

OVERNIGHT

'Heart of Grace' bursting with heritage

H.T. Chen & Dancers embrace past, present at Eisemann Center

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Special Contributor

RICHARDSON — Chinese culture spilled out into modern dance Sunday at the Eisemann Center, as the New York-based H.T. Chen & Dancers appeared in a gala sponsored by the Dallas Chinese Community Center.

The evening's premiere, *Heart of Grace*, covered a lot of ground — from 19th-century immigrants to today's Chinatowns, whether in New York City or Richardson.

Tradition was represented by

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lion dancers (performed by two men for each lion), red ribbons and yellow flags. The program began with girls waving ribbons in sync as they made their way from the back of the theater to the stage, followed on both sides by an enormous red-and-yellow lion and an even larger yellow-and-gold lion. The girls disappeared and the lions took over, exuding menace.

Images of the lions flickered on a video screen, even bigger and bolder than onstage, while the human dancers moved with resolve. From time to time, images of gray, empty buildings and the Angel Island, Calif., immigration station offered a stark reminder of early hardship, while the dancers pulled



Fulchu Li

H.T. Chen & Dancers filled the stage with struggle and hope during the premiere of *Heart of Grace* on Sunday night at the Eisemann Center in Richardson.

together as a single unit with sharp, spare thrusts and turns.

Struggle gave way near the end when three new arrivals — a boy, girl and their mother — ran forward with eager anticipation. Hardship turned to hope and bustle with screen images of the crowded Chinatown streets.

Ambitious and raw, *Heart of Grace* was still a work in progress. Not so *Opening the Gate*, an excerpt from a 1993 work that employs "13 sounds" (small flower

drums) and martial-arts movements. Mr. Chen has only nine dancers, but he knows how to make them look like an army and how to disperse them like tumbleweeds scattered in the wind.

Wearing white martial-arts uniforms, they assembled in arresting images, paused and moved on. The music — the drums and wind instruments — surged and fell with the dance.

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