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REVIEW

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*Brenda Wong Aoki**'Ghost Festival'**31st October 2004**San Francisco, Yerba Buena Forum**by Renee Renouf*

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Brenda Wong Aoki first came to my attention with the kyogen and noh productions of Yuriko Doi's Theatre of Yugen. Small, intensely pretty with a flowing stream of dark hair, she was a singular performer, who moved and acted extremely well. She moved beyond the Japanese theatrical tradition and began to weave her way as a story teller.

But such a story teller. None of this 'listen to me while I sit' approach; she didn't strum a banjo, guitar or lap harp in the process. No, Wong Aoki moved, and then some. Whether before or after a phrase or paragraph, Wong Aoki became the sweet, biddable wife, the swaggering samurai, the fisherman capturing the mermaid, the Fiji-born woman gunned down in a gang battle. Activities emerged from her body; picking roses; getting drunk with sake; tumbling down a ravine; cleaning house; weaving kimono.

Wong chose five stories, at least four of them with Japanese roots, one perhaps of Chinese origin and one a reminder of the Japanese American World War II incarceration in nine desolate area relocation centers. Black Hair; The Soul of The Great Bell; Dancing in California; The Bell of Dojoji; Mermaid Meat.

Mark Izu and Seiichi Tanaka stood at the upper left of the Forum's adaptable stage space. A portable jacket hanger stood at back center stage with a stool, the rest bare for Wong Aoki to inhabit after KK Aoki Izu did an invocatory jig, lithe, scrawny with bleached dread locks, held in place by a headband emblazoned with the rising sun. He also provided shadows from behind a white curtain for The Soul of The Great Bell.

Wong proceeded to tell her stories: the egotistical samurai in Kyoto who lost his daimyo and drowned his sorrows in sake, while his wife sold their possessions to provide food, eventually cutting her hair to provide him with a new kimono, emblazoned with the character, kokoro or good heart, with blood from her little finger. The swagger, the disdain, the narcissistic daimyo's daughter who lures the samurai into service in Nagoya, her white teeth, her fatal love of sweets..

Here, as in The Bell of Dojoji and Mermaid Meat, Wong Aoki makes singularly effective use of her shining hip-length tresses. Her physical props are not limited to her hair, her skill with the fan or her ability to assume a samurai stance. Wong Aoki possesses a voice which croons, whispers, groans, seduces, sobs and screams as her arm creates the bell, describes the heat, the cooling of the metal, the breaking of the casting; the terror of being entangled in the hair of a ghost.

The eerie sounds of the sho, a muted or accelerated drum beat, the sound of the hand flicking the gut strings of the bass, heightened the narrative, providing a touch of the macabre to the spell-bound audience..

In the five plus decades I have watched dance theatre, such versatility is rare. Such power and restraint are also seldom seen in these decades of lengthy self-indulgence. Yoko Tahara, familiar with the Japanese Ghost tradition, remarked, "It was a tour de force." For myself, I said to her, "I've seen only one other woman who could evoke the masculine with equal skill, and that was Balasaraswati."

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