

Dance

CanAsian festival serves up a soulful dance travelogue

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Good art should satisfy on every level – emotional, spiritual, aesthetic. The two programs of the CanAsian International Dance Festival fulfilled that mandate.

The festival celebrated its 10th anniversary with a broad sweep of diverse artists, both the traditional and the contemporary. Taken together, the two programs were a terpsichorean travelogue, from Turkey to India, Cambodia, Japan and Korea. Kudos to artistic director Denise Fujiwara and her board for the clever programming.

What is fascinating about Asian dance arts is that each style affects an audience in very different ways. Some are visual feasts for the eyes, while others are breathtaking in their physical demands. But they all touch the soul.

Ziya Azazi (Sufi Whirling Dervish)

In every festival there is a first among equals. Turkish-born, Vienna-based Azazi managed to make a whirling dervish look both sexy and thrilling. His solo *Dervish in Progress* was simply one of the most exciting dances ever.

Azazi transformed the ancient ritual of Sufi whirling into contemporary dance with the addition of surprising touches. His choreography was all about the ever-changing placement of his head, arms, hands and torso. In traditional Sufism, the body changes are imperceptible. Azazi, on the other hand, made his physical changes very obvious, so they became physical manifestations of emotion, whether beating his chest, or wringing his hands.

In another surprise, during his non-stop whirling, he stripped off his hat, shirt and two of his skirts. At one point, he actually managed to twirl one skirt over his head, throw it up in the air like a pancake, and catch it without missing a beat. His music, an edgy mix of traditional Turkish and modern-day electro-acoustic and the dazzling overhead lighting by Lutz Deppe augmented the spectacle of the dance.

Jocelyne Montpetit (Butoh)

Montreal's Montpetit reduced me to tears with her butoh homage to her late Japanese master, Kazuo Ohno. Her solo *Nuit, Nacht, Notte* was her meditation on life and death.

Using western classical music that included the *Lament* from Purcell's opera *Dido and Aeneas*, as well as songs about death by Schubert and Canteloube, she performed a solo that was a stunning metaphor

for pain and release. Her tortured physicality was an agonizing journey to free the soul from earthly bonds. She was simply magnificent.

Mi Young Kim (Traditional Korean Dance)

Toronto's Kim, who began her career as a child, is celebrating 60 years as a professional dancer. Her gorgeous company performed three traditional Korean dances of shimmering beauty.

Whether it was the joyous *Small Gong Dance* from the rural countryside or the seductive *Geisha Dance*, or the always colourful *Jianggo Chum* or drum dance, her impeccably schooled company performed with commitment.

Bageshree Vaze (Kathak)

Vaze is a choreographer and a singer. Her latest CD *Tarana* is a selection of music to accompany the kathak dance of north India. For this concert, Vaze created three dances set to selections from the album – the devotional *Devi*, an homage to the goddess Durga, and two court dances, *Lucknow's Jewel* and *Tarana*.

Vaze is a brilliant and expressive dancer with a crisp, highly articulated attack. Kathak is defined by its showy *chakkars* or pirouettes, whether in one spot or in a circle, and Vaze tossed off these turns with astonishing speed.

Peter Chin (Contemporary/South-East Asian)

For the last decade, Chin has been fascinated by the cultures of Indo-China and Indonesia. He presented two dances, a solo for himself, and a provocative work for five dancers from Cambodia.

The eye-catching solo, *Sriwijaya*, was inspired by an ancient Buddhist kingdom that once existed on the island of Sumatra. Set to Indonesian gamelan music, the dance was Chin's imagining of what a temple dance must have looked like in this ancient kingdom.

He included many influences of various eastern dance forms – Indian and Thai, for example, but he also added in a manly fierceness and dramatic poses. The solo radiated vibrancy.

The intriguing quintet *Olden New Golden Blue* was performed by five Cambodian dancers, two women and three men. Chin collaborated on the music, which included songs by Sin Sisamuth, the Frank Sinatra of Cambodia in the 1950s.

The most important aspect of this piece, which included a lot of conversation between the dancers (subtitled in English), was their dilemma at being caught between contemporary and traditional dance.

The sad truth is that the savage Pol Pot regime almost eradicated the ancient Khmer tradition. Only a bare fraction of the country's artists were left alive after the overthrow. Thus, resurrecting and preserving the ancient art forms is paramount. On the other hand, these dancers are young people of today, with contemporary interests.

The delight of this piece was the fusion of both worlds, a happy melding of traditional physicality with a contemporary twist. For example, a pose from an ancient temple wall would dissolve into something

evoking a hip-hop move.

The throughline metaphor was the White Monkey, an important symbol in Khmer mythology. At one point, all the dancers portrayed the monkey as they battled with the ancient conflict between the old and the new. As such, the piece was a capsule of the present time.

CanAsian International Dance Festival

- At Fleck Dance Theatre
- In Toronto on Wednesday and Thursday Feb. 23 and 24

CanAsian Program B with Vaze and Chin repeats Saturday night.

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