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## Dance Review: Margaret Jenkins Dancy Company Premieres *Other Suns*

Voice Of Dance Review: Margaret Jenkins Dance Company and Guangdong Modern Dance Company in Margaret Jenkins' *Other Suns* (A *Trilogy*)

September 25, 2009

By

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Margaret Jenkins Dance Company *Other Suns* .


Back in 2006, the Margaret Jenkins Dance Company and members of India's Tansuree Shankar Dance Company filled San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts with a maelstrom of directed movement that seemed to explore two dance cultures without exploiting either. Perhaps the most winning aspect of the project, *A Slipping Glimpse*, was its utter lack of self-consciousness; the sense of spontaneity as the work bubbled through the hall was extraordinary.

Now, Jenkins, the doyenne of Bay Area modern dance, has returned with another crosscultural project, this one with members of China's Guangdong Modern Dance Company, fashioned here and in Asia over the past couple of years. The occasion marks the Jenkins' company's 35th anniversary. Despite much luscious dancing from both troupes, *Other Suns* doesn't quite live up to the promise. The three-part piece, given its world premiere Thursday (Sept. 24) at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts' Novellus Theater, looked over-extended and over-calculated (though Jenkins goes to great pains to tell us that it was the dancers who supplied the movement material), while the choreographer's bewildering musical choices, older scores by Bun-Ching Lam and longtime Jenkins collaborator Paul Dresher, performed live and over-amplified throughout, occasionally threatened to sabotage the entire project.

*Other Suns* works like this. The first part features the eight members of MJDC (with Amy Foley subbing for Heidi Schweiker). The second section, choreographed by Liu Qi, highlights five members of the Guangdong company with guest artist Norma Fong. The finale assembles representatives from both companies. With one intermission, the work runs close to two hours. Alexander V. Nichols' appealing visual design, banks of lights and lamps, remains basically the same, while the costumes metamorphose from pewter to coppery hues.

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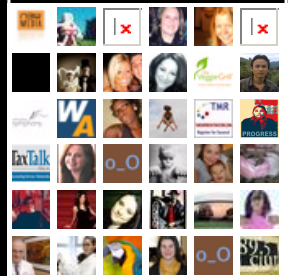
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
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Jenkins previewed the first section two years ago at Project Artaud; she has tightened this material since then, eliminating a water imagery motif that went nowhere. Yet, this still remains the most gripping section of the work. It opens with Foley nuzzling against Joseph Copley, as other dancers flank them in a straight line, and it ends with Copley breaking free of all constraints as he leaps and swats the lighting fixtures.

More important, the opening panel presents us with the material that will evolve throughout the rest of the piece. Dancers line up, swarm across the stage in unison, freeze in their tracks, arch their backs, lift each other, transport bodies like logs. Symmetries often prevail. Daisy chains proliferate. The edges are sharp; whiplash turns are prominent; hands are in constant motion and the gaze is fixed.

The Chinese dancers miss the Americans' ferocity, but they seem to conjure art from the sheer process of movement. They hug the floor with one shoulder and as they rise, the sequence looks like the flowering of a civilization. When a dancer attempts to penetrate a phalanx of her colleagues, she brings a calligraphic whimsy to the foray. Yet, despite the Chinese performers training in symmetrical structures, their instinct for lyrical attack provides a degree of tension. And they are gifted in the acrobatic crafts, too. Unfortunately, Jenkins' choice of music here, minimalist keyboard riffs, comes close to courting disaster. The sound score makes these gentle, humane dancers look almost robotic, artificially whipping up excitement in a way that the movement does not.

After the intermission, the two companies merge. Same-sex duets proliferate. Duets morph into trios. Lifts also seem to come in threes and those over-the-head carries acquire a totemic power. The mood seems almost Edenic. But the sequence runs 35 minutes, and Other Suns looks increasingly like the beautifully rendered working out of a thesis, rather than an organic creation. This is not to deny a handful of sterling individual contributions. Emily Hite allows herself to be hoisted and lugged with consummate elegance. Margaret Cromwell's gamine-like forays are always welcome. And Copley remains a charismatic presence and thrilling mover.

One should note that this weekend's performances are the first to assemble all the material in one theater at one time (a fall tour will follow). Other Suns needs additional editing. And it needs a rethinking of the music, especially in the second part, which drove one prominent composer from the hall Thursday. One does feel change will come; after 35 years of running a company, Jenkins, of all choreographers, know how fluid the dance experience must be.

Other Suns (A Trilogy) will be repeated Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Novellus Theater, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., San Francisco. 415.978.ARTS; www.ybca.org

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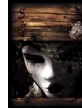
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