

# Quest for a breakthrough in contemporary Asian dance

By **PARVATHI NAYAR**  
and **JURENA CHAN**

WITH the world premiere of *Quest* on June 1, the Singapore Arts Festival 2006 is now officially underway. The ambitious work is a collaborative effort between two premier Singapore arts groups — the Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO). The programme itself was a triple bill with works by three choreographers from China, Korea and Singapore. As the title suggests, the sense of a search or journey or exploration is a link element running through the works.

The evening opened with Chinese choreographer Gao Yan Jin Zi's *INTO (Jing Hua Shui Yue)* set to Chan Ying Han's *Illusions*. The dance examined the idea of man's life-cycle on earth based on the five elements of gold, wood, water, fire and earth — it was also controlled by the four Chinese characters making up the title that stand for mirror, flower, water and moon.

Some of these appeared in quite literal ways. Gao used large oval mirror frames as props, for example; the concept was then extended to the dance through motifs such as the mirror-image or synchronised movements that mirror each other. As for the music, the piano and the timpani's dialogue echoed each other through the repeated staccato motifs in the first and fourth movements — which also worked as a reflection of Gao's mirror image idea. Incidentally, the sound of the prepared piano blended well with the sound of the Chinese orchestra.

Visually the piece was a treat; the dancers clothed in vivid red and black gauzes created tableaux that linger in the mind. However, there were too many ideas crammed into the one piece, with not enough space-time given to extend and explore these images. As dance researcher Stephanie Burrige says, the piece was "bogged down by its symbolic narrative".

In complete contrast to the subtle flows of *INTO* was Korean Kim Eun Hee's *The Path, The Illusion*, choreographed to Tan Dun's *Fire Ritual*. It was the most coherent of the three works, following through with one principal idea: reflecting human will through breath and movement.

The dance was energetic with liberal use of the abrupt rhythmic gestures repeated



gesture, repeated in several iterations. However, perhaps intentionally, the strong individual passages did create a slightly disjointed narrative overall.

The rousing entry of the full orchestra into this dance segment was satisfying. The piece complemented Kim's signature style, being ener-



**Challenging:** *Quest* presents the unique idea by pairing a Chinese orchestra with a contemporary dance company

getic and vigorous. An interesting music effect was created with vocal chants interspersed with rhythms from the orchestra and the percussion. Particularly successful was the *huqin* solo by SCO's concert master Li Bao Shun; fire and passion aside, there were also the quieter moments in it. The solo explored the extremes of the *huqin* — wistful and poignant at times, intensely passionate at others — and left us wanting more.

The evening ended with Singaporean Jeffrey Tan's piece titled *F.U.S.E.*, choreographed to Tang Jian Ping's *Hou Tu*. The work looked at the intimacy between man and nature and had a disconcertingly tribal feel to it, with the chanting, smoke and lights, and the forms assumed by the dancers that were suggestive of rituals. The music, which incorporated recordings of four minority ethnic groups from south-west China, added a traditional touch. Though *Hou Tu* did have its captivating moments with the rhythmic beats of the *xiao luo* — and the urgent pentatonic melodies — the piece did not seem to quite fit in with the choreography, with concepts from the dance sometimes seemingly divergent from the music ideas.

It was an interesting idea to use Chua Ek Kay's calligraphic works as a background; however, some of the devices seemed overused in SDT numbers — especially the falling sand/water from the ceiling onto the stage. Still, the dancers were given opportunities to explore more rhythmic dance passages in this work. Essentially, the triple bill did place enormous technical challenges on the SDT as a repertory company of dancers being asked to respond to three very different choreography styles — and kudos to the dancers for being able to respond.

The three choreographers picked the music of their choice from a list given by SCO music director Tsung Yeh. That the pieces were not written for dance — lots of silent passages in them, for example — was a challenge not fully explored. There was a feeling that the music, in some passages, was too controlling of the dance — rather than the dance “interpreting” the music. As for SCO, they displayed a lovely sense of musicality, with clean technique and control of the music. Being situated in the pit helped the orchestra — the mystical soundscape was enhanced with the musicians not being visually present.

Overall, the diversity of Asia was well reflected; both Korean and Chinese segments referred back to the traditional dance forms and imagery of the respective countries through the movements and costumes.

To pair a Chinese orchestra with a contemporary dance company was a unique idea. As an experience of Asian contemporary dance, it was pretty challenging for the audience, who could never quite get into the flow and had to change focus with each piece; perhaps as a result, one didn't get a real sense of connection between viewer and viewed. However, as a collaborative exploration, the piece was of real interest, offering an opportunity to see how different rhythms of Asian creativity can be woven together.

---

*Quest*, Esplanade Theatre, June 1 to 3. Tickets from \$15 to \$80 available at Sistic outlets (tel: 6348-5555 or go to [www.sistic.com.sg](http://www.sistic.com.sg))