


From the opening clang of cymbals and bang of drums, *Heart of Grace* grabs our attention. Premiered at Dance Theatre Workshop's 2005 Guest Artist Series May 19-22 the piece continues H.T. Chen's exploration of his multifaceted background. Born in Shanghai, China, he was schooled at Julliard, NYU and La Mama E.T.C. and remains an integral part of the Asian American community in New York with his Mulberry Street Theater. His newest dance unfolds his stories within stories for almost an hour. Using a commissioned score by Cao Bao-An, a native of China and a percussionist who opens the show, the dance starts from the icon of the traditional lion dance, moves to metaphor and circles around a theatrical reality. The goal is to link and explore Chinese myths and legends seeing where they lead us and what they tell us about ourselves.

In this ambitious presentation Chen is supported by Multimedia Scenic Designer Eric Harritz, Lighting Designer David Lander, Costume Designer Linda Ross, as well as props by Keith Leung and slides by John Wang. Traditional drummers, Lion Dancers, children participants, martial artist Philip Cruse, slides and video create a world around choreography that is energetic and searching. Appearing to use more dancers than the company of nine, Chen is a never-ending movement creator. He's always adding to basic phrases or taking motion in a different direction. Rarely repeating himself the choreography is flowing and visceral. Some of the slides and videos confuse the environment of his pure dance moments, but the music and movement are always well integrated.

The dancers are strong and lithe. As they begin, bamboo trees are featured in the background slide. Kayan Lam captures Chen's spring, throwing herself into the air but landing in a lengthened line. Twisting, percussive energy refers gently to the form and style of the multicolored lion. Lunging deeply and curving into running falls, solos blend into duets. When the group dances together they are like parts of a large creature. Moving together as a wave they create a sense of wholeness. As they separate we see the individual struggle. Renouard Gee, a veteran Chen dancer has a quiet spinning solo and elsewhere strikes one as a steady and grounded figure. Either wearing small lion heads or taking their masks off they stay human. They can bound joyfully in a playful quartet and shine as individuals.

In their capri pants and snug shiny tops the dancers have a modern look and their relationships are modern. A particularly lovely duet for Li-Ann Lim and Dito Sudito with floating lotus blossoms in the background is contrasted by a playful segment of two women wearing headscarfs with images from street life. A more traditional duet for men with Sudito and Antoin Gadpaille followed a dramatic solo where a mask encircled the dancer from above like a birdcage.

The ever changing scene reminds one of free association. Trying to get to an idea of being "human, animal, fanciful, and majestic," as he states in program notes, Chen thinks of everything and weaves it together. In the end the shaking lion still attracts the attention of the children on stage. Real life and real icons still attract H.T. Chen. For me, the dense dancing of *Heart of Grace* is the metaphor: working your way out of your cage requires constant movement. 

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DENSE WITH GRACE