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*Dance***'Island' of Identity**

*Dana Tai Soon Burgess In Step With America's Cultural Collage*

**by Christine Cubé**

When dancer Dana Tai Soon Burgess choreographs a new composition, he usually doesn't look very far for inspiration. He goes directly to his roots.

A Korean-American, Burgess was raised by two visual artists in New Mexico, speaking English and Spanish. It's this diverse cultural foundation that has inspired much of his artwork as he uses movement to explore issues of identity, loss and simply how to feel at home in one's own community.

"Growing up, I saw a lot of misunderstanding happen, and a recurring theme to me is how to be understood and welcomed by a community, especially now when there are such diverse communities living amongst each other," Burgess said. "Dance is a big form of communication. People can speak different languages but still understand the same performance. It's not like theater, where you're going to language-wise miss things."

Referred to by the Washington Post as "the area's leading dance artist, consistently following his own path and producing distinctive, well-considered works," Burgess has kept Washington audiences on their toes with his cross-cultural creations (also see "[Dana's Dancing Ambassadors](#)" in the October 2007 issue of The Washington Diplomat).

He recently was named chair of George Washington University's Department of Theatre and Dance, becoming the first dancer in 16 years to hold the position. In September, Burgess was also named the State Department's "alumni member of the month," having participated over the years in Fulbright cultural exchange programs to Peru, Panama, Egypt, Israel, the West Bank, India and Mexico, in addition to teaching his dance techniques in South Korea, Venezuela, Russia and various other nations.

And this month, Burgess and his modern dance troupe, Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Co., will perform the world premiere of "Island" at Washington's Dance Place.

With more than 15 years of touring experience, Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Co. has earned recognition for its signature style, a fusion of Eastern and Western traditions with elements of ballet, martial arts and visual arts that together produces a spare yet powerful contemporary dance form.

“Island” also continues Burgess’s ongoing examination of identity, cultural acceptance, and relationships among Americans of various backgrounds and ethnicities. It took six months to develop, from the choreography and musical score to costumes and the video projection environment.

The title of the piece refers to the Angel Island immigration station near San Francisco, which was the primary entry point — and detention center — for Asians coming into the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. Burgess said he’s been fascinated for a long time with what was considered the “Ellis Island of the West.”

Beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, a series of laws prohibited the immigration of Asians belonging to certain nationalities and social classes. Although all Asians were affected, the greatest impact was on the Chinese.

“I’m very interested in utilizing certain historic moments as a jumping-off point,” Burgess explained. “The piece is designed around transitions — emotional and physical. It’s that in-between point where you don’t have a place to go back to and you don’t have a clear place to get to. I perceive Angel Island as an emotional holding tank.”

To help his audience visualize this “Island” of immigration, Burgess collaborated with Sara Brown, director of theater design at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, to create a landscape that includes archival footage, graffiti poetry as well as video of the ocean that many immigrants crossed to get to America — images that will be projected onto the floor beneath the dancers.

“The projected images along with the intimate setting in which the audience encircles the performers is intended to evoke the feeling immigrants had of being trapped between their culture and the new one they were anticipating in America,” Burgess noted.

Following its D.C. debut, the dance company will take “Island” on national and international tours through 2011. The program also includes a dance that premiered last year, “Hyphen,” which looks at the experience of being a hyphenated multi-ethnic American. The 10 Dana Tai Soon Burgess & Co. dancers themselves were raised and trained all over the world — from Ohio to Geneva to Taiwan to Ecuador — a reflection of Burgess’s own deep-rooted commitment to cultural diversity and how it affects what he calls the “evolving American landscape and its relationship to the racial and cultural differences that connect and divide us.”

*Christine Cubé is a freelance writer in Alexandria, Va.*

**Island**

Oct. 9 to 11

**Dance Place**

3225 8th St., NE

Tickets are \$22.

*For more information, please call (202) 269-1600 or visit*

[www.danceplace.org](http://www.danceplace.org) or [www.dtsbco.com](http://www.dtsbco.com).

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