

er touch made Madge's malevolence shocking.

*Bournonville Divertissements*, Stanley Williams' 1977 highlight reel of Danish classicism, began each *Sylphide* program, giving the SPAC audience a primer in the style. Devin Alberda's opening entrechats, feet shooting like arrows toward the floor, arms calmly curled by his sides, immediately trumpet this is something really different. Intelligently, Martins wanted NYCB's adaptation of Bournonville style to look expressive on the company, not like a straitjacket, so in *La Sylphide* he occasionally relaxes some of the technique's more stringent demands, allowing the men to bend their knees, for example, in preparation for jumps. Still, NYCB executes the Bournonville signatures beautifully, and the full-frontal jetés, with their modest low port de bras, create illusions of Hyltin floating and De Luz soaring, embracing the air rather than rocketing through it.

Susan Tammany's multicolored act 2 Art Nouveau forest bursts with shimmery hints of Klimt, and its trees' organic Mucha curlicues echo the tendrils escaping from the Sylph's pinned-up hair. Tammany's splendid costumes, even James's odd purple tartan, enhance the dancing; her delicate white sylphs' outfits, with their touchingly absurd

gossamer waist-wings, suggest the airy eroticism of Fuseli.

Before one Saratoga performance, corps member Faye Arthurs, welcoming the audience, wittily commented that NYCB, famous for its daring and innovation, was therefore proud to present a work dating from 1836. *Sylphide* triumphed in just about every way while simultaneously inspiring debate about whether it's really what NYCB should be doing. Yet Balanchine admired Bournonville intensely, and if *Sylphide* enables astonishing performances like Hyltin's, that can't be a bad thing.

## Brooklyn

Karen Greenspan

Consider that in much of the world, breakfast, lunch, and dinner consist of the same dietary ingredients. According to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization, rice is the staple food of more than half of the world's population and Asia produces and consumes 90 percent of the world's supply. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Lin Hwai-min – founder, director, and choreographer of Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan – chose to treat this elemental source of sustenance in his choreographic work *Rice* presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival. This simple grain, so deeply rooted in Asian life, has served as muse in Lin's previous works *Legacy* and *Songs of the Wanderers*. However, with *Rice*, he has given "Grace" for his culture's nourishment.

Set against the massive stage backdrop in BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, on which Howell Hao-jan Chang's sumptuous videography of rice fields of the Chihshang region of Taiwan was projected, the seventy-minute dance was comprised of eight segments expressing the seasons and cycle of paddy agriculture. The poignant opening – a single, shirtless male dancer crossing the stage shaking his horizontally held, gently curved, long, rattan stick while the other arm maintained an arc behind him



Photo: Jack Varrogin, BAM

Huang Pei-hua and Tsai Ming-yuan in *Rice*.

with his hand at his hip as if holding a bag or basket of seed – set up with elegant simplicity the implicit drama between farmer and nature.

In the section called “Soil,” images of solid earth before planting and flooding were projected. Costumed in classic, sleeveless, A-line dresses in multiple colors from nature’s palette and designed and executed by Ann Yu Chien and Li-Ting Huang, the female members of the troupe entered and sank into a wide squat. They lifted both heels off the floor as their bodies seemed to accumulate more mass, and then pounded those heels into the floor. These slight women moved about the stage and repeated this sequence with the density of impenetrable clods of earth. The hollow, rhythmic thud of their heels performing percussion to the recording of timeless farmers’ work songs in the Hakka Chinese dialect amplified a sense of the daunting labor required to plough and break up the unyielding earth in preparation for planting.

The men’s high energy “Wind” section was an eye-ful of vaulting, suspension, juggling, toss and catch, combat, and male/female partnering – all in play with the long rattan canes. The section closed with the final image of several dancers standing still while slowly twirling the poles, calling to mind spare windmills dotting a rural landscape.

The centerpiece of poetic beauty was the exquisite coupling duet called “Pollen II,” performed with an unemotional, purely sensual abandon by Huang Pei-hua and Tsai Ming-yuan. The audience’s silence was palpable as the sexual electricity mounted with the parallel hovering of one body part over another until the dancers succumbed to contact in a complete physical union. The energy of the connection, accompanied by sublime strains of Camille Saint-Saens’ *Le Rossignol et la Rose*, evoked sheer ecstasy in this danced pollination. Video of luscious, verdant sheaves undulating in pulsing waves danced on the screen behind, as well as on the stage below – creating an orgasmic bliss of movement.

Later, in “Fire,” the rattan sticks audibly

defined nature’s drama as they were slapped against the floor, creating the sound of flames igniting in the forced burning of the remnants of the field. The tension built with insistent drumming and the men’s powerful display of acrobatic leaps and man-to-man combat with poles. At times the dancers walked about spinning the poles like water-filled hoses. The projected, smoking, blackened fields concluded the scene of utter devastation.

In *Rice*, Lin has pioneered a new relationship between dance and video – and it is never predictable. The video footage provides an environment of textures and gradations of movement and stillness onstage that the choreography complements, contrasts with, echoes, or amplifies in a sensitive and powerful interplay. The overall effect is a total movement immersion.

In the Eastern view, all things circle to begin anew – to enact the cycle of life. And so the paddy was again flooded with water. A dancer who had been hammered to the ground like a burnt stump managed to pull herself erect holding her rattan stick that she vibrated. Her face opened into a bright smile as the original Hakka folk tune piped up, prodding man and nature back to life.

As a hallmark part of their training, the Cloud Gate dancers practice their birthright – Chinese internal martial arts – millenia-old Taoist techniques of breathing – while performing natural circular movements, standing posture meditation, and martial movement sequences that use the entire body as a complete unit to generate power.

During the master class offered at the Mark Morris Dance Center, veteran dancer Yeh Yiping led examples of all of these practices followed by phrases from the company’s repertory, demonstrating how the training shapes their vocabulary and approach to moving. Initiating and sustaining the standing postures for five minutes, the class was instructed to relax and breathe into the poses while assuming a meditative internal focus. When the company members practice these postures, they hold them for a full ten minutes. Center

work included punching drills that emphasized initiating the punch from the pelvis and travelling kicking exercises that focused on rooting the standing leg into the floor.

Most of the dancers began training in Tai Chi and Qigong only after joining the company. As youngsters, many of them trained in Chinese opera movement, which explains the thrilling, men's, prop-oriented acrobatics as well as travelling sections defined by circular floor patterns traversed in small, metered steps.

Cloud Gate also incorporates ballet and modern dance into its training regime and these Western influences are clearly visible. It is, however, their specific training in the Chinese internal martial arts (developed as a spiritual philosophy, traditional Chinese medicine, and a method of deflecting an opponent) that informs their distinctive ability to texturize movement with contrasting qualities: flowing malleability/impenetrable solidity, aerial elfin lightness/sinking groundedness, yielding softness/crisp attack.

In 1973, Lin Hwai-min formed the first contemporary dance company in Taiwan and the greater Chinese-speaking community. Educated as a writer, he had returned to Taiwan after completing his degree at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and studying dance during summers at the Martha Graham School in New York. Lin named the company "Cloud Gate" for the oldest known dance in China. Over forty years later, the company sustains a rigorous touring schedule abroad, yet also travels and performs for rural communities throughout the Taiwan countryside, where there is little exposure to contemporary, non-traditional performing arts.

With *Rice*, as with much of Lin's celebrated body of work, Cloud Gate embodies another meaning of its symbolic name – a passageway to other worlds.

## New York

Harris Green

Justin Peck, New York City Ballet's resident choreographer, was being slyly cheeky when

he chose *New Blood* as the title for his contribution to the fall season's gala premiere of four works. Of course the creators of the other ballets, which would eventually be performed together on the same program augmented by a fifth novelty, could have claimed that proud title for their work. Peck, however, had earned it.

None of the other four choreographers began with so glum a stage picture. The curtain opened on thirteen dancers, a mix of corps, soloists, and principals, standing one by one in a line that stretched upstage. At the first note of Steve Reich's hypernervous *Variations for Vibes, Piano and Strings*, the dancers broke free, like pearls in a necklace that has snapped its string, to go merrily bouncing all over the stage and into the wings. They returned, but in pairs, to have the stage to themselves for a while until a third dancer cut in and sent one of them off, a routine religiously followed until every dancer had performed it. Costumes by Humberto Leon of Opening Ceremony and Kenzo were suitably sleek and functional.

Not surprisingly, Peck also altered the way performers were listed in the *Playbill*. After all, he had insisted that the title of his *Rōdē,ō* be printed like a dictionary pronunciation aid to guarantee no one would confuse his ballet with Agnes de Mille's. Printing the principals first and their names in larger type would not do for *New Blood*. No, everyone was listed "In Order of Progression." Principals Ashley Boudier and Adrian Danchig-Waring brought up the rear. Andrew Veyette was among Megan Mann and Georgina Pazcoguin, but after Brittany Pollack, Lauren King, and Taylor Stanley. Corps members Peter Walker, David Protas, and Claire Kretzschmar preceded all the principals.

Although Reich's music regularly sounded like it had been dropped on its way to the orchestra pit and reassembled in haste, Peck never settled for mere busy-ness just to give everyone something – *anything* – to do. He skillfully alternated demanding bursts of energy with a blissful scooting across the stage on the soles of one's feet. A dancer, seemingly prone for