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Review/Dance; California Dreaming Against Manhattan Backdrop

By Anna Kisselgoff

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Summer comes and along with it a host of dance companies whose members feel compelled to perform out of doors. What a surprise then to see something as imaginative as the Zaccho Dance Theater from San Francisco persuasively turning an overgrown garden on Roosevelt island, in New York City, into a beguiling fairytale setting on Friday night.

“Cho-Mu,” choreographed by Joanna Haigood, the company’s director, in collaboration with the visual artist, is very California in its message: Love the earth and revere the connection between all things, from butterflies to mankind.



Happily, the tale is couched in a style that has the refinement and indirectness of Japanese Haiku. Each of the six sections came across as a poetic image that drew upon archetypal resonance. The vivid movement was integrated with Ms. Goto’s ingenious and simple sculptures and installations. These ranged from a vertical water tank to a square of shelves for a soloist balancing at the top.

Dancing in the Streets, which presented “Cho-Mu,” translated the title from the Japanese as “Butterfly Dreams,” Ms. Haigood was the Wanderer, a dreamer who was followed by the audience from site to site on a spiritual journey. Andy Meier, as the Tall Man, marched around on stilts under his Persian attire, appearing at crucial moments like a heavenly messenger to release some butterflies from a box strapped to his chest.

At the very end, it was Ms. Haigood who released the last of the butterflies and watched them fly out against the ready-made backdrop of the trees and the 59th Street Bridge.

A strong text, composed by Ms. Haigood and Shakiri, the dancer who recited it, introduced the theme of reincarnation and transformation. Shakiri embodied the life force (“I was born again in one thousand different bodies...I had been strong and frail...I am energy flowing from one life to another.”)

Leaving the outline of a miniature house before which Shakiri had performed her priestly dance, Ms. Haigood led the audience across abandoned vegetable and flower plots to the water tank. Sheila Lopez, tumbling and weightless, her long hair floating upward, made this section, “The Egg,” as pure as it was surreal.



From water to plant life, Ms. Haigood came upon Jo Kreiter, a wonder of equilibrium who stood on one foot of did the split atop the bookshelf structure. Jars containing plants were arranged in rows on each shelf. Lauren Weinger’s sophisticated electronic score was thematically apt to each section. Jose Navarette twirled a pole and spun in place during a ritual dance inside a circle of stones.

Paul Benny was seen inside a shadow box, his nudity projected in silhouette. He grew more agitated and finally jumped through the translucent paper into the arms of Ms. Haigood standing below. It was a spectacular moment that left the audience gasping. “Leaving the Chrysalis” was the section’s understated title.

The finale was daring. Each cast member stood atop a stepladder, gesturing. The butterflies, which had accompanied every evolutionary transformation, were all

released. Well done.

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