

## **danceNAGANUMA: Using Their Noodles**

by Chih-Chung Fang

I was on a flight many years ago when it came time for dinner. The pretty flight attendant wheeled her food cart up, looked at me and said, “Would you like the fish, or,” she said as her face broke into the widest smile, “we have CHINESE... CHICKEN... SALAD! (\*WINK WINK\*)” Yeah, I’m Chinese, so what? “I will have... the... fish,” I replied, enunciating every word as clearly as she had done.

Good thing Claudine Naganuma -- who is half Chinese and half Japanese -- wasn’t there, or she would have made a few things clear to the well-meaning flight attendant. Things like: Asian people don’t all know Kung Fu. In fact, we don’t even all like eating noodles, or tofu, or Chinese chicken salad. And if you dig deeper, you’ll see that our families aren’t always as drama-free as we want everyone to think -- shhh...don’t tell anyone. Gotta save face.

Naganuma’s dance company, danceNAGANUMA, performed “Noodle Women” May 22-25, 2008 at the SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco. It looked at Western society’s assumptions and East Asian society’s unspoken expectations of Asian people. It was presented in collaboration with Flo Oy Wong’s texturally-rich sculptures and mixed media pieces, and as part of the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center’s 11th Annual United States of Asian America Festival.

The first part of the performance was in the gallery that housed Wong’s exhibit, where three dancers clad in shiny cheong-sam (or chi pau) slurped down strand after strand of noodles. Their slurps and mmmm’s, along with musician Joel Davel banging on upside-down pots and pans, made for quirky -- if not wacky -- background music as I perused Wong’s rice bag paintings and joss paper sculptures which told stories of Angel Island and Japanese-American internment camps. Cool. Pretty. But then I noticed the dancers lurking in the corners. There was something disturbing about the young girl sitting with a panda mask over her face. Or perhaps the young lady doing tai-chi/dance with a mouthful of twigs. Or the woman in the far corner with the blindfold on, saying, “Don’t worry about it. It’s OK. Pretend it’s not happening.” (Mom, is that you?) Weird? Maybe. Thought-provoking? Definitely. What’s going on here? We were ushered into the main theater in search of the answer.

The cozy theater meant that I was close enough to see every pained expression, which lent a personal touch that would have been lost in a larger venue. This worked particularly well for pieces such as the opener, “Little Sister’s Voices”, which the narrative told us is about the impact that immigrating to the US had on young Asian children and their families. (Side note: portions of the performance were narrated, putting the dance in context, and -- IMHO -- allowing a deeper and more enjoyable understanding of the show.) “Little Sister’s Voices” is also where I started to understand the significance of noodles, not just as a comforting symbol of home or culture, but also of inner turmoil upon being uprooted. As one young dancer said aloud during her performance, she was like a bowl of noodles, “all squirmy inside”.

Of particular note is the piece “Hidden Story”, with the part of a mentally ill girl danced by 13-year old Sierra Joe Lash. Even at Lash’s young age, she has an emotional breadth and maturity that sometimes eludes much older dancers; angst and resignation seemed to inhabit every line of her face, which made her performance that much more agonizing to watch. While Lash jumped and jerked about with a mouthful of twigs, others -- being dutiful members of the Chinese family -- danced at a distance with chopsticks in their mouths, leaving Lash to her

spasms. She eventually stopped and sat still, uttering the words, “I’m fine,” a phrase that we’ve all been guilty of saying even in the midst of an exceedingly crappy day.

I later learned, in “Big Sister’s Wisdom”, that these two pieces tell the story of Flo Oy Wong and her mentally ill sister. Fed up with her family always hiding and not acknowledging her sister’s mental illness, Wong ultimately summoned enough courage to force her parents to talk about the issue and take steps to help her sister. In Wong’s own words, in a traditional Asian household, “You don’t question your parents.... Families are afraid of revealing the secrets.... We always had to be perfect.” Hmm...sound familiar? And in reference to her art, she said that she uses “beautiful materials to tell the story, but up close the story is not beautiful.”

Despite these solemn themes, Naganuma succeeded in keeping the tone playful and the audience laughing. In addition to the narration, the dancers often clicked chopsticks, yelped, and made other silly noises. There were also phrases uttered by dancers affirming their Asian-AMERICAN-ness, like, “I’m Chinese, but I don’t speak Chinese...I hate Chinese food...I hate walking to Chinatown....Chinese fish markets are smelly and disgusting....” OMG! That is SO not Asian. Beautiful silken costumes added color and beauty, while the “cuteness factor” was undeniably supplied by Lihong Chan (age 10), Julia Milani (age 8), and Catalina Jackson Urueña (age 10).

The final piece, “Full of Noodles”, had the entire company on stage, using their chopsticks to pull imaginary noodles out of their bodies, some of them making funny faces and bobbing their heads. I found myself asking the same question as at the beginning: What is going on here? Are they purging themselves of the traditional, stifling Asian-ness and fashioning a new identity? Are they getting rid of the “squirminess” that they felt while torn between two worlds? Or maybe, as the closing narration suggested when it said, “I realized that it’s OK to be full of noodles,” they were finally realizing that they will always be full of their culture and are learning to embrace it.

I was surprised at how much I had enjoyed and identified with the dance, despite my initial fears of it being “another show about the Asian-American identity crisis”. Even my non-Asian other half seemed to appreciate and identify to an extent (though perhaps via osmosis, courtesy of me). But mostly, my stomach was now growling, begging for some noodles. Luckily, as I exited the theater, I was relieved to see plates of noodles set out for all of us to enjoy (served by Claudine Naganuma herself!).

A few slurps and burps later, I was a happy camper on my way home, content that I had spent a productive evening eating noodles and watching an insightful and entertaining performance. Not to mention inspirational. Speaking of which, there is something that I would like to make clear. Contrary to popular belief, Chinese chicken salad is NOT based on an old, traditional recipe handed down from Chinese grandmothers. Oh yeah, one more thing. I know Kung Fu. I’m Chinese after all.

*If you missed it, “Noodle Women” will be performed again in New York City on July 23 & 24, 2010 at Chen Dance Center: 70 Mulberry Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor, New York, NY 10013. (212)349-0126 [www.ChenDanceCenter.org](http://www.ChenDanceCenter.org)*