

Dance

Dean Moss, Yoon Jin Kim, and David Roussève Practice the Art of Displacement

By Deborah Jowitz

In the crosscultural kitchen of postmodern dance drama, it's sometimes hard to tell whether the chef has embarked on a particular creative process to discover more about himself and his roots, or more about the Other. Most often, it's a bit of both. The customers may be charmed, enlightened, and/or confused. *Kisaeng Becomes You* by Dean Moss (African American) and Yoon Jin Kim (Korean) is performed by five women dancers from Korea and several different recruits from the New York audience each night. The cast of David Roussève's *Saudade* includes Roussève, two other African Americans, an Indonesian, a native of Burkina Faso, and a dancer who studied India's Bharata Natyam for 22 years.



Sri Susilowati and Taisha Paggett in David Roussève's "Saudade."

directly into the earpiece of the "trainee." Lured from her own life into another virtual culture, this spur-of-the-moment performer is bound by its rules, and distanced by the prompting and the inevitable pauses from the import of what she's doing and saying. The others' final act, besides applauding her, is to offer her money.

Aspects of a *kisaeng*'s life are abstracted in a variety of ways and given a postmodern twist. In the beginning, a woman is bending over a table; the video shows us that she's embroidering her hand (I), slipping a needle under the topmost layer of skin (*kisaeng* were skilled seamstresses). Soyeoun Lim rubs a microphone over Jeongyeon Yang's face and neck, and we imagine a novice being trained in fellatio (afterward Lim brandishes the mike like a penis, then bites it noisily). In one sequence, Jiseon Kwon and Bae, smiling and servile, usher in an imaginary male visitor, then gradually go dead—all expression draining from their faces and bodies. For what seems an eternity, they stand staring at us. Several times, all the women revolve on tiptoe, heads back, mouths open, like fish at the surface of a pond.

They also show us the clientele. Lim lines up glasses of beer, rim to rim, balances shot glasses of whiskey on top of them, and, with one gesture, knocks the tiny glasses into the larger ones. Party time. Channeling their inner males, the wonderful performers ad lib, down their drinks, and encourage two women from the audience to drain their glasses. Things get rowdy, a raucous song is sung. One of the volunteer performers is educated in the delivery of *kisaeng* poetry, the other is given the video camera and told to shoot the fun.

It is she who ends the piece. On display. They've taken away the camera and left her alone center stage in her trim little dress and high-heeled boots. She looks pleadingly over to where the others are sitting on the sidelines, giggles, gazes at us, decides to be brave. She stands there for quite a while before the lights dim. Suddenly: a *kisaeng* waiting to be chosen for the evening's diversions.

Roussève's *Saudade* is much more elaborate—an olla so rich in ingredients that, flavorful though it is, you can't easily locate its essence. The music too throws you a bit off the scent. *Saudade*—performed by a multicultural cast about experiences anchored in Roussève's personal, very American stories—is accompanied by nine recordings of Portuguese fado. What these songs do underscore, however, is the universality of yearning and not getting.

Roussève, the piece's writer, director, and choreographer, is also its leading performer and anchorman. He greets us and jokes with us, before bringing up the fine line between life and death, pleasure and pain, and retreating to a distant corner to begin a slow walk forward along a diagonal path. It takes him almost the entire performance to arrive where he started. Along the way, he stops to tell stories, each stage of his journey marked by a white pillar. Peter Melville's backdrop looks somewhat like a vast crossword puzzle waiting to be filled in, but most of Roussève's words are not about ideal solutions; they're about small events that briefly relieve pain or lift spirits. And about how we remember them.

The man is—has always been—a marvelous storyteller, and he recounts his tales in beautifully chosen, often witty words. He stoops over and makes his voice raspy to become a down-and-out old man who falls in love with a mangy tomcat—a cat who can walk on sharp-edged fences and still have "soft little kitty-cat paws." Roussève's tone is higher and more innocent when he speaks for a slave girl who saw her older sister horribly beaten for teaching her little sibling to write her own name: "Sally." In one unforgettable scene, Sally is brutally deflowered by her master in a wooden shack with cracks and holes in its walls. She stretches a hand through one of those holes and feels her sister's tears dropping into her palm.

The seven other vibrant performers—all either faculty members or graduate students in UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures, where Roussève is a professor—echo aspects of his stories but also contribute more obliquely. It's not so surprising to watch tall Taisha Paggett let small noises in her throat build up to physical, vocal frenzy, until the others soothe her. Or see Nehara Kalev angrily tie Arjali Tata-Hudson's feet together and take her away. People fall and roll on. Some crawl along roped together, and others free them. They dance slowly, awkwardly together as if drugged by pain. However, it's utterly unexpected to listen to Marianne M. Kim emit a fantastic, high ululation that sounds a bit like the flourishes of baroque opera in hyper-drive. Sri Susilowati yells at her to stop, but she can't. Finally, Susilowati bares her belly, and says teasingly, "You wouldn't want to miss this."

The performers occasionally interact with Roussève as he tells his stories (including ones about his own despondence during a hospital stay, and a woman's account of what she lost and what she gained during the floods that Katrina visited on New Orleans). They also comment on events as they occur in the dance. While Esther M. Baker Tarpaga and Olivier Tarpaga spar playfully in words and movement, Kalev intermittently struts through wearing a bikini and high heels and holding up signs that announce, for example, "Round Two. I think they are faking it."

When I ponder what I've seen, images that seemed isolated during the performance coalesce in my mind and link more securely to Roussève's themes. I think back to Susilowati several times offering a red pepper to her colleagues, even offering to pay Roussève a dollar if he'll try a bite of this Indonesian staple (he pays no attention). Later a close-up video of her appears on a screen. She's cramming pepper after pepper into her mouth, while tears gradually begin to run down her cheeks. Whatever culture we're from, is that how we eat life—no matter how much it burns?