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In praise of musical tourism: Huayin Shadow Puppet Band and Cloud Gate Dance Theatre

By MARK SWED



Wu Man, left, with the Huayin Shadow Puppet Band at Campbell Hall at UC Santa Barbara. (David Bazemore / UCSB Arts & Lectures)

If it's Tuesday, this must be Huayin, a scenic village in Northern China on a tributary of the Yellow River at the foot of Hua Mountain.

OK, it was a Thursday. And it was Santa Barbara. But the Huayin Shadow Puppet Band did play with the pipa star Wu Man at Campbell Hall, on the UC Santa Barbara campus. This was a wackily, joyously raucous band unlike any I have ever encountered from any part of the world. One of the performers, Zhang Quansi, played a bench, and not just any bench; he insisted on traveling with a ratty old wooden one from his living room.

A week later, village music was included in the West Coast premiere of "Formosa," a stunning new work that Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan brought to the Segerstrom Center for the Arts. Like pretty much everyone else at these performances, I was a tourist.

We kid ourselves when we think that we have at our finger tips access to all the music of the world, as well as information about them. The fact is I feel more, not less, ignorant about world music now than I did before the internet.

Back in the day when vinyl was a dirty word (because it was so hard to get recordings pressed on good vinyl and to keep the ones you had clean and free of scratches), if you picked up an LP of Indonesian gamelan music or African drumming — say part of Nonesuch's invaluable Explorer

series that opened the ears of a generation or something on the Folkways label — it came with informative liner notes, often with excellent references to help you find out more. Turn now to Spotify or Apple Music, and you're lucky to find out even who is playing what and from where and when.

You can discover much online, but not as much as you might think, and source material can be more than a little dubious. YouTube may be a fabulous resource, but it takes considerable knowledge and willpower not to be led astray by the artificiality of its intelligence. Nor do we audience members (or critics) have anything like the time to familiarize ourselves more than superficially (if even that) with all these different cultures in our readily accessible global village. If there were anyone who knew anything about Huayin Shadow Puppet Band in the audience at UCSB, I'd be amazed.

I'd be even more astonished if anyone attending Cloud Gate with me Sunday afternoon could possibly have the background to put together all the aspects of choreographer Lin Hwai-Min's stunning "Formosa."

In Cloud Gate's "Formosa," company members perform abstract dance to a striking video backdrop. (Liu Chen-Hsiang)

There was the dance language, with its Asian and Western aspects. The spoken narration was in Chinese, and the striking video backdrop was of animated Chinese characters. Formosa's history — as well as its legends, geography and weather — were conveyed in abstract dance. The music included indigenous Pinyumayan song, excerpts from electronic and acoustic works by contemporary Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, excerpts from a massive percussion piece by the late French spectralist Gérard Grisey, along with contributions from the company's music director, Liang Chun-Mei.

We like to fall back on the expectancy of music being a universal language, but it is no more so than is Hungarian or Hebrew. Be it hip-hop or John Cage's anarchic harmony, to get an idea of what it all means, you need a grasp of musical syntax and of cultural background.

Yet at both of these events, the audiences were engrossed. The Huayin musicians, all members of an extended family or clan, are keeping a dying tradition with an outgoing enthusiasm so infectious you can't help getting caught up in it. What is universal is laughter and liveliness, and that they have in spades.

They are all old gents. (Getting the younger generation interested in traditional music almost anywhere is increasingly difficult. The internet, rather than widening horizons, sends kids straight to commercial music.) Everything performers sang about (not that we knew what they were singing about except in the most general sense), be it sex or soldiering, they did by jumping up and down, shooting, kicking up their heels and playing their folk instruments with unrelenting vigor.

Zhang Shimin kept the beat on a bell and clapper while sprawled out on the floor with a look of utter contentment. Zhang Quansi paraded to the front of the stage and swung his bench in the air, hitting it with a brick.



Pipa master Wu Man, left, during the Huayin Shadow Puppet Band concert at UC Santa Barbara's Campbell Hall. (David Bazemore / UCSB Arts & Lectures)

Wu Man, who is well known from her performances with the Silk Road Ensemble as well as the many pipa concertos that have been written for her, comes from a different sort of Chinese village. Her playing is the last word in elegance, and the contest between her solos and the folk musicians (whom she discovered and has brought on a U.S tour) was part of the fun. Yet she joined right in with what she called, with a huge smile on her face, her band. She broke up laughing. We all did.

The sublime beauty of Cloud Gate's "Formosa" had nothing remotely to do with Huayin. The little bit of native music, sung by Sangpuy Katatepan Mavaliyw (on recording, as was all the music used in the dance) was somberly ritualistic. The Chinese texts for the nine sections of the dance were translated in the program, but it was not advisable, or even possible, to follow them during the performance.

Instead the severe beauty, the delicate pattering, the sensuality and then the shocking (though still beautiful) violence of the dance was so mesmerizing that unrelated styles of music intertwined, enhancing the otherness of the other. Once again, as outsiders, we couldn't pretend to share in emotions we could not comprehend, but that didn't prevent us from feeling connected.

Sure, that is tourism, but it is tourism in the best sense of discovery, where foreignness becomes meaning. The more different something is, the more likely you'll never forget it. By being beyond understanding, it simply becomes part of you in ways your defenses against the unknown cannot prevent.