

# STEPPING EAST

David Mead explores East Asian dance in the UK



Quang Kien Van in *Patient 319*. Photograph by Ludovic Des Cognets.

According to Taiwanese-born but long-time UK-resident Yeh Jih-Wen, the under-representation of British East Asian choreographers in UK dance is an issue that has long needed addressing. After graduating from Laban in 1993 Yeh says that while she found numerous openings to make work that reflected most people's stereotype of Chinese dance or Chinese contemporary dance, she felt unable to choreograph as she really wanted. Over time she became increasingly frustrated by the lack of opportunities to make work that reflected her and her experiences.

Despite Yeh's efforts championing the development of East Asian artists through her involvement with London's Chinatown Arts Space and Step Out Arts (the latter founded by her specifically

with the aim of developing a British East Asian dance sector and broadening audiences for works through production and education projects), she feels the situation today is little changed. While convinced there is plenty of choreographic talent among British East Asian dance artists, she thinks there remains a serious lack of encouragement and opportunity awareness. As a result it is difficult for choreographers to achieve visibility and stability outside the East Asian community.

Yeh finally found a release for her frustrations in 2009 when Step Out Arts was awarded funding from Arts Council England to establish the British East Asian Choreographer Development Scheme (BEACDS), designed specifically to create

opportunities and raise the visibility of choreographers based in the UK but whose background and cultural roots lie east of Vietnam. "At last I felt I could really challenge the status quo," she says.

The scheme is open to artists working in any dance form in the contemporary context, and proposals are considered by a panel representing a range of dance and arts specialties. Successful applicants receive £1,000 to support their research and development, production, and travelling expenses; and two weeks rehearsal space at one of the scheme's partners: Greenwich Dance, the University of Bedfordshire, Middlesex University and Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester. Showcases allow work created to be presented to the public, dance professionals and promoters. For

the 2010 phase of the scheme these will again be at Bedford and Greenwich in October, the latter including seminars and a debate as part of the programme.

However, the scheme aims to go beyond developing the participants' talents in the studio and supply opportunities to show their work. For Yeh it is about making the artists more comfortable and confident in pursuing their career, including dealing with funders and other organisations. It is about showing them that opportunities are there and how they can take advantage of them. "Sometimes they need to be pushed to sell themselves, and be told 'Go and do it!'" she says.

Four choreographers were chosen for the first year of the scheme. When showcased the pieces were in various stages of development, although it was already clear all four showed promise. British-Chinese Annie Lok's *Half Truths and Allegories* considered the processes of translation and mistranslation and their effect on storytelling and communication. Quang Kien Van, British-Vietnamese of Chinese ethnicity, sought to highlight the dangers of social exclusion and cultural alienation in his tension-filled *Patient 319*. Khamlane Halsackda, originally from Laos, questioned the meaning of love in *ACT 1*, a work inspired by memories of childhood, the moment he first fell in love, and a former partner. Most innovative though was *BEATS*, in which Japanese-born deaf dancer Chisato Minamimura challenged the audience to see sound or music through movement, and to consider what she calls "visual sound/music" from her perspective. The work certainly polarised opinion, some finding her combination of repetitive, minimalist dance and percussive sound hard going. The 2010 showcases will include an opportunity for these artists to further develop their works into completed pieces.

Although all the pieces contained subtle references to each choreographer's cultural background, the key stimulus was very much personal experience. None of the works had what might be considered an overtly East Asian aesthetic or theme. This was in contrast to, for example, a good deal of the work that came out of *Re-Orient*, the annual season of dance by East Asian artists at The Place in the 1990s, much of which addressed regional social and political issues. Indeed, there was some discussion after the BEACDS showcases about whether what had been shown was British contemporary dance or East Asian contemporary dance – as if the latter had, somehow, to be different – raising the question of just how East Asian identity relates to choreography



Above, Khamlane Halsackda in *ACT 1*. Photograph by Ludovic Des Cognets. Inset, Yeh Jih-Wen.

within the UK dance scene today.

Yeh considers there are a number cultural and policy reasons East Asian choreographers have failed to break through, not least the fact they have tended to be subsumed within a general black and Asian grouping where the Asian dynamic has mostly been towards South Asian dance. She feels the showcase comments highlight something else she has long suspected, namely that there is often an expectation that East Asian dance should have a particular, almost stereotypical look. Yet, as she points out, contemporary dance in that part of the world is as diverse as it is in the UK. Such views can lead choreographers to feel that they cannot express what they want to say as an individual and engage truly in dialogue between their personal experiences, and their mixed British and East Asian cultural backgrounds, she considers.

Halsackda echoes Yeh's comments, saying that he has previously resisted working under any umbrella that promoted him as South East Asian believing it would place him in a minority pigeon-hole and mean his work would have to avoid certain aspects of his identity. He points out that to have four very different choreographers paving the way for breaking down stereotypes about East Asian work is high up there on the list of reasons to get beneath just such an umbrella.

All four 2009 artists felt they benefited from their participation in the scheme and speak warmly of the support they received from their mentors. Halsackda says the advice received from his theatrical mentor has brought his work on by leaps and bounds, while Minamimura feels that only now does she have the confidence to approach organisations and seek out her own opportunities, as a result of which she will be performing at this year's DaDa (Deaf and Disabled artists) Fest in Liverpool. "The scheme showed me how to take the first step," she says. So positive was the experience for Halsackda and Minamimura that they have applied for continued Arts Council funding. Yeh is disappointed that the others felt it was not the right time for them, but concedes, "That is the reality of the situation."

Looking ahead, Yeh does not see the scheme running every year. What is certain, however, is that it will change as it is tailored constantly to reflect each artist's needs. This year, for example, a particular area to be addressed is how the artists can work more closely with dance organisations in the UK. It is far too early to judge the long-term effectiveness of the BEACDS but with new partnerships being built and resources being identified, awareness of British East Asian dance will surely only increase. ■

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