

Online Review of Transmission of the Invisible

Swimming to Cambodia

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Last night we travelled through a blizzard to Cambodia. Made our way down to the lake along streets cushioned with snow—the city caked in kabuki whiteface, a winter thunderstorm lighting up the sky—to watch metaphysics in the flesh.

On an evening of snow cancellations, it was inspiring to see a full house show up for the premiere of *Transmission of the Invisible*, a multi-media dance work staged and choreographed by the multi-talented Peter Chin as part of Harbourfront's WorldStage program. The show, which runs Feb. 6-9, is a Canada/Cambodia collaboration featuring three dancers from Toronto (Andrea Nann, Heidi Strauss, Louis Laberg-Cote) and two from Cambodia (Phon Sopheap, Yim Savann). Chin and the Toronto dancers travelled to Cambodia on a Canada Council Grant to develop the piece, which explores the urgency and essence of Cambodian culture and in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide. But it's not any kind of literal narrative. It's more like ritual meltdown of tradition and modernity, intent on erasing the scar-line between past and present, horror and beauty, nature and civilization. It summons ghosts through cracked pavement..

Transmission of the Invisible is an exceptionally abstract work, thus hard to describe. It begins with a jungle frieze of movement as dancers conjure nature with precisely synchronized patterns: limbs and wind and grass. A real-time jungle soundscape recorded in Cambodia transports us to another place, puts us in a room of wilderness. Through an escalation of rhythm, the dancers swim through tribal currents into churning distress, through an angular maze of cutting and threshing. The forest spaces give way to hard city surfaces and buried emotions. As we watch the dancers onstage, a video projection shows them performing trance-like on a Cambodian sidewalk, captured by a long lens, as magnified traffic slides to and fro in the foreground.

We enter a fractious Babel of trapped and alien energy, hands oscillating in a blur like whirring antennae. Staccato vocalizations emerge from the underworld of rhythm, and eventually erupt into spoken word—one regrettable element of the performance, as it shatters the spell with the cold, prosaic light of language. Wonderful dancers cannot be expected to be equally adept on the verbal plane. They create a myriad of compelling characters through movement and gesture alone. Andrea Nann, in particular, undergoes a shape-shifting, shamanistic transformation that's mysterious, scary and electrifying.

Even though the piece doesn't fully coalesce in the final act, it's exquisitely staged and performed. Cylla von Tiedemann's video projections—waveforms of water, fish and traffic—are mesmerizing. And the music and sound design (by Peter Chin and Garnet Willis) compliment the visuals with spare, dimensional worlds of acoustic space.



Transmission of the Invisible lives up to its ambitious title by taking us on a descent into the collective unconscious, as if trying to divine the cure for cultural amnesia. The ancestral spirits come and go, and there are intimations of murder and sex, anger and sadness, amnesia and loss. But everything is suggested, nothing is explicit. I kept feeling I'd lost the plot, then realizing there wasn't one. After a while, I couldn't tell what was genocide from what was not, or what came before from what remained. Fluid movement was forever dissolving the line, until the dead and living flowed through one another like fish. Fish and traffic.