them. If artists of her caliber borrow from the West, they borrow primarily the credo of freedom and personal expression. So Chandralekha incorporates Bharata Natyam movements and elements of the martial-arts form Kalaripayat, but alters context and performance style.

Chandralekha's stated goal is to honor not only the femaleness in men and vice versa, but a self that transcends gender. The women in *Raga* (Janaki Meera Krishnamurthy, Kalpana Krishnamurthy, R. Rajalakshmi, and N. Yagnaprabha) make Bharata Natyam steps assert power with every resonant slap of their feet against the floor. They slice through space with big, ground-covering steps, circling the soft, methodical men. They bounce into a squat. Only when the men embark on a spate of vigorous combat or—rigidly stretched out like lizards on their hands and toes—jump toward a cautious, too-curious woman, do we glimpse more-familiar male and female roles.

The actions of the two men, Shaji John and V.A. Sunny (Ramachandra Das enters intermittently, his role not entirely clear), suggest preparation; some maneuvers in the hypnotic massaging and stretching call to mind teachers limbering up little boys who study Kathakali. But the men's serene, glancingly erotic involvement with each other's bodies—continuing as it does almost throughout the piece—is an end in itself. When they rotate their twining postures in space, they resemble bookends holding something precious yet intangible between them. Occasionally a woman briefly molds herself into their patterns. The music, played by an ensemble headed by T.H. Subash Chandran, perpetuates the feeling of a dreamy cycle.

What struck me as odd in this mesmerizing work—a work asserting the power of the feminine in all of us—is that the four women function primarily as a Greek chorus, entering to comment on or frame the men. They usually dance in unison, not introduced as individuals.

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Chandralekha flaunts their physical boldness, but their thrall to a tight choreographic structure makes them seem docile.

Yin Mei—a dancer-choreographer from China, now residing in the U.S.—builds a vocabulary on martial arts and primal emotional drives and responses. There are few dance steps per se in her exquisite *Empty Tradition: City of Peonies*; the work, presented by the Asia Society, is as spare as ancient Chinese paintings. Intense images emerge from mist—the tremulous space in which dreams and memories sprout.

According to legend, an empress once commanded all the flowers in her garden to bloom in winter; the peony refused. Every peony was therefore banished to Luoyang. Yin Mei was born in this city of peonies during the Cultural Revolution, when the planting of peonies was forbidden and the blooming of the human spirit restrained. For long moments she stands, her whole body shuddering. Scrolls of imaginary calligraphy by installation artist Xu Bing, looping from the stage to the back of the auditorium, fly down to be swept and folded into books. Yin Mei has one in her teeth as her taped voice says, "When I was a child, there were no bedtime stories." During her childhood, people leaving and entering the compound were monitored. She's sticking peonies between her toes when that serene voice says, perhaps of her own heart, "I stop people coming in and I make a list of who goes out."

Much of the action involves an unequal struggle between her and a man who could represent a stern father, a lover, or a repressive force in society. Tall, slender Tibetan Sang Ji Jia, a leading modern dancer in China, sits impassively on a chair. While the New Jakarta Ensemble with singer Liu Sola performs Indonesian composer Tony Prabowo's evocative score, Sang manipulates Yin—a beautiful, fluid dancer—in cruelly imaginative ways that twist her limbs and strain her joints. If she moves away from his lap, he hooks her in with a leg or picks her up by the back of her dress. Yet just before the end they meet as equals, pressing their fingers to each other's lips and eyes, pinching one another's faces and rubbing them together before they cross and pass on.

The meaning of the whole is enigmatic, but every incident ignites ideas. The function of two women, Jennifer Nugent and Amanda Loulaki, isn't clear, but Shi Hengxin, a Kungfu monk trained at the Songshan Shaolin Monastery, acts as a powerful redemptive force—restraining Yin's panicky, obsessive acts, subduing Sang by lying on top of him, and performing feats so stunning you can't believe what you're seeing, like a somersault followed by a reverse flip that crashes him onto his back; from there, he rebounds into a sit. He seems to gather force from his rapid trajectories and then consolidate it in a motionless instant. This whole startling piece has that feeling: a journey of instants frozen in memory.

The West has a tradition of borrowing from the East. Margarita Guergué's six-month residency in Japan and her studies with butoh artist Kazuo Ohno have exerted an oblique yet potent influence on her *De Flor*—from such stylistic aspects as having tongues (live and on film) acknowledged as important actors in the theater of physicality to a profound concern with the elemental. *De Flor* is spare and slow-paced compared with Guergué's earlier work (always odd, always compelling). The atmosphere at P.S.122 seems haunted by people whose behavior and bodies are always a little askew, who move together and alone as if guided by some instinctual patterns they must fulfill. Hahn Rowe's music—delicate and sparse much of the time—adds droplets of mystery to the strange atmosphere.

In the beginning, five people sit around Mimi Goese's luminous box. With the help (I assume) of lighting designer Tal Yarden, its colors gradually change. The five lean very slowly this way and that, faces slack, eyes sometimes closed. Even open-eyed, they seem less to see than to sense—like animals snuffing the wind. Wearing pajamas, Guergué and Cydney Wilkes stumble in like novice walkers or half-asleep kids. As they stand blankly side by side, Guergué extrudes from her mouth a wad that suddenly opens into a flower. Wilkes grabs it with her mouth, and they stumble out.

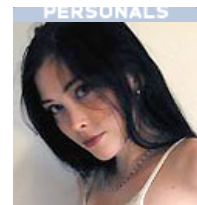
These two keep rolling in, doing a little something, and leaving. They crawl through a barely moving forest of figures of all ages who wear white clothes by Paula Ferreya. Everyone looks slightly off-balance. Are those marbles rolling across a floor in Goese's film? Or bubbles in a

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pool? People revolve like sour fashion models. Time passes so slowly that I stare at a safety pin on one performer's costume, chart the droplet of sweat rolling down from an armpit, compare tongues when a group offers them for inspection. Guergué and Vicky Shick dance alone together, channeling their limbs into invisible crevices. As when I watch butoh, boredom and fascination mingle so curiously that they become indistinguishable. The piece is pretty inscrutable until the end, when Guergué and Wilkes vary the flower act. Wilkes drops her own blossom to take the one blooming from Guergué's mouth. But Guergué has another coming. A brilliant juxtaposition on Guergué's part of human covetousness and cyclical inevitability.

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