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By: Kate Dobbs Ariail

Corporeal Possibilities: US Premiere of China's TAO Dance Theater at ADF

The American Dance Festival presents many tried and proven companies each summer in Durham, but each year there are also performers working at the far edge of the known world of movement. The first of these this season is TAO Dance Theater, appearing in the US for the first time. Tao Ye and Duan Ni (who has attended ADF as a student, and performed as a member of Shen Wei's company between 2006 and 2008) danced their choreography, 2, on a white-covered stage in Reynolds Theater.



2 confounds and amazes. It is rare to be able to say, "I've never seen anything quite like it," and really mean it. As the piece opens, the two dancers in mottled greeny-grey unitards and draped, bifurcated skirts (by Li Min) lie splayed center stage, close together but not touching, grey-covered soles of feet facing the audience. In this position, their shaved heads are barely visible, and the only skin that shows is that of the hands, which assume great communicative and supportive significance as they slowly begin to move. The first motions are tiny, easily missed: a flutter of fingers, a slight ripple of back. No music accompanies or motivates the action that suddenly springs forth. An arm rapidly rises and crosses the back with a flapping sound. A body suddenly flops over, slapping the stage. The dancers roll and arc without rising.

Gradually they twist into sitting and crouching positions, via many crossing motions of legs and arms. Crossing and opening, crossing and opening, they roll, twist and writhe with the limberness of babies. A humming drrrrmmmming sound begins (the music is by Xiao He). One dancer launches an almost-cartwheel. Did the sound cause the cartwheel? From deep, wide-legged crouches, the dancers creep, lunge and invert to handstands — with legs bent like those of frogs.

They fall and flop through a series of actions that reverse their stage positions. They never look at each other or at the audience, but they move with synchronicity that indicates deep awareness of the other.

Out of the recurrent silence, a louder sound — and the bodies lie still. Duan Ni rises for the briefest instant, then Tao Ye, before both flip and fall back. A great buzzing arises; the dancers' hands close. They work around to the reverse of their first positions, now with heads out and feet vanishing upstage. In the silence, in their stillness,

we hear their breathing.

A sudden, brief chord pierces the air, then crackling noise. Unexpectedly, shockingly, the dancers look sharply to the corners of the stage, then at each other. Seeing them see each other, the viewer feels pierced by that gaze.

Gong, crackle, reverb. High beeping. The dancers take oppositional positions and begin a slow, crouching creep. This is the only part of the dance that looks at all familiar — it is reminiscent of Butoh, but not nearly as slow.

Noise. Music. An arm upflung to the vertical. Legs open 180 degrees, spread sideways to form a straight line, the torso rising perpendicular. Into the even light (by Wang Peng) with its minimal, soft shadows, rides a long series of galloping thumps and the dancers move faster, almost rising, rolling over their shoulders, opening and crossing. Metal crashes; they lie flat, knees up, again like frogs. Buzzing, and suddenly an arm crosses and flops against a back.

An ascending hum, and they creep toward each other as the light slowly, so slowly, dims and yellows. A descending hum; the light fades to yellowed grey; the dancers still writhe and shift. A dripping, tapping sound. The zone of dim light narrows. By now it is a lighter value of the costume color. Crash, fizz, crash, crash, hoo, hah, pop. Darkness.

Sound continues without light. When the white light returns, the dancers are gone, and the sound becomes remote. Then there is singing, a loud chanting that grows louder. The dancers return, walking, and stand still while the chanting continues. It ceases, and they remain, quiet, motionless, purely vertical. At last they bow, forming two straight ells, torsos parallel to the stage. They vanish, leaving an indelible memory.

TAO repeats this extraordinary exploration of spirit-freeing corporeality on 6/21 and 6/22. See sidebar for details. If you attend, you may like to hold onto the magic by leaving before the house lights come up, otherwise the spell will be promptly broken by a person chatting you up about the ADF scholarship fund and asking you for money. This would be far better done before the performance.