

JUNE 2009	
REVIEW	

ballet.*magazine*

Cho-In Theatre

SF International Arts Festival:

*'The Angel
and the Woodcutter'*

May 2009

San Francisco, Cowell Theatre

by Renee Renouf

Jointly supported by the Korean Cultural Center of San Francisco and SF International Arts Festival, the seven-year old Cho-In Theater made its U.S. debut at the Cowell Theatre in two performances. I saw the second, May 23 and was stunned by the acuity and inventiveness of director Park Chung-euy's concept and the artists' performance.

Using Korean name formation. Park takes a traditional Korean folk tale and the movement style of Korean masked drama, to set *The Angel and The Woodcutter* in the contemporary context of the Korean War. A woodcutter (Kim Gitae) and his mother (Son Kyoung Soon) encounter an angel (Lee Sang Hae); the mother retains the angel's wings which prevent her from flying away. Woodcutter and Angel fall in love; there is a struggle between mother-in-law and wife; a baby is born; war interferes, splitting isolated rural existence apart, meager though it is.

Through out the exposition, the folk tale unfolds with interruptions of the barrage and brutality of modern warfare, all via minimal devices, constantly juxtaposing charm and chaos. The woodcutter is forced into soldiering, mother-in-law, wife and baby refuge; the wife is caught by soldiers and becomes a prostitute. After his own servicing, the Woodcutter encounters the angel; after an anguished reunion and rejection, he brings the kimono, symbolizing the angel's wings, and lays it at her feet before rushing away; holding her puppet child, she stares at it as the mother-in-law follows a traditionally garbed, black-robed Korean off stage.

Except for grunts, screams and sounds of warfare or music, the play unfolds in silence. The movement possesses decided roots in the Korean masked dances seen around Seoul in 1966, to great advantage. Lateral movements with the Woodcutter are broadened, as are balances; the play between mother and son, whether washing at the end of the day, in eating food less than the best, or playing tricks on one another, evoke deep relationship.

The meeting of woodcutter and angel is a series of postural surprise, advance, rebuffs, a chase, before coupling behind the burlap shelter wall of the hut.

The hut, an eloquent prop, is a series of poles and burlap, easy to bundle up and carry. It provides a visual divide as the angel tries to claim separation between the woodcutter and his mother, creating special push-pull maneuvers with poles and burlap screen. When the angel is pregnant, the same burlap hides the actual birth after the angel is seen in labor.

The induction of the woodcutter into soldiering is keenly delineated, leaving the mother in law and wife bereft, but bringing them together in protecting the child and moving just a portion of the hut, so that it becomes a pup tent. Alas, it is too near a camp, constructed from the remaining poles. The angel is violated by three soldiers; after a silent blackout, the same soldiers bring on red lanterns, obviously outside the camp's barbed wire. The soldiers arrive for relief, the angel holds out her hand for pay; they disappear into the tent, as do two others behind draperies - the stage is filled with the groans of coitus. From one of the flaps upstage, the woodcutter in soldier's uniform emerges.

The movement possesses a goodly portion of pauses, frozen motion, to convey not only the plot, but also inner response. One truism in drama is that most particularly expressed in a culture usually bears universal relevance. This Cho-In production is clearly exhibit A. You simply can't get much better than this.