

CULTUREBOT

arts + culture + ideas

Talking with Muna Tseng About “Stella” at Danspace Project

20 April 2011 by Jane Jung



I had the pleasure of visiting Muna Tseng’s apartment on a beautiful spring afternoon last week to have a conversation with her about Stella, her upcoming installation and performance at Danspace Project (May 5-7; tickets \$18). Tseng, a Bessie Award winning choreographer, is known for works such as SlutForArt, Water Trilogy, The Silver River, and The Pink.

Stella is a memory piece about Tseng’s late mother, incorporating an extensive collection of vintage tailor made dresses and personal belongings from 1960’s Hong Kong. The collection of dresses and artifacts, which Tseng inherited from her mother, is exquisitely preserved. Tseng showed me a sampling of Stella’s dresses, which were hanging on a rack in her bedroom, set aside to be displayed as part of an installation and interacted with during the performance. Silk cheongsams with striking blue chrysanthemum patterns, white fur collars, wool suits, elegant black velvet coats with embroidery were all evocative of the larger than life golden girl Tseng described her mother to be. We took in details that reflected the time period of the dresses such as the subtle differences in zippers or a label with the hand sewn address of the family tailor in Hong Kong. In a cabinet across the room were stacks of porcelain plates and tea cups, artifacts which will also be used in the piece, recreating a scene where Stella hosts a Chinese dinner party. The piece covers the four major chapters of Stella’s life in a non linear way. Stella was born in Shanghai where she grew up privileged and highly educated. Her family abruptly moved to Hong Kong in 1949, fleeing the communist revolution, where she became a young mother, teacher, and gracious hostess. When her family immigrated to Vancouver in the 1960’s her life was decidedly less glamorous and she spent the final chapter of her life in a rest home in Toronto, Canada.

The cast of Stella consists of four dancers, yourself (Muna Tseng), David Thomson, Rebecca Warner, and Isadora Wolfe. What role do the dancers play in this piece?

We are all Stellas. I wanted to take the dresses as a departure. I could see her body in the dresses. The dancers try to channel Stella through the dresses. There are sections where I'm directing the dancers to be Cindy Shermans. They're putting on wigs, dresses, makeup, pearls from a foreign land. There's one section like a Vanessa Beecroft installation where they interact and mix with mannequins wearing the dresses. These live and object Stellas produce a tension between stillness, movement, truth, fiction, persona, authenticity.

In what ways is this tension cultural as well?

Isadora and Rebecca are white Americans; David is African American; and I am the fourth Stella. It was purely instinctual to cast that way. As a young dancer who came to New York, I was in the contemporary dance world studying with Graham, Cunningham. I existed in the white dance world so I thought I was white. This echoes back to my mother who was a Chinese woman growing up in Shanghai in the 1930's. There was always a western look in her upbringing and psyche. She left her two young children to get a Master's in Education through a fellowship at London University in the 1950's. It was pretty extraordinary for her to do that in a traditional Chinese family.

How does this come through in the movement?

I'm dealing with this east west bi-focus- embodied western bodies in Chinese dresses. What does it mean and how do we culturally move in a different way? You cannot extend your legs in the Chinese cheongsam. They are very sculptural and demure. They immediately make the dancers discover new vocabulary. The dance vocabulary is non-Asian except for the restriction that the dresses give them. I want all of the Asian elements in the piece to be in the authenticity of the artifacts and then for it to exist in a non Asian world. There is no Asian music. My mother played the western piano. I want the western/eastern elements to co-exist.

What are some challenges in navigating the dynamic between an imagined, iconic persona and the physical belongings and memories of your mother?

The casting of David is complex for me. It goes into dangerous territory. As you know from SlutForArt, I had a gay brother (the photographer Tseng Kwong Chi) who died from AIDS. He was quite a larger than life character like my mother. My mother would say things like, "you make me cough blood." and that's pretty camp. David's Stella role is camp. Her oldest son (in a Chinese family, the most important son), turned out to be gay and that brought up the disappointment that goes with not carrying on the family line. A woman who wears these beautiful dresses would have a big part of her life with a son who dressed up as a woman every Halloween. My role of performing Stella is the part where I can never be Stella. I can never fit into her dress. I can never fully be her.

I think it's important that you start with something close to you, but somehow get it past the personal into something universal. Cultural values can be shared. Through this story of a particular woman in a particular time and place, we are talking about loss, love, and mother/daughter relations in an open way.



Choreography, Text, Direction by Muna Tseng

Dramaturgy by Ong Keng Sen

Lighting Design by Thomas Dunn

Sound Design by David Lawson

Costume Design: Vintage 1960's Hong Kong & Bonnie Tchien Hy

Featuring: David Thomson, Muna Tseng, Rebecca Warner, Isadora Wolfe

May 5, 6, 7, 8 [Thurs-Sat] 8pm

Danspace Project

St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery

131 East 10th Street at 2nd Avenue