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ARE MALE DANCERS OBSOLETE AT 35?

Can The Marriage Of Church And Theater Work?

Who Speaks For Chinese-American Theater?

Can Blacks Overcome Hollywood's Limited Access Rule?

Is There Any Escape From The Musical Ghetto?

YEN LU WONG IS A DANCER AND CHOREOGRAPHER-currently teaching the art of movement in the Drama Department at the University of California in San Diego. She was born in Kunming, Yunnan, China. Her family moved to Hong Kong when she was eight, and she came to the United States to attend college when she was sixteen. She holds a B.A. from Tufts and an M.A. from Kansas University; she has also studied at the Martha Graham School and with Louis Horst, Alwin Nikolais, and Irmgard Bartenieff. She is a certified Effort/Shape movement analyst, and has been guest artist at universities and theatre centers in the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, as well as a Fellow of the National Endowment for the Humanities. At the time of this interview, she was in the process of creating **Golden Mountain,** the first major work of dance theatre to deal with the immigrant heritage of Chinese Americans. The conversation took place in her home in Del Mar, just north of UCSD, at the end of a long day in the eighth week of rehearsal. We sat on the floor of her living room and drank tea.

Neworld: Do you feel your new creation, Golden Mountain, will be historically significant to Chinese American theatre?

Wong: In a sense, every piece is historic. But the Chinese Americans have had only one piece of artistic work that dealt with the history of this group of people who came from this land called China and somehow took roots here—people who have actually shaped and molded the history of California, and in so doing have shaped and changed the course of history for America. The history books never deal with that adequately or truthfully, or with any kind of integrity. So we have only one example, that is, Frank Chin's **The Year of the Dragon** and **Chicken-Coop Chinaman.** I think at last we are seeing in these works that we don't have amnesia—we just don't say, you either become Suzie Wong or a Peking Theatre opera singer. Either of which puts us in a totally unreal context.

I think it's particularly important to do this piece this year because we are starting the third century of America and rather than feeling pessimistic about it, I want to feel that there's something to celebrate. There's something to celebrate about what is to come, because a great change is going on, which for some people is very unsettling. I think it's important, if this country is to say 'E Pluribus Unum,' to know what it's talking about. A cultural diversity does not mean that your culture can be preempted by another group. Nor does it mean cultural exclusivity.

N.W.: But the Chinese enjoy a rich and respected cultural history. Even here.

Wong: Because of our unique position in history, we have always had a very schizophrenic relationship with America. On the one hand, since Marco Polo and the early missionaries, the adulation and the glory that have been given to China—for its civilization, its silk, its inventions like gunpowder, paper, writing, and its 4,000 years of cultural achievement—have made it seem like a kind of Utopia. Every time there has been contact, such as during Marco Polo's time, travelers have brought home these unbelievable tales, which have touched off a whole wave of literary works "in the Chinese manner." So that's one half of the schizophrenia, and then in the other half there's also this fantastic phenomenon of saying that the Chinese are absolutely without scruples, they are a heathen race that is totally beyond redemption, they have no sense of time, they do everything upside-down. That was being said way before the first immigrants came to this country. So that when the first immigrants came as laborers, coolies, from one of the most poverty-stricken areas in South China, when they landed here, it was like oil meeting water. And this kind of schizoid behavior has repeated itself on both sides, I must say, but more so, of course, on the United States' side because it was the oppressor.

N.W.: Is that your sole purpose in creating Golden Mountain?

Wong: There's another reason to do this work, other than just a historical perspective and the need to exorcise past history and become part of the consciousness of a whole group of people. How many Chinese performers are there? How many Chinese **American** performers are there? You can count them on your fingertips. Even when you make a list of these successful "Chinese"—the two Nobel Prize winners and I.M. Pei sort of thing—why is it that the success has always been in science? There's not been one successful artist, except Dong Kingman, and now recently Frank Chin, but even that is questionable. I mean, what is successful? Having your two plays produced? That makes you successful? So, culturally speaking, what do the Chinese see when they turn on the TV? Kung Fu? Or—Hawaii Five-O? And for children, there is absolutely no self-image, there's no role-models, except whatever is fed to them, about the femininity of Chinese women, the virtues of Chinese women, and all those other Confucian teachings.

". . . When I'm done with this work, they cannot say Yen Lo Wong has not been here. They've got to reckon with it."

N.W.: Is the thrust of this work, then,

role models, or is it Chinese history or culture or what?

Wong: In making this piece I feel that we can no longer live with amnesia, we can't just forget the past. And the strongest point I want to make is: it doesn't matter if you came over here as a coolie, as a cook, as a painter, or as a college professor intellectual. You came over here and you had to leave something. And when you left that and came over here and had to begin all over again, something happened. What drove you away? What was the journey about? What kinds of transformation and change did you undergo after that sea journey? So it's a very complex question because it's always molded by a complex environment. But nobody has dealt with it. Arthur Miller dealt with it in **A View From the Bridge.** But there was something unique about the Chinese. And it's that uniqueness I want to talk about.

N.W.: What reaction do you anticipate from the Chinese community?

Wong: I don't think it's going to be a piece where the Chinese in Chinatown are going to say, "hurray, that's what we love," or Chinese intellectuals in academia are going to say, "Wow, that's it, the answer to our radition." I think I'm going to get stoned in many ways—not literal rocks thrown at me, but in many other ways. I know that, I fully recognize that; but I think here the artist plays the role of the outsider, the artist must goad.

N.W.: So there **is** Chinese-American theatre, then?

Wong: There is not **yet**, but it's about to happen. I think it's premature to talk about Asian-American, and it's only beginning to make sense to talk about Chinese-American. When I say that, I mean that the solidarity of Asian-Americanness has only begun. It takes a long time. Spurts and setbacks and spurts and setbacks. It comes when different groups can begin to define themselves. I don't want to talk about whether there is a Chinese-American theatre yet or not. I'd just like to talk about what I think my theatre is attempting to do, what it addresses itself to, what makes it unique.

N.W.: Which is what?

Wong: As I said, historically I'm saying there's something unique about the Chinese, the way they came over, and the way they were systematically excluded and denied citizenship—which no other immigrant groups had to undergo. And that story has to be told so that we don't forget—so that we know what our ancestors' footsteps are. We can hear them. The building of the railroad, the digging of the mine, the spreading of the fishnet, the watering and the irrigation of the orchards, and the opening of the West—these were done by sweat and blood—and long, long hours of work and suffering. And by men who, in a sense, were lost in a no-man's land because —when the events turned, and they could no longer return to China, they were just set adrift. And rather than moan and groan about it—I think we've done quite a bit of that—I think these men must be celebrated. It's only when that aspect is exorcised—I want to put it right in front of every person of Chinese heritage, and say, "Look at it!" **Then** we can go on. If we don't look at it, and we say, "Oh, you know, those coolies weren't educated," then we're forever deluding ourselves. It doesn't matter if your children go to MIT and Harvard and Stanford and you live in Westchester and whatever. Still, that part of you must be faced.

N.W.: Will occidentals have difficulty relating to Golden Mountain?

Wong: I don't think you have to be Chinese to understand or to do this work. It will help because there will be a lot of shared concerns—historical data, and all that kind of thing—just the matter of customs and rituals; but I think that if you're not Chinese you can begin to understand what it's like to be Chinese. And you share that. And I think this group of performers that we have are able to do so, when they begin to talk about their grandparents, they begin to talk about the things that were not mentioned in their house, the fears about bringing friends to their home because people there didn't speak English. The Americanization of Greek children, of Lithuanian children, and so forth. And I think this is very, very important.

N.W.: So it's not just that they're understanding about being Chinese, but they're...

Wong: ...understanding about themselves. And I think in so doing I arouse in them a sense of heritage. I mean, I think I get them to say, "Hey, I'm gonna ask my mother some time about this." And then you're really fully in the oral tradition, where you hand it from one generation to the other. And when you do that, that's what makes a piece celebratory. That's what I mean by being optimistic.

A third area that I feel this piece begins to open up, is a truly trans-discipline kind of work, in which, because there is a feeling of ensemble, and a trust and ability to be vulnerable in a group, people can do things that they would normally never dare do. Like people who've never opened their mouths to sing, all of a sudden are croaking out these sounds.

N.W.: So trans-discipline means taking on techniques that you would normally not even think were possible.

Wong: If you categorize.

N.W.: Refusing to categorize your own abilities.

Wong: It's nothing new, because if you look at the roots of Chinese theatre, they never said [gesturing as if to separate compartments] "Here is drama. Here is singing. Here is dancing. Here is music." It's always been an integral thing. Although the art form has become more fossilized into a classical tradition, the performer is still called on to do movement, to sing, to recite dialogue in a stylized manner, to do vaudeville, trick acts, and so forth.

N.W.: How did you get this ensemble together?

Wong: Well, there are two ways they came to work with me. One is through this course called "The Art of Movement." I screen the people into the course pretty carefully—I always make them come and see me and I explain the course to them and say, "Do you still want it?" And they say "Yes." And I growl at them and say, "Are you sure?" And they come. So at least I know they're not easily intimidated.

N.W.: How formidable is the choreography?

Continued on page 44

WONG...

Continued from page 24

Wong: In the course of the work in "The Art of Movement," they're called on to look at dance and movement in a different light. In other words, I'm not giving them dance steps, and there's no such thing as learning a routine. They pretty much have to confront themselves and say, "Oh, that's the way I move," breaking it down into weight, space, flow, and time. And when they do their project, they are to go as free as they can and do something they believe in. So in that course they are required to be committed; they are required to experience it on a kinesthetic level and they also then acquire a methodology and a frame of reference. When I say, "This contraction is linked to the release of these muscles," they understand it; when I say "This is a peripheral initiation," they understand it. So the people from that class are a great asset.

N.W.: What techniques do you use to determine their abilities?

Wong: In the case of people I've never worked with, when I give the audition I have them solve some artistic problems. One is an imaginary landscape where you are a brilliant Kung Fu master, and you come face to face with twelve enemies who are attacking you from different angles and you have to steal yourself out of danger. Well—one of the women who's now in the cast, that I hadn't worked with, let out a yell that would curdle your blood, and I said, "Fine." You know, that was enough, that convinced me—about everything.

I chose them because I recognized that each of them was quite different—it's a bunch of uncommon, idiosyncratic people. There's something about them that struck me, the stubbornness, for some of them the odd size or the odd shape. I know they're hard-working, because I've seen them work, and I know that they have perseverance, and that's very important. I also find in them a fantastic sense of integrity, and a very healthy humility but at the same time, not sickie humbleness. They're not there for an ego trip, because there are no star roles. And I know all of them dared. They dared to take risks, they dared to make mistakes, they dared to fall flat on their face, but when they dared, they were big.

N.W.: Can you talk particularly about how you achieve a sense of ensemble? I've noticed, watching your rehearsals, that you do almost no traditional choreographing, in the sense of teaching each movement exactly as you want it.

Wong: How we began our work is very, very important. I spent a whole week doing nothing but showing slides, talking about it, giving them historical data. Although we have no script, at every important section we do, I paint it for them—the imagery that I see, the key metaphor, the meaningful gestures, the Gestalt. And let them at least see this part of the work projected in their consciousness. Then each of them would take that piece and link it and say, "What has this got to do with me? What is something in my experience which I can link that with?" So it becomes real to them.

Also, I spend half an hour to an hour of each rehearsal on warmups—and for me warmup isn't just to get your muscles warm, or get lots of perspiration; warmup means getting your body ready to move in a particular way that's right for the part we're working on. And when we begin to work I think kinesthetically they begin to understand the role that they're playing.

N.W.: So a tremendous amount of indirect preparation goes into the movement they finally do in the piece itself. First the background material—writing, photographs, films, records, videotapes—and then the warmup, the imagery.

Wong: Yes. I have an overall structure for each part of the work, and I can give it to them on a kinesthetic level as well as an intellectual one.

N.W.: So the end result is not something you've directed or choreographed exactly, but something you've triggered, after giving them a toehold on a tradition.

Wong: Tradition, yes. There's so much root-going in the piece—you know, you go back to where it came from. The music, you go back to where it came from. The text, you go back to where it came from. And certainly the imagery, you go back to where it came from. So I think in terms of the artistic umbrella we're saying, this is what theatre's about: it's about play, it's about healing, it's about ritual, it's about ceremony, it's about exaltation, it's about pain, it's about relief, and it's about time and space.

It's about Chinese and it's about American. And, I think this is a crazy country!

N.W.: Going back to kinesthetics, a very nice thing about **Golden Mountain** is that I think it's impossible not to get it on some level. If you're going to be there, you're going to have to experience it kinesthetically, no matter what your mind says. Your body cannot help but get it, to some extent, and that's a very nice thing about the medium of movement.

Wong: It is. What we're dealing with is a very powerful medium; it **can** really move people. I mean, the root meaning of "emotion" is "out of motion." So when I'm done with this work, they cannot say Yen Lu Wong has not been here. They've got to reckon with it. Now whether they like it, or they don't like it—that's all right with me. But I think that the Chinese have to find their own language in their own way. It just makes no sense to adopt black rhetoric, Chicano rhetoric. Mao Tse-Tung was a big enough man and leader to say to many of the third world countries, "You must find your own revolution." I think it must be so for the Chinese in America. When you go against the grain of how you see things, you inevitably destroy something. The Chinese must find their own way of changing things, which can be very different from what other minorities have done.

As I've said before, I'm looking for new wine in new bottles. And that new bottle is very hard to shape; but I think that it's inevitable that we will shape it, and then generations from us will smash it and shape another one. •

YEN LU WONG

A New Force In The Wings

Interview

By Lowry Pei