

# Choreographer Cheronne Wong: Refusing to be pigeonholed as only “Asian”

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Flamboyance versus concealment. Identity versus impersonation. These are a few of the variations of the “undercover” investigations in Cheronne Wong’s new dance piece, “sub-Rosa.” Combining modern dance with her characteristic use of martial arts, plus a fair amount of paired acrobatics, Wong has developed an hour-long series of movement devoted to exploring the lies – and the ultimate truth – in the body.

“The body is a complex organ and we’ve discovered that it can reveal and hide all at the same time,” Wong says. “But it’s so easy to be disingenuous. I truly believe that the body can’t lie no matter how hard we try to hide.”

Wong’s process spanned a year of collaborative work with her four dancers: Christina Guillette, Danny Herter, Kade Stotler, and Naho Shioya. “We explored a lot with improv (solo and group) to find that place of moving with total abandonment, honesty and power,” Wong says.

After asking each performer to create a profile of a spy, she then “challenged them to explore bizarre things – speak in nonsensical language, sing, turn the movement 90 degrees, imagine walking on the moon ...”

She also collaborated with composer Amy Denio and video artist John D. Pai, incorporating the use of creative video projections, gobos, and fog, to augment the dancers’ movement with the dynamism of nature and the social.

“The big challenge,” Wong says, “was to not create a piece with a story or narrative but yet have something tangible for the performers to hang on to while embodying their spy personas — subtle but powerful theatricality.”

The sound and video gestures toward the conventions of spy thrillers, using shadow and repetition to evoke the sense of the detected versus the detective, the hunted versus the hunter.

“During this year-long process we’ve also explored using text and sound-making (collaborating with Susie Kozawa),” Wong says. “Much of it we’ve edited out ... but it was a process of exploring deeper into the characters of the piece.”

Part of that exploration has been Wong’s choice to move away from her previous use of site-specific space toward a more traditional indoor venue.

“We were originally going to be presented at Conworks,” Wong says. “But that space closed down so I had to hunt for an alternate space to self-produce.” Wong considered performing “sub-Rosa” at a raw space at Sandpoint, but believed the logistics of converting the space into a public performance venue would be too daunting.

“I chose Langston Hughes because it’s a wonderful theater but not your traditional dance venue,” Wong says. “I wanted a venue that would be best for a theatrical work [ideal conditions for lighting, video and floor surface for dancing].”

Before her current role as choreographer, Wong previously performed since childhood as a dancer. “I started out studying ballet in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and had fantasies of becoming a ballet dancer,” Wong says.

Dance “was never an option when college came around,” she says. Wong’s parents sent her overseas to earn a degree in accounting. “But I made sure the college had a dance program and I joined the college dance company and started training in modern dance.”

That training led to a dance fellowship at Ohio State University, where Wong received her master’s degree in fine arts.

But despite that advanced training, Wong recalls her grandmother as one of her primary influences: Wong says that, during her upbringing in a Catholic Chinese family in Malaysia, her grandmother “nurtured my performer side by taking me to Chinese movies and having

Chinese soap dramas on the radio play every day.”

Yet, because of her education in the UK and the USA, Wong says, “I feel that I straddle the East and West in the subject matter that I choose, the style of movement and my aesthetic. I believe that my heritage is subtly reflected in my work.”

Attempting to bridge the East and West, Wong says she struggles with the challenge to “generate material that is truly uncensored and genuine, that is not masked by but enhanced by many years of Western training and education.”

When Wong first studied dance in New York, she joined what she calls “an Isadora Duncan-derivative dance company.” She reports: “I floated in silk tunics in a very cold warehouse space. It was not my cup of tea.”

This led to her interest in a wider variety of dance forms: “My study of post-modern dance technique in NYC was wonderful in terms of generation of movement, but I found it too bland and I try to spice up my work with inserting other movement references,” she says.

Now Wong reports: “I love all kinds of dance – modern, ballet, jazz. I also love social dancing and for awhile was heavy into the salsa scene.”

Because of her Asian heritage, Wong has sometimes encountered expectations that conflict with the work she strives to create. “People expect or assume my work to be either traditional, folk, or directly referencing my Asian heritage,” she says. “Sometimes I feel that it’s difficult for some to place me in the experimental, post-modern realm.”

But Wong’s philosophy is more comprehensive: “Movement is movement whether it’s derived from European, African, or Asian roots, but if the passion and message is honest, I couldn’t care less about the genre,” she says. “My experience from growing up in a multicultural environment where in one sentence you would hear words in Malay, Chinese, and English has definitely influenced my willingness to blend all types of dance styles.”

Along with combining those multiple dance styles, Wong plans to pursue her interest in weaving together interdisciplinary aspects of performance: "My continued interest is honing in on the craft of blending movement with content and theater."

She also mingles her creative work with the challenges of self-producing. "I'm acting as publicist, grant writer, project manager, creative director and that drains me mentally and physically!"

Add to that motherhood and part-time work as an accountant, and Wong finds that embracing collaboration with other artists is a necessity rather than a luxury. "My process had to change since I have less studio time creating, but rely on my performers to collaborate with movement," Wong says. "I have four incredible performers - they are each very different and unique. This piece wouldn't be what it is without their contribution and their willingness to experiment with me."

The "undercover" theme of "sub-Rosa" hearkens to part of Wong's long-held sense of herself. "I was (am) always very shy growing up and found an outlet in expression in dance," she says. "Dance was the one outlet that I could be completely free and uncensored."

"sub-Rosa" runs through Sept. 22 at Langston Hughes Performing Arts Center, 104 17th Ave. S., Seattle.