March 2011   Volume 20  Number 8  SAN FRANCISCO
   Featuring the Most Comprehensive Monthly Listing of ... new 
work by Hope Mohr.
A scene from Lynn Nottage's Fabulation , with Rudy Guerrero and Margo Hall. 
MOANALANI JEFFREY

New Exhibit at Asian Showcases Bali
by Sura Wood

Bali, a tiny island in the vast Indonesian archipelago, captivates the romantic imagination of Westerners, lured by its exoticism, its wealth of culture and its network of 20,000 temples that grace the mountainous landscape.

Although Bali is well known for its vibrant performing and visual arts, it has never been the subject of a major exhibition in the United States until now. The Asian Art Museum's new show, Bali: Art, Ritual, Performance, explores the role of performance and ritual in Balinese daily life and offers visitors in-depth exposure to the aesthetic beauty of the island's art and ritual practices.

Hope Mohr Dances Dancing the Unsayable
by Jean Schiffman

Hope Mohr Dance's five professional dancers plus four military veterans perform her latest premiere, the hour-long The Unsayable, a mix of ethnicities, ages and body types. "I think the two populations have a lot to teach each other," says Mohr. The piece explores the American military experience through movement, text generated by veterans and dancers and an original sound score. "It's been an emotionally intense journey for everyone, including me," says Mohr.

"We are a country at war," says local choreographer Hope Mohr, "[yet] I felt the isolation of artists and dancers from war and its human costs and wanted to bridge that gap." Hope Mohr Dance’s project Five Sounds in the Country explores the relationships between various materials and concepts. The exhibition’s 130 diverse artworks, dating primarily from 1700 to the 1930s, include sculpture, paintings, architectural elements, furnishings, archival photographs, drawings, decorative objects, musical instruments and shadow puppets borrowed from the collection of anthropologist Margaret Mead, as well as fourteen painted masks and diamond-encrusted ceremonial daggers thought by the Balinese to possess supernatural powers.

"We really want to show the ways that art lives in Bali," says associate curator of Southeast Asian Art Natasha Reichle. "It’s amazing to see a society in which people who are not rich monetarily invest so much time and energy making and doing spectacularly beautiful things for their ceremonial life. These fabulous objects are deeply ingrained in the lives of people."

Many of the works on view, adds Reichle, have intriguing stories to tell. Take, for example, the pair of ornately carved wooden doors measuring over four meters tall that were rescued from the palace of Denpasar. In the early 20th century, the Dutch, who maintained a colonial presence in Indonesia for over 300 years, were in the midst of their final conquest of Bali. W.O.J. Nieuwenkamp, a Dutch artist visiting the region at the time, witnessed the siege of the palace and intervened when he saw soldiers using the doors to make a bridge across a creek; he somehow salvaged the artifacts and conveyed them to a museum in The Netherlands. During this period, rajas of the remaining Balinese kingdoms, realizing their defeat was at an end, staged puputan (fights to the finish), where they and their retainers dressed in traditional funereal white and matched directly into Dutch gun fire. The Dutch burned their compounds to the ground.

Years later, Nieuwenkamp

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Hope Mohr

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Mohr originally studied at the San Francisco Ballet School, later danced with Trieste Brown and describes her lineage as “ballet, Cunningham, Judson Church.” After teaching creative movement to breast cancer patients, she had a chance to do the same at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration. From there, she was inspired to create The Unsayable.

With vigorous outreach to VA hospitals and residences, she interviewed about 30 Bay Area veterans of various wars to choose among them a handful to work with her company dancers in developing the project. That the vets participate fully as performers, not just as sources, and get the same hourly wage the dancers do, is integral to Mohr’s conception. “As a choreographer, to see dancer and ‘non-dancer’ bodies sharing space is an interesting choreographic challenge and compelling for audiences,” she explains.

Mohr collaborated with Bart Schneider, an oral historian at the San Francisco VA, to structure text-generating workshops. “I didn’t come in with an agenda that people must share x or y; but there are common threads with everybody nevertheless,” says Mohr. Each day she and Schneider designated a theme (homecoming was an especially potent one), and the participants, vets and dancers alike, responded by drawing pictures, engaging in dialogue, creating movement or gesture. “If it’s wet up on an image and I asked a dancer to dance to it, it was revelatory for the vet to see the physical interpretation of that personal experience,” says Mohr.

Mohr and Schneider whirled down and shaped the material. An impressionistic text emerged, to be layered over an emotionally charged and often revealing oral history. “It was apparent that the story of a war veteran and a dancer can be a dance of courage and triumph,” says Mohr.

The verbatim words of the veteran dancers, read in their own voices, are at times intensely personal. From soldier Carol Roye: “When I was in the military academy, we were really tense. We were almost hardly touching. Three hundred cadets started. Halfway through our training, only three women (including me) were left and 15 men. I could take all the punishment. My body was so strong, so promising… during Desert Storm, I was raped by a fellow soldier.” Roye will play out that scene explicitly in the piece, says Mohr. Midway through the rehearsed piece, the two were trying to decide how much detail to include.

“One of the challenges of working on The Unsayable is definitely the emotional content of the pieces,” says Cameroon Crowden, who has been with Hope Mohr Dance since its inception four years ago. “They’re very charged.” One of Crowden’s duets is with vet Paul Ramirez; each embodies different feelings about Old Glory. “I was raised to love the flag. Nobody was more proud than me to join the Navy,” intones Ramirez in voiceover. “I really felt like I was in a coma for two weeks. I was brain dead.”

Crowden’s take on the flag, heard in voiceover: “I don’t feel like it means what I want it to mean, what I think it should mean, what it meant when I was a child.”

In one section, the vets instruct the dancers in how to warm up. “It’s really very hard for the dancers,” says Mohr. “I generated a lot of material based on that experience—the resistance of the body to be contained. To be told what to do. In fact some of the dancers said, ‘It was like my first ballet class.’

At other times, it was challenging to integrate the two culturally disparate groups. “The dancers—if they generate a phrase, they glean a handful of gestures from this phrase that are pedestrian or accessible, so dancers and vets develop a common gestural vocabulary,” explains Mohr. “I looked for simple ideas, cohesive, a spatial pattern—ways they could participate in a form without having to do a pirouette—while dancers are doing something more complicated.”

In one section of the text, dancer Tegan Schwab says, “I don’t know their language. Even though they taught us ‘ease’ ‘parade rest,’ … if we taught them plié, tendu, dégagé, and we said ok, plié! tendu! dégagé! that quickly they wouldn’t be able to do it.”

As painful as some of the vets’ confessions are—David Fish expresses a post-war “desire to be happy, and an inability to enjoy life”—they are not entirely negative. Immunity the punishment. My future seemed foreordained from war. Fish names “a fossilized clam, completely intact, thousands of years old” and “a ring given to me by an Iraqi soldier.” Three of the four vets have said they’d relish if given the chance. “When you interact with vets,” says Mohr, “you see the human costs of war, what they’ve sacrificed… a physical injury, the life sacrifices they make to serve in the military. Whether or not they agree that war is necessary to ensure freedom… you see the human sacrifices.”

She adds, “It’s important to me to do more than simply repeat or reenact trauma and suffering. I feel a part of the intensity of this project is to demonstrate one of the roles of the artist: To bear witness to suffering… it’s important to me to thread the past through healing and transformation. How do you open the door within yourself after experiencing trauma? For me, the intelligence of the dancing body is key—a unique resource in dealing with trauma. That deep connection to sensation is what makes a dancer great and what enables a person to heal.”

The Unsayable and she dreams in code, Mar. 3-6, Theater Artaud, 450 Florida St., 800/838-3006, info@hope Mohr.org. www.hopemohr.org.

Hansberry

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“We were just starting to see the mortgage meltdown and the economy imploding. This is so timely in terms of its dark humor around who’s being most affected by the [failure of the] American Dream, which is of course African-Americans and Latinos. Undine’s story is not about that, but indirectly it spoke to me about some of these economic issues, and about reinventing yourself. To actually live in a [new] class and at the same time be disconnected from your class of origin to the point of being powerless.”

Hall and Chang have examined the multiple levels of the character Undine. Chang has an intuitive understanding of what it feels to move upward in society: Raised working-class in Eastern Washington with her father’s African-American parents, as a teen, she was suddenly thrust into her white mother’s middle-class, academic surroundings in Berkeley.

Unlike Undine, Chang never denied her class background, but she understands the dynamic: “Undine is definitely a character that when you first meet her, she’s not symmetric,” she says. “But she does change.”

There are two sides to Undine’s story, avows Hall. “The reintegrated Undine, seen at the beginning of the play, is creative, smart, powerful, ruthless. Hall herself has known people like this, who have changed the way they speak, cut themselves off from their families. ‘It’s a choice,’ she says. ‘I’m sure Undine thinks she did everything. She was supposed to do—she saw another way to live and decided, “That’s what I want.”’

Hall herself comes from a lower- to middle-class family in Detroit. Her step- father, a Motown musician (Aretha Franklin sang at Hall’s mother’s funeral), and there were periods of feast and famine.

Hall had the privileges of dance classes and music lessons, but she also visited family members who lived in the projects, she’s not unfamiliar with the fictional Undine’s background. But, “How do you allow audiences to like her and understand why she did what she did?” wonders Hall, even in the rehearsal process. Undine has to be her true self—a tough woman—but with a vulnerability that can melt the heart.

Fabulation, the story of one woman’s inverted societal struggle, is smart, biting and very political, declares Chang, precisely because it explores the issue we continue to struggle with in our society: our ability to talk about class. “There needs to be a way to honor our roots as we navigate through the fog of certain ideas and culture.”