

Outstanding female dancer

Yen Han

Over a cup of tea

The conversation ebbs and flows; but this is no random chat, no colourful series of associations in the manner of a video clip. This is a conversation that develops freely, with a communicative clarity that is entirely natural and not “made”, that emerges spontaneously, from within.

When you talk to Yen Han, the impression she creates is remarkably similar to when she is on stage, dancing. As she sips her cup of tea, she doesn't play the artist or somehow “manufacture” the uniqueness of stage presence and expressive force. Which comes as no surprise, because she doesn't do it on the stage either. There too, she achieves her effect through limpid clarity of communication, never so much as hinting that it is somehow “artistically” created but always – for all its formal ambitions – seeming to emerge, perfectly naturally, from within.

From within: again and again, in various contexts, it becomes clear that the notion of “from within” is at the core of Yen Han's work as an artist: even, as she says, in her daily training, and at every rehearsal.

This “from within” has of course been the favoured mantra of all artists since the Renaissance, and nowhere more so than in dance. Over the last century, “I only dance what comes from within me” has become the modus operandi of almost everyone in the dance world who has an awareness of the times they live in. To a large extent, it has led to a mostly adamant rejection of any form that is externally prescribed, any choreography that came about independently of oneself. Primarily – and in some cases rigorously – its target has inevitably been classical ballet.

For Yen Han, then, this “from within” must mean something else. She is, after all, a classical dancer, a classical ballerina. And that's what she wants to be. As she herself stresses: “I'm a dancer. I'm not a choreographer.” But as a dancer, she adds, she dances forms that she did not create herself but which come from another “within” – that of the choreographer.

Indeed, as she is at pains to point out, she wants and needs clear formal rules. If someone asks her to produce some vaguely defined movement or other, in some unspecified way, she no longer feels comfortable; she'd prefer the movement to be danced by someone more suited to the style.

But if the form is so explicitly dictated from outside, where does the emphatic “it must come from within me” fit in? As we shall see, what is at work here is a process of internal transformation, of conversion.

Yen Han turns a form imposed from outside into an inner picture of her own. In this way the prescribed form is transformed into something that does indeed come from within her. And so Yen Han can be genuinely herself, drawing from within herself,

even when she is dancing “other people’s” forms. Through her own pictures, she has assimilated, transformed the external prescribed form into something of herself. Now she can dance the “other” form as something that comes from within her.

This process enables Yen Han to tackle a remarkably eclectic repertoire of roles; even scores that are not necessarily in her nature. Her ability to bring to life the gentle flow and formal magic of romantic ballet in its quintessential form – in Bournonville’s *La Sylphide* or the *Genzano pas-de-deux* – was only to be expected; yet with the earthy expressive dynamism which she brought to the role of the Chosen One in Spoerli’s sublimely unconventional *Rite of Spring*, she revealed facets of her inner visual power that almost no-one had thought to see from her.

The ability to develop such inner pictures for entirely different choreographic forms is an essential element in this kind of dance. But there is another: training the body, what Yen Han calls the “instrument” – an instrument that is ever more subtly and more perfectly tuned. Thus the body becomes increasingly capable of creating a danced shape that matches a wide variety of internalised formal images as precisely as possible: a shape that becomes an expression communicating itself directly.

Endless, intense training is, for Yen Han, a natural prerequisite for her profession. The goal is to achieve dancing of supreme quality in terms of both form and expression, the two being combined into a single entity when executed in practice, even during her training.

She objects to the term “disciplined”, fearing that it implies she “drills” herself and her body; and indeed, classical training is widely regarded as drill, pure and simple. For her, “disciplined” training is not an arid repetition of forms; nor is it driven by personal ambition, but rather by a desire to convert the “forms” into personal expression in ever more nuanced ways.

This has the ring of truth about it: in discussion, she sidesteps any topic which touches purely upon herself: there is no reference to the family that she so evidently possesses, and but a cursory mention of the school that she and her husband own and run. Facts about her own career – her training, commissions and roles – are addressed only in response to an explicit question; yet even then, the topic proves unproductive, the discussion ended almost before it has begun, with the words: “I’ll have to check and get back to you.”

With her ability to create inner pictures, Yen Han does not have to bide her time until specific forms come along. She has no “dream roles” or “favourites”. Certainly there are entirely predictable expectations: she would, for instance, love to dance Balanchine’s *Tchaikovsky Pas-de-Deux*. But she is not waiting for the right opportunity. Nor is there any nostalgia for past roles or longing for scores that she craves.

Instead there is an openness, a readiness for new forms that cross her path; she expects to translate other forms into pictures of her own. Perhaps that fundamental approach explains why, as Yen Han works out a role, she feels little pressure from outside – few fears that people might consider her performance inadequate.

For all that, her preparations come with their own baggage. The pressure is not external but self-imposed, as a series of questions: will she succeed in translating her pictures, is she up to the task, can she do justice to her own conception? At the same time, Yen Han is careful to avoid raising expectations so high that she sets herself up for failure.

For Yen Han, her work is a constantly renewed process of testing her own limits and capacities. It is largely an exercise in engaging with her own self. But it is more than that. The outcome is, after all, a “public” happening; and it is in that public happening that criteria from outside come into play. Yen Han undoubtedly acknowledges such criticism and takes it seriously. But she does not allow it to dictate to her.

Her being as a dancer is defined by the pictures and conceptions within her, and by their outward manifestation. It is an unceasing, flowing process, both on the stage and in conversation. A conversation that, in our case, revolved exclusively around ever-changing aspects of dance, but also around questions of dance tradition, of “dance consciousness”, on both sides of the curtain. And it would in all likelihood have continued on its way, fascinatingly free-ranging, if a glance at the clock hadn’t prompted her to say: “I have to go to my school.”

The teacups were still there, almost untouched and half full.

Interview conducted by Richard Merz