

# Inspiring, but too long

## DANCE

**Stupa**  
Peter Chin/Tribal Cracking Wind  
At Harbourfront Theatre Centre  
In Toronto on Thursday

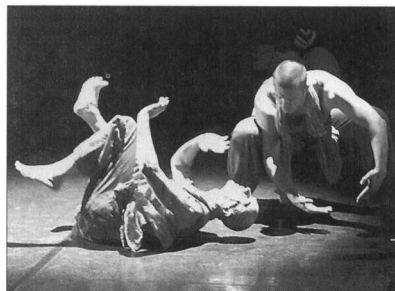
REVIEWED BY PAULA CITRON

There is no doubt that Peter Chin is a brilliant man. For his new full-length work *Stupa*, he is the choreographer, composer, costume designer and text writer. The only thing he didn't do himself is the lighting, leaving that essential element to Arun Srinivasan, who has bathed *Stupa* in ravishing colours. There is one other outside person that Chin needs, and that is an editor. *Stupa*, for all its glories, suffers from a creator too in love with his material to see that length — an hour and half — can be a problem.

For the last several years, Chin has travelled extensively in South-East Asia, and the work is anchored in eastern sensibility. A stupa is a Buddhist spiritual monument. The basic shape is a dome or a bell, but each stupa has individualized symbolic and mystical decorations both inside and out. Many stupas were built to commemorate gifted holy men, signifying that though their bodies may be no more, their minds dwell forever. Observing a stupa is supposed to invoke peace and liberation in the viewer, because these monuments represent the enlightenment of the Buddha.

How Chin has translated a stupa and its many aspects of spirituality into movement and sound is a fascinating summation of his travels. There are many, many threads throughout his work which form a complicated tapestry indeed.

First there is performance artist Katherine Duncanson who spends the entire piece meditating in silence, turning in circles on her stool, oblivious to her surroundings. The seven dancers represent everything from fierce demon gods, to animals, to people in crisis, performing movement that involves intricate hand and facial expressions, as well as intoning a vocal soundscape running from screams to whimpers. Three of them (Carolyn Woods, Piotr R. Biernat and Susanna Hood) also



ARUN SRINIVASAN

Chin's Tribal Cracking Wind dancers perform the monumental *Stupa*: a complex world where people grapple with demons and dreams.

recite text, describing the spiritual journey of an archeologist, boy monk and architect respectively, each questing for an inner truth.

The musical score for *Stupa*, which is performed live by eight instrumentalists, is filled with exotica such as Indonesian gamelans and Tibetan horns, and rides a wave between chaotic cacophony and caressing slivers of sound. Except for the three recitations, what is spoken or chanted by the dancers seems to be in languages of Chin's own invention. To say that both the dance and music are eccentric is an understatement.

Chin has never been one to hold back on vulnerability, and he is blessed with some of the finest, most risk-taking, dancing actors around. Besides Woods, Biernat and Hood, the cast includes Yves Candau, Mark Johnson, Hiroshi K. Miyamoto and Yvonne Ng, and all of them are willing to bare their souls, both vocally and physically.

*Stupa's* leitmotif is a stylized walk plucked out of Asian dance, a sashay that is propelled by a heel-toe, flexed-knee swagger, augmented by swinging arms with angular, bent elbows. This walk occurs periodically throughout *Stupa* to a percussive march, and seems to be a dividing line between vignettes visited along the way. Another visual theme is the physical isolation of one or more dancers sitting cross-legged in the lotus po-

sition, a stillness that forms a quiet backdrop for the more violent movement centre stage, and reminds us of the spirituality at the heart of a stupa.

Some sections do comment on the spoken text. For example, Biernat's story of a boy monk brought up by wolves is followed by wild animal imagery, as well as duets that echo his love of a fellow monk. Other sections show the seven dancers as individuals, engaged in their own intense physical meditation, or in a state of questing agitation. Of note is that each costume is different, although bound together by Eastern design aesthetics.

Chin also uses the power of a unified group, or splits the dancers into smaller ensembles in opposition to each other.

In the final analysis, *Stupa* is a densely layered, monumental work that evokes a complicated world where people grapple with both demons and dreams. The hope is in the figure of Duncanson who has presumably seen her stupa and found peace.

My one caveat, as stated before, is that the piece is too long. By the last 15 minutes or so, Chin's immense imagination has brought on sensory overload.

*Stupa* continues at Toronto's Harbourfront Theatre Centre tonight.