

Autumn fan

Chinese Choreography in Malaysia

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The fan is an important expressive element of Chinese culture. Like other handicrafts in ancient China, it not only serves a functional purpose, but is an object of great aesthetic value. It appears in many different shapes and sizes, made with various types of materials; paper, cloth, silk, bamboo

with wood or ivory as its frame. In the Chinese dance culture, the fan is widely used in the court and by commoners. In this context, the fan can be viewed as a cultural symbol of the Chinese.

My choreography "The Autumn Fan" was created in 1990. It is hoped that this dance will provoke the audience to view more critically the alarming decline of cultural heritage and tradition. It would be very sad if the day comes when mothers are unable to answer their children's questions about the origin of the fans and the meaning of the verses on the fans.

In "The Autumn Fan," the fan is not only a functional object used by people to cool themselves, but a cultural symbol that has deeper meaning. In this piece, the folded fan is chosen as the main prop. Cloths with famous poems written by great historical heroes in Chinese history; the long sleeve dance; as well as a Chinese opera excerpt are interwoven in the piece.

Fans, in Chinese folk dance, are used in an impressive variety of ways. Skill in manipulation of the fan by the fingers and wrists takes a long time to achieve. The fan is cheap to make and easy to carry around for outdoor presentations, be it in paddy field or the crowded temple ground.

Historical heroes in the dance can be identified by the poems, known to anybody who knows Chinese culture, written on their fans.

Yet in the dance, they are somehow being washed away. Their appearance can be seen as a salute, an allusion, a reminiscence of patriots. Their disappearance is unforeseen, unacceptable and unthinkable. Nevertheless, it happens in the dance.

The famous Beijing opera excerpt, "The Drunken Concubine," is a masterpiece created by the late Mei Lian Fan, a top female impersonator whose career began before the war and reached its peak in the 1950s. In this piece, the drunken concubine has a memorable fan dance that helps her to express the loneliness and despair of being a beauty captured in a vast and soulless palace. In "The Autumn Fan" the audience is impatient with the singing and the gentle movement of the fan. They also ridicule the female impersonator, showing no respect for his great art. Again folding up the fan at the end of the scene is an act of deep despair of

the powerless.

The use of the extra long three-metre sleeves in the dance, with poetry recitation in the background, is intended to enhance the visual impact. The enlarged space in which the sleeves are wielded symbolize the extensive influence of the great literature. However, in the foreground, the other group of dancers are restless and at the end even tear their fans violently. Finally, they pick up their torn fans, move around randomly and recite the famous lines of a Tang Dynasty poet, Li Bai. Did they discard the fans because autumn is here and the fans are no longer needed? Or did they regret what they had done to their fans and treasure the object

that constantly was at their side during the long hot summer?

In "The Autumn Fan," the movement patterns and the dance steps are basically ethnic based. The Beijing opera excerpt is kept as closely as possible to the original choreography of Mei Lan Fan. The traditional dance movements are

delicate and subtle, attentive to details of small changes in the positioning of the torso, the movements of the eyes and facial expressions. However, the structure of the piece is unconventional, non-linear and non-narrative.

Perhaps it can be called modern Chinese dance. I believe that as an artist, a choreographer has the dual responsibility of inheriting tradition and developing it further, refining the cultural heritage and moving on. But first one must master the technique of traditional dance and 'digest' it so that it can be totally absorbed. Once it becomes part of

your creativity, you can develop new movement patterns that are required for your choreography. These may not be identical to the traditional dance steps of the old repertoire but they will be identifiable as Chinese.

In Malaysia, I am convinced that Chinese dance can develop further as strong foundations have been laid by many choreographers who have diligently worked in the past two decades. The quality of teaching has improved tremendously as there are more local and foreign professional teachers giving classes. There is also great support from the community. It is now up to the choreographers to absorb and digest, to sow new seeds and nurture the new plants with the water of creativity.

