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Review

Big Dance Theater "Shunkin"

ビッグ・ダンス・シアター
“春琴”

Performed at The Kitchen
Reviewed on 9/7/01 by Liz Belton
Translated by Tomoko Otsuka

Dance

The Many Faces of Shunkin

Big Dance Theater's "Shunkin," the almost mythological tale of a female Japanese musician, is based on "A Portrait of Shunkin," a folk tale by Junichiro Tanizaki, but one does not need to know any more about the original than is provided by the readings from the tale elegantly woven into the production. Artfully directed by Paula Lazar and co-directed and choreographed by Annie B Parsons, the performance combined theater, dance and music, drawing an intriguing portrait of the blind diva who cannot see herself, let alone the world around her.

Shunkin collects a coterie of followers — groupies, if you will — as she develops the

aura of a rock star, though she has not performed in public. She is abusive and controlling toward her followers, and bitter because of her blind dependence on them. When finally given the opportunity to perform for the High Sheriff's Lady, Shunkin refuses, because the lady does not understand or appreciate what she is trying to say. Shunkin grows old and dies in obscurity.

The multi-media production opens with four women in colorful Asian dress performing a folk dance. The stage is set with birch limbs and infused with smoke covering the floor. The women slowly raise their knees and extend their feet, revealing fans held between their toes. One of this group turns her back. The others hold her skirt and place their fans like wings on her back. When she faces us she is wearing sunglasses and complains, "Smoky!" The others fan her and shower her with attention. This is the first representation of Shunkin. Portrayed by Molly Hickock, Cynthia Hopkins and Tymberly Canale respectively, Shunkin cannot be pinned down. Both her character and her words are elusive. When asked what her songs are about, Shunkin replies, "About five minutes. Sometimes ten." The other characters all want to be this sarcastic diva with a voice of honey and a heart of iron, and, strangely, some of the performers get their chance.

When Shunkin (Cynthia Hopkins)

offers to let someone else be Shunkin, Tymberly Canale wins the honor by swiping her fan at the others. Hopkins allows her to rehearse the part of Shunkin, but maintains control by directing the rehearsal. "No, let's skip ahead to the part where you're on the floor crying." Shunkin is an amalgamation of the performers' contributions, greater than any one of them, and at the same time completely dependent upon the existence of her followers.

The ingenious use of props and sets transforms the stage easily as Shunkin travels. The birch limbs swing up and down as needed and a bamboo mat turns from picnic spot into tent as needed. The multi-talented performers themselves manipulate many of these set changes as part of the dramatic narration. Hopkins' voice was soothing but surprisingly unpretentious. We are left asking ourselves, "How can such an ironic personality produce such a sweetly pure sound?" Shunkin has so many faces we must recognize how impossible it is to know someone completely.



Big Dance Theater in "Shunkin" Photo: Paula Court