

Spectrum Dance

In a new dance performance at Spectrum Dance Theater, producers delve deep into the meaning of America's relationship to China.

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Dance can often astonish us with technique, energy, and aesthetics. Now, Spectrum Dance Theatre's new piece also offers us a meditation on national relations of both personal and political kinds.

In "Farewell: A Fantastical Contemplation on America's Relationship with China," Spectrum Dance Theatre's Artistic Director Donald Byrd has teamed up with composer Byron Au Yong to explore Chinese American heritage.

"Farewell" was created as part of Spectrum's three-year initiative, "Beyond Dance: Promoting Awareness and Mutual Understanding" (PAMU). Through PAMU, Byrd aims to collaborate nationally and internationally to create dance theater pieces that examine issues relating to personal liberty, freedom, security, and social justice.

After meeting Au Yong in 2008, and learning that the composer felt his "relationship to China and my Chinese heritage was confusing and chaotic," Byrd suggested that the "Farewell" dance premiere might feature original music created by Au Yong.

Au Yong brings more than music to this new work, confronting his own questions of freedom and justice. "I have learned that history is full of mistakes and that the media thrives on reporting about injustice," he says. "My question is, does journalism build a more ethical society? I am suspicious of a veiled subjectivity masquerading as objectivity."

In "Farewell," those explorations are never simple. "The Cultural Revolution ballet quotes cause a visceral reaction of horror and pride in me," Au Yong says.

Since their initial conversation in 2008, the Byrd-Au Yong collaboration has developed in multiple ways. Au Yong has participated in Spectrum's standard Open Rehearsal process, which for "Farewell" was held on February 2.

"We always try to schedule open rehearsals as part of our activities around the development of a new project," says Anne Derieux, Spectrum Dance Theatre's Executive Director. "It is a tool for us to invite people to find out more about the process involved in creating a new piece."

Although the audience was seated onstage with the artists during the Open Rehearsal, audience participation is not typically a part of Spectrum's collaborative process. In Au Yong's view, an Open Rehearsal is like any other rehearsal. Learning from the audience "is not the point," he says. "It's about creating work."

The Open Rehearsal process was filmed, and video clips were posted on Spectrum's website, for viewing by the public. This also helps "to invite people in the creative process," says Derieux.

In addition, Byrd and Au Yong gave a joint talk at the Columbia City Gallery on February 5 about the making of "Farewell," and Au Yong has curated a companion "Farewell" visual art exhibit which will run at that gallery until March 7.

The exhibition features objects of memory and travel created by eight visual artists, highlighting personal moments of leave-taking and public issues of Asian transnational migration, and will feature a panel discussion by these artists on February 25 at 6:30 p.m. on-site at the Columbia City Gallery.

Spectrum Dance Theatre also has further plans for "Farewell" following its closing performance on February 20.

"We have a representative agent who promotes all Spectrum performances to presenters throughout this country as well as Europe," says Derieux. "'Farewell' will be included in what Donald [Byrd] refers to as Spectrum's 'Glocal Quintet'" of evening-length works that Byrd expects to complete in 2011.

Before any touring, though, Au Yong expects his audience at the Moore Theatre to view the "Farewell" dance performance kinetically, despite his primary work as a composer of music and sound.

"Art is neither visual nor aural, it is felt," he says. "If you are uptight, go get a massage. If you are relaxed, prepare to discover."

"Farewell: A Fantastical Contemplation on America's Relationship with China" runs February 18-20 at the Moore Theatre, 1932 Second Avenue, Seattle.