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writers on dancing

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Island, Mainland, Mother Courage

Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Company

Dance Place

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by George Jackson

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The figures in Dana Tai Soon Burgess' new "Island" are packed into a tight place. Around them, above them and beneath them there is light, air or earth. Everything moves, but whereas the elements pulse with ceaseless time, it is only the human forms that configure the space, splitting and reshaping it as individual feelings fluctuate. These are people, not statistics or stereotypes, no matter how shared their fate. Burgess sets himself a challenge of scale in this richly different opus on his favorite theme of alienation and accommodation.

Eight dancers in the cast of 9 are divided into an equal number of red clad "Immigrants" and black clad "Guards". Yet there are not just these two types: as the work unscrolls, there is constant interplay between the epic dimension of the history explored and brush strokes of movement that seem like the characters' personal signatures. Those that are Guards also function as guardians, sometimes like the dancing and miming puppet-masters of classical Far Eastern theater, and not just as jailers. Those that are Immigrants aren't only people who have tried to move from one land to another but beings anywhere, born to live life to its fullest. Burgess' starting point is Angel Island, where Chinese trying to enter America in the 1890s were detained. But he also seems to see all of China as an entrapping island. The poses of the 8 figures allude at times to imperial calligraphy as practiced at the court of The Last Empress, their motion is sometimes akin to that in the communist ballets of Mme. Mao. Theatrically, the production suggests, but doesn't literally imitate, Chinese opera's elaborate formality. Dramatically, too, "Island" resonates with the alternation of sophistication and simplicity that is a hallmark of classic Peking stagefare. For all the nuance in the action's dance and stance content, there also are plain, bold strokes - particularly when people die.

The 9th figure in "Island" is Motherland China. She is Mother in the universal sense, yet part of her character encompasses The Last Empress, Mme. Mao and Brecht's Mother Courage. Much of the time she hovers at the perimeter of the action, becoming directly involved at moments of climax. I'm not sure that all the layers of this dance piece are final, or how it will look in other theaters. At Dance Place it was clearly designed for the audience to be looking down. The musical score is an intriguing quilt, but there seemed to me no set relationship between the movement and any given composition. That happened even more in the program's other work, Burgess's "Hyphen". The main sound score for it, by Ryuichi Sakomoto, sometimes even squelched the choreography's dynamic. Still, it

was interesting to see how "Hyphen" compacted from the wide Lisner stage where it had premiered in 2008 to the more boxy dimensions of Dance Place.

There's not much turnover in Burgess' company, which makes for performances with a fine blend of individuality and ensemble. Connie Lin Fink, Miyako Nitadori, Ricardo Alvarez and Shu-Chen Cuff (as the Mother figure) had prominent roles in "Island". Collaborators for this work's "multimedia" were Sara Brown (visuals), Laura McDonald (sound), Ben Levine (lights), and Judy Hansen (costumes). Anne Sidney was Burgess's rehearsal director.

Dana Tai Soon Burgess's "Island" with Ricardo Alvarez and Miyako Nitadori. Photo by Mary Noble Ours.

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