

# The Villager

West Village, East Village, Chelsea, Soho, Tribeca and Lower East Side

## The whole new art of storydancing

BY DORIS DIETHER

"Memoryscan," the new work by Koosil-ja Hwang to be presented this weekend at The Kitchen, comes out of the memories of her dancers. "I borrowed their memories," Hwang said. "It gave me opportunities to dip into different moments of their lives, who they are behind that, where they are coming from. And without stereotypes, or what I have read about Irish, Jewish, Spanish, whatever." Hwang listened to their tales and then tried to stage the ones that were selected. "I wanted to do this piece to get to know them. I wanted to understand them."

Perhaps Hwang's choice of this work



comes from her desire to better understand herself. She was born in Japan, of Korean parents. "My parents had a tough life," Hwang said. "They had to deal with survival during the war, so they are very much into making money, surviving, and becoming middle-class. I'm very much a dream girl. I knew what I liked to do, but I couldn't identify it as creating art. I didn't have that kind of environment. I had a confusing adolescence, just because I didn't know how to plug in my energy. Constant arguments with my parents because of this frustration and I didn't even know what I was frustrated with." She loved to dance, but that was not an acceptable life choice in Japan. She did jazz dance when she was 16, but that was more like an exercise class, with an annual concert by the students.

Hwang's life was changed by a magazine article about John Cage and Merce Cunningham. "Here's art, a philosophy, here's a life. It could all happen in one place," Hwang said. "So I felt really saved. That was what I wanted to do." She knew of Martha Graham, but "she seems a little passe to me," Hwang said, "a classic, a masterpiece. But Martha was then. Now I have to do this."

So, in 1981, Hwang came to New York. "I stayed in Merce's school for five years, off and on," Hwang said. "I couldn't stand going to school five days a week. The repetition almost killed me. It seemed very mundane to me, because I didn't have a good friend from the school. Most of the school had this sterile atmosphere, colder rather than warmer, something like a hospital." She also took ballet, and often rode up and down the city on the buses.

Shortly after arriving in New York Hwang found her present apartment. "I lived at 10 Waverly Pl. for a while," Hwang said. "Then I was looking around for an apartment. Somebody told me I should never cross Broadway to the east, it's not good. That was in 1981 and it was different then. I walked down to the East Village. Wow, this is it, this is what I was looking for. When I thought about New York, I thought about here. I found this apartment, in such bad shape. But we cleaned it up and there I am. I don't have a garden but I can see the trees and soon the crocuses will come out."

Around 1986 Hwang started doing her own choreography. "I sort of got comfortable with what I can do with my body, and I decided to create," she explained. "At the time I was in a band, percussion and singing, so I had developed experience in

being on stage and dealing with the public. And finally the cast of loneliness and isolation lifted off. Before, they didn't know me. It didn't really matter whether I existed here or not. Now they know me. My name has a face. So that was really a relief."

Hwang started working on "Memoryscan" in December 1997. "Usually I get a gig," Hwang said, "then I create. This one I wanted to create so I began doing some improvisations, rehearsing, finding. You get to know about my dancers' personalities in this new work. Every one of my dancers is different. I was just scouting different people's classes when I saw Mary Helene Spring. She had a special quality. Margaret Hallisey is a choreographer, and her mind is so interesting. I had the feeling that she would understand me.

"And Michael Portnoy is a performer, striving to become a pop star. He danced in the last Grammy Award [ceremony] where Bob Dylan was singing. He's an iconoclastic performer, making you laugh, making you think. He's a very provocative performer. And then Kathryn Sanders is an incredible dancer. I saw her dancing, and she does things that I can't do. Every section is based on someone else's memory. The dancer has a mental ownership of the section, so it's very interesting that way. That's what I meant about sharing, because it is their memory."

This is Hwang's third show at The Kitchen. "I'm fascinated by the blackness of that black box, the nature of the theater," Hwang said. "But I'm also afraid of the dancers in that blackness. I hope they will come through okay. It's kind of dense there. It's not like the Joyce when all the lights go



Villager photo by Mark C

Dancer and choreographer Koosil-ja Hwang

out, it's a different feeling."

In Japan, Hwang's father has his own business making parts for kitchenware, like handles for pots. Her mother works as his manager and accountant, and helps him with his work. Basically her parents run the business by themselves, with occasional part-time help. "They never got to play when they were kids," Hwang said. "They don't have time to play. What they wanted for me was very simple--get married, have children, live life. But I thought, I guess I'm only going to be here once, with this mind. I think there should be more than that. As I get closer to this show I find I miss them and think about them a lot. I'd like to share this with them, so they would know who I am."

Koosil-Ja Hwang's "Memoryscan," at the Kitchen, 512 W. 19<sup>th</sup> St., Wed.-Sat., Mar. 10-13, 8 p.m., \$15, 255-5793.