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Kuan Yin: Our Lady of Compassion

*December 2002
San Francisco, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts*

by Renee Renouf

Kuan Yin, Our Lady of Compassion was presented November 9 and 10 at Yerba Buena's Theatre in association with Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. The story, with music and movement, tells about a small boy in San Francisco's Chinatown whose dying grandmother relates the legend of Kuan-Yin and gives him as a birthday present her lucky Kuan Yin image she used in playing Monopoly. It was one of those rare and special explorations of legend mingled with everyday life that one associates with the likes of master storyteller Brenda Wong Aoki. The production was a joint venture between First Voice of San Francisco and No Man's Land of Hong Kong, with Shu-Wing Tang of Hong Kong as director.

Instead of one of her gripping solo portraits, Brenda teamed up with her husband, jazz musician Mark Izu, Jane Kuromoto, koto exponent from the Hiroshima ensemble and Japanese Living Treasure Suenobu Togi, the only member of the Japanese Imperial Household musicians to perform and teach outside the Imperial Palace in Tokyo. Togi both played the haunting wind instrument, the hichiriki, with its piercing wail, and danced some of the expansive movements and measures of bugaku.

Aoki, who received a hunk of her theatrical training with Yuriko Doi's Theatre of Yugen, moves with presence, authority and an evenness that comes close to floating. Her figure now has assumed more ample proportions, adding to the impression of benevolent grandmother telling a story. Around her eloquent mouth is a small lifting smile, crinkling up the corners without showing the teeth, while her eyes light up with the pleasure of being in the moment and relishing it, all framed by that magnificent head

of abundant black hair.

This is not to say the content was entirely fantasy or the remote aesthetic of Tang Dynasty Chinese music as preserved by the Japanese court. Wong's description of a San Francisco Chinatown tenement is everything one senses seeing strips of Chinese cabbage drying on the storm fence of a Chinatown tennis court, or the patches of green vegetation billowing out one window of a brick building while the next window displays the day's variegated garments washed and hung to dry. The sharp contrast between such nitty-gritty and the cruel fantasy of one too many daughters arousing the ire of a crusty monarch is the stuff of marvels that Aoki manages to render into near blank verse poetry. With that walk and her timing, Aoki's presentation is spell binding.

Jazz with the usual percussion ensemble, the bass and koto provided a contrast to the shrill pitch of the hichiriki. With Togi's opening, dedicatory movements the evening assumed a space and breadth just as transcendent as if he wore a traditional costume of the Left or Right rather than the austere white of a Shinto dignitary. The winsome K.K., son of Aoki and Izu, provided the focus as he sat and listened to the story and watched the players execute their magic.

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