

Cloud Gate Founder Lin Hwai-Min Reflects on His 20-Year Journey

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In early March, [Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan](#) comes to Seattle to extend an invitation to tranquility.

Under the direction of founder Lin Hwai-min, Cloud Gate will perform “Songs of the Wanderers,” which Lin developed nearly twenty years ago.

This dance piece was generated at a turning point for Lin, in 1994, after Cloud Gate Dance Theatre had already been in existence two decades, since 1973.

“I was always eager and anxious and easily frustrated when I was young,” Lin said. But in 1994, he embarked on a journey to Bodhgaya, India, the site of Buddha’s enlightenment under a Bodhi tree.

Before that journey, Lin had already experienced two fast-paced careers. “I started as a writer,” Lin said. “My second book, ‘Cicada,’ a collection of fiction, was published with high acclaims when I was 22.”

But writing as a young adult led him back to dance, which he had previously found compelling since early childhood.

“I was inspired by ‘The Red Shoes,’ the famous British ballet film,” Lin said. “I saw it eleven times when I was five-and-a-half. I was very inspired and wanted to become a dancer.”

Yet those dreams were placed on hold until Lin pursued advanced studies in the U.S.

“It was during my studies at the Writers Workshop at University of Iowa that I took modern dance classes and started choreographing,” Lin said. “Since then, I have been writing with bodies in space.”

Soon after he returned to dance, Lin received both encouragement and a warning from his father. “Dancers are the greatest among all artists,” Lin quoted his father, “because they use their bodies as an instrument for expression.”

But when Lin decided to found his own dance company, his father cautioned that “dancing could be a beggar’s career.” Lin took this advice to heart. “I have since worked hard to make sure that my dancers are not deprived,” he said.

Cloud Gate has succeeded for four decades due to its outreach efforts and community support.

“Whenever we could, we gave free outdoor performances,” Lin said. “In the past 18 years, thanks to the generous support of Cathay Insurance Company, we gave such performances in four different cities and small towns every year.”

Lin reports that attendance has been strong.

“It attracts 50,000 to 60,000 people for each show, or 30,000 on rainy days,” he said. “Just to see tens of thousands of people have turned off their TV and come out to sit together is a great encouragement to us.”

But Lin wanted to expand Cloud Gate’s outreach further.

“In 1998, Cloud Gate Dance School was founded,” he said. “We cultivate students to be aware of and to make friends with their bodies.”

Then, the dance company stretched again.

“To further tour campuses and grass-roots communities, and to foster young choreographers in Taiwan, I founded Cloud Gate 2 in 1999,” Lin said.

That road has not always been easy.

“Like everybody, Cloud Gate had moments of exhaustion and desperation,” Lin said. “However, when looking around, in offices, on the platforms of classrooms, in farming fields and factories, on drivers’ seats of trains, buses, taxi or garbage trucks, at every corner of Taiwan every single person takes on his or her role with full devotion, no matter what challenges each one faces through time. Therefore, we dare not to despair, but to keep going.”

A significant component in what kept Lin going was his 1994 trip to India.

“Life and death is revealed in a very simple way by the Ganges,” Lin said. “In India, a bowl of rice is really a bowl of rice. A glass of water is a glass of water. They don’t have any kind of brand names.”

Initially, Lin found this frustrating.

“In the first week I was always upset when trains and airlines were delayed,” Lin said. “Then I told myself that the train and the plane would definitely come, no panicking. The experience made me slow down and appreciate every moment of life.”

This deceleration of life continued to stay with Lin. “I don’t look for the end result,” he said. “I keep working and treasure each minute of the process.”

That process has often proved a challenge, as the tension he felt between writing and dance lasted for decades as he built his dance company.

“Ironically, it took me more than twenty years to ‘erase’ words from my mind, until I realized that the most powerful quality of dance is ambiguity,” Lin said.

And now the situation is reversed: “I have since lost my ability to articulate with written words,” he said.

But Lin is satisfied with this outcome. During his 1994 trip to India, Lin found that he no longer needed words.

“I was overcome with joy and felt a quietude that I had never experienced,” he said.

Following these travels, Lin found his creative process to be very fluid.

“Back in Taipei, ‘Songs of the Wanderers’ just flew out by itself,” Lin explained. “I always think that it is not my work, but a gift from Buddha.”

Since then, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre has continued to perform “Songs of the Wanderers” for worldwide audiences. “Although almost twenty years has passed, the choreography remains the same,” Lin said.

“But the dancers’ Gong Fu (Kung fu) are getting better and better,” he explained. “Gong Fu has two meanings: skill and time. After the years, those from the original cast have become more powerful and thus more expressive. And the young dancers in the present cast make up for their lack of experience by spending more time in meditation.”

This enables “Songs of the Wanderers” to remain alive in the present moment, Lin said, “so we are able to keep the work fresh.”

These practices are all aimed at Lin’s ultimate goal: “I hope to share with the audience the serenity I brought back from Bodhgaya.

Cloud Gate Dance Theatre’s “Songs of the Wanderers” will be performed on March 6 to 8 at 8:00 p.m. at the Meany Hall for the Performing Arts, University of Washington, Seattle.