



## H.T. Chen Dancers bridge extremes in Birmingham performance

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### H.T. CHEN AND DANCERS



H.T. Chen and Dancers

Friday, Alys Stephens Center

Presented by Birmingham Chinese Garden & Asian Cultural Center Foundation

Repeats Saturday at 2 p.m.

H.T. Chen's choreography resides in an evocative, invented culture-world that shares ancient Chinese traditions with modern Western sensibility. It fades in and out between these extremes so fluidly it's hardly noticeable. Though highly rigorous, it avoids the acrobatic showmanship of many modern dance companies in favor of soft-edged, abstract, at times folkish moves.



In their program Friday at the Sirote Theatre, the eight New York-based dancers expertly placed Chen's mark on two works. "Heart of Grace" takes the traditional Chinese lion dance to its bare bones. The lion is first suggested in a subtle backdrop of slides and videos, emerging frighteningly from a bamboo forest. Dancers enter carrying first a skeletal lion's head, then one that's more colorfully adorned. Crisp lifts, floor rolls and expansive formations are accompanied by a score by Cao Bao-An and Bradley Kaus that merges instruments such as erhu, pipa, bamboo flute, gong and various other percussion. The otherworldly feel is heightened by images of stars, clouds and a lotus blossom. At once stark and celebratory, it is a kind of indefinable odyssey.

The company's most recent work, "Between Heaven and Earth," is more virtuosic, and in some ways more closely linked to Chen's Chinese roots. With suggestions of the wide, circular glissandos found in Chinese opera, combined with the simpler modes of folk music, the music by Chinese-American composers Zhou Long and Chen Yi provides a free slate for choreographer and dancers. Chen demands more precision and suppleness, both of which were in abundance. Chinese lanterns appeared as a recurrent theme, drawing the piece together.

Especially impressive was the work's finale. With dancers in a straight, front-to-back line, arms and legs stretched out and contracted in sequential motion like flower petals. Confetti from an umbrella was tossed about, covering the stage and bringing the work to a festive close.

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