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REVIEW

ballet.*magazine**Hong Kong Dance Company**'Princess Changping'**March 2009**Hong Kong, Cultural Centre**by Natasha Rogai*

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A version of this review previously appeared in the South China Morning Post.

At first glance it looks straightforward. A Chinese dance version of the classic Cantonese opera *Princess Changping*, the story of the last Ming emperor's ill-fated daughter, culminating in her committing suicide with her lover. Cue for the colourful period costumes, lavish crowd scenes and romantic duets Hong Kong Dance Company has traditionally staged. This time, however, the troupe has defied expectations by placing the production in the hands of director Tang Shu-wing and choreographer Xing Liang, both known for their iconoclastic approach.

The result is a bold, intriguing de-construction of the opera. Conventional narrative is abandoned in favour of an eclectic succession of key scenes which break off at unexpected points, punctuated by entertaining passages of dialogue in voiceover between Tang and Xing. Changping and her beloved Zhou Shixian are portrayed by multiple dancers, sometimes simultaneously. Ancient and modern are cleverly juxtaposed - costumes mix the 17th century with the 21st, choreography blends Chinese dance with contemporary.

As experimental theatre, the production works well. Outstanding moments include the powerful tableau for the scene entitled Begging for the Princess's Corpse and effective use of slow motion movement. There are welcome touches of humour and irreverent exploration of how productions are created. Tsang Man-tung's designs and Yeung Tsz-yan's lighting create a strong visual framework.

The dance side is less satisfying. Xing has produced some interesting combinations of contemporary and Chinese dance elements as well as some striking images reminiscent of Indian dance, notably in the opening sequence. He



usually works with a much smaller group of dancers at his home company CCDC and has used the larger number available here to good effect. The piece is performed to a high standard - HKDC has fine dancers and they have responded well to working outside their usual style. However, the choreography fails to develop – it lacks contrast and becomes repetitive. Curiously, in what is known as a great love story, all the duets seem to be violent in nature and there is no sense of the passion between the lovers. Ironically, one of the most effective scenes was the only one done in conventional operatic style, Welcome the Princess.

Princess Changping raises interesting questions about the value of deconstructing a work as opposed to interpreting it. Ultimately it engages the intellect rather than the emotions and requires familiarity with the original work to be fully appreciated. However, it is a rewarding experience and HKDC are to be congratulated on taking the risk to stage such a daring piece.



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