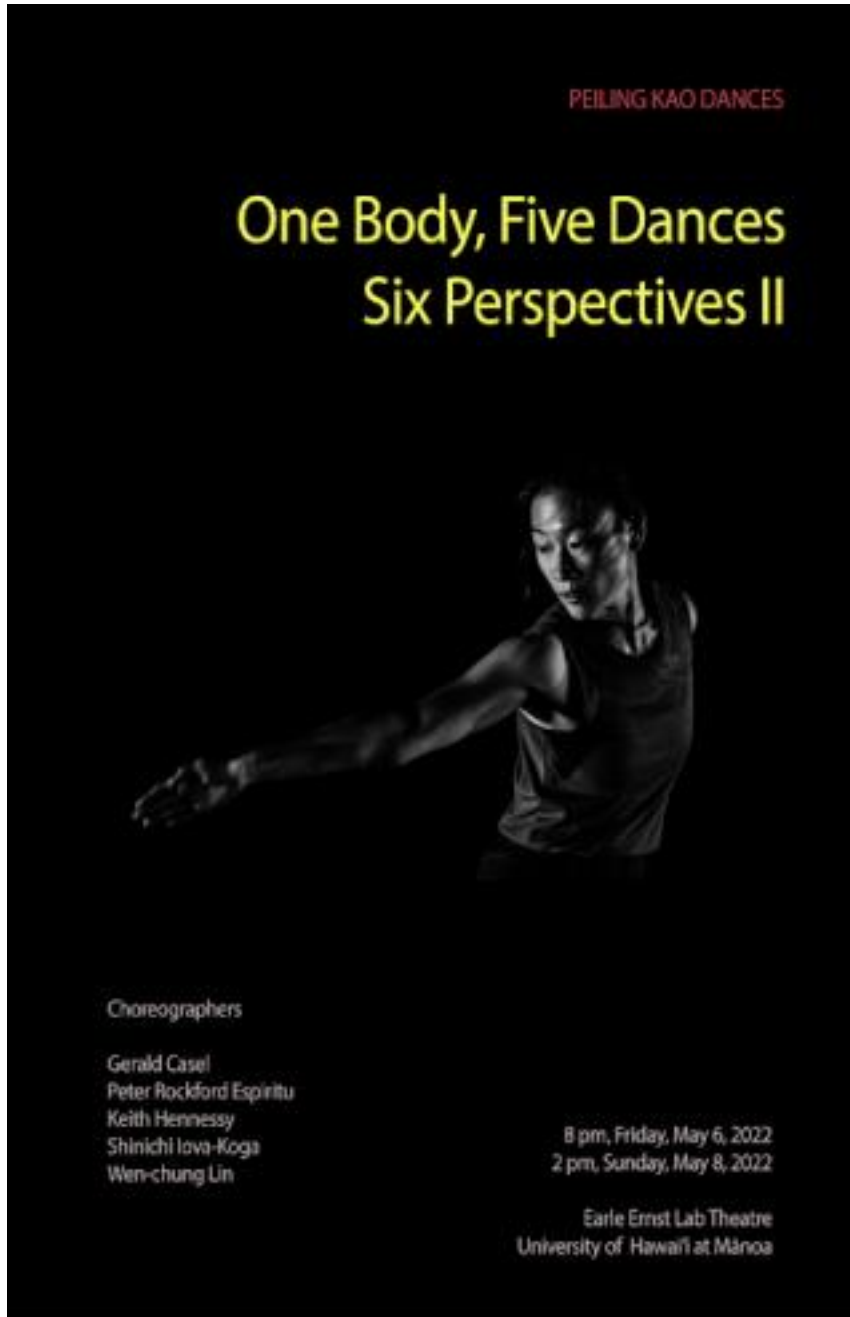


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Review of "One Body, Five Dances, Six Perspectives II" with Peiling Kao Dances



Peiling Kao Dances: One Body, Five Dances, Six Perspectives II

May 6th & 8th, 2022

University of Hawai'i, Mānoa Earle Ernst Lab Theater, Honolulu, HI

Reviewed by Christopher Blasdel

Peiling Kao's dance concert—*One Body, Five dances, Six Perspectives II*—consisted of a series of short, commissioned dance vignettes from five guest choreographers. Each of the guest choreographers came from differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and they infused different themes, costumes, styles, movement, stage props and music into their works, reflecting a great diversity. The only unifying aspect of these five disparate pieces was the dancer herself.

For the first dance project of this series, *One Body, Five Dances, Six Perspectives I*, Peiling commissioned dances from five female choreographers. The second iteration focused on male choreographers. Her intention, according to her own words, was to explore the additional gender dynamic in the process of creating dance. She selected her choreographers on the basis of personal relationship, admiration, ethnicities, styles of the work, and her own desire to collaborate.

Like a musician performing a commissioned piece, the dancer must put herself at the will and direction of the choreographer. Peiling asked herself at the outset whether “this dancer's body can be colonized by the choreographic intentions,” but she demonstrated that her cultivation into each dance piece was both natural, meaningful and fleeting. She swept through the pieces like a peregrinating spirit incarnating for a brief period within each dance vignette. It is a tribute to Peiling's great skill and extensive dance vocabulary that she successfully inhabited these dances and made them into her own. The result was a rare opportunity for the audience to experience a wide variety of highly articulate movement and storytelling.

Pele honua mea (Pele of the Sacred Land)

Choreography: Peter Rockford Espiritu

This piece opened the recital with a chanted tribute to the *‘āina*—the concept of land that is sacred to Hawaiians. The chant described the location of the theater and its place within the overall hierarchy of land in Hawai'i, starting with the largest land division in the state: the individual island (*mokupuni*), in this case O'ahu. The next level of division is *moku* (Kona, referring to the southwest part of O'ahu), and then the lesser *ahupua'a* division (Waikīkī), down to the smaller subdivisions (*'ili*) and finally to the very small division—the hill upon which the Earle Ernst Lab Theater stands.

Peiling emerged from the darkness clothed in a red and black flowing dress. She was Pele, the volcano goddess, and indeed the back story of the dance referred to a defeat that Pele suffered in a disastrous fight with her sister, Nāmaka o Kaha'i (Pele is the fire goddess, and Nāmaka is the water goddess, so I assume there is a basic instability in their relationship). The story, according to the choreographer, depicted the resurrection of Pele and the rebuilding of her home (Kilauea) as she recovered from the battle.

Peiling physically narrated this story with elegantly extended arms and legs, taking ownership of the stage (and her world) by creating an expansive sense of space. She used two props, both long sticks, that (to me) resembled serpents, although in this particular context it may be more meaningful to interpret them as *mo'o*, the traditional Hawaiian lizard (or dragon) that is an elemental, though troubled, water spirit. At one point in the dance, Pele picked up the largest of these *mo'o* and held it aloft, in a triumphant gesture of fire subduing water. This movement demonstrated mastery of both her dance/storytelling techniques and the energetic ascendancy of Pele back into her rightful status as the volcano goddess. After the dance finished and the light faded from the stage, I thought how appropriate this dance was for the opening. It made clear the Hawaiian's reverence for *'āina*, tradition and mythology that informs the profundity of the Hawaiian culture, and I felt as if I had witnessed a ceremony attended by divine participants.

How Water Disappears

Choreography: Shinichi Iova-Koga

How Water Disappears was danced in total silence with an almost brutal minimalism. The choreography was a reference to *butoh*, a movement that originated in Japan in the late 1950's, early 60's and reflected an intense questioning—at least in *butoh's* early days—of one's place in society as a human and an artist.

Whereas Pele knew her destiny and how to reclaim it with broad, expansive movements, Peiling as the *butoh* dancer remained focused on her inner world, only emerging for brief moments to express wonder, or perhaps a slight annoyance, of things that were going on in her surrounding physical world. Her body seemed to alternate between an inward uncertainty of the spirit and outward exploration of the physical world, and as she shifted perspectives, I felt myself joining her, going inward into my thoughts then outward to the movements onstage. The switching of perspective reminded me of the traditional Japanese *bon* dance, where villages and local family members welcome home the dead for a few days of food, entertainment and communion with the living. In some of the local dances, for example the Nishimonai *bon* dance from rural Akita Prefecture, the dancers move in a choreographed line, first facing inward then outward,

symbolically alternating between the world of the dead and the living. Gestures emanating from the dancer's body, it seems, can exist in both.

Iova-Koga described his dance as being based on the theme of water as a life-giving force. He envisioned images of a child discovering the transitory nature of water that collects in the morning rain and evaporates in the midday sun. Both rain and life are evanescent, and one must enjoy them to the fullest while they are with us.

Hapon

Choreography: Gerald Casel

This dance was well-placed as the third piece in concert. Peiling entered the stage dressed in white and, with Debussy's *Afternoon of the Faun* as background music, began dancing in a modern dance style, totally different from the previous segments. Not surprisingly, throughout the piece Peiling demonstrated an impressive mastery of both modern and classical dance techniques.

Afternoon of the Faun (which originally premiered in 1894) is probably best known as the music to which the Ballets Russes legendary dancer Vaslav Nijinsky's choreographed a sensual and provocative (for the times) dance in 1912. Indeed, shortly into the piece Peiling began to imitate Nijinsky's iconic hand movements; kneeling low on the floor with palms extended in straight lines or at a 45 degree angle from the body. Guest choreographer Casel, inspired by Nijinsky and Debussy, choreographed this piece in 2019 during a residency at the Bogliasco Foundation in Italy, but Peiling's performance was its premiere. The piece was effective, coming as it did immediately after the fiery *Pele Honua Mea* and the watery, introspective butoh dance. Peiling danced with a clever sense of self awareness, and it was refreshing that she did not take herself too seriously and enjoyed the brief channeling of Nijinsky's spirit.

The Sound Keeps Falling

Choreography: Wen-Ching Lin

This piece was a light-hearted and openly humorous respite from the previous works. Holding four bamboo clappers, Peiling moved around the stage to the well-known Taiwanese dance song *Chē gū diào*. The arrangement of the piece she used however, was done on synthesizer with humorous electronic timbres, creating an absurd, manga-like parody of the music. Peiling danced this absurdity to the fullest, made even more effective by a straight poker-face held throughout the dance. She heightened the cartoonish effect with humorous actions; for example, she perched her clappers on her shoulders, where of course they inevitably fell off. She replaced

them, only for them to dislodge once more. The inevitable futility of this unpretentious action reminded me how entertaining simple repetition can be. It added to the cartoonish atmosphere of the choreography and delighted the audience.

To discover the subtext of this dance, however, one apparently had to look beyond its cartoonish veneer. The choreographer explained that he wanted to make the audience consider the present state of traditional folk dances. He asked questions like: *How can one keep these dances alive? What is the place of the traditional folk dance in contemporary society? and How do we make them relevant and meaningful in modern society?* Indeed, these are important questions, but for the moment I just sat back and enjoyed the funky music and fun dance.

Island

Choreography, visuals and text: Keith Hennessy

The stage set for this dance utilized more props than the other dances, including a very large, seven-pointed star (made by the dancer herself from cardboard, tin foil and decorative paper) suspended at the back of the stage and a large plastic tarp, consisting of colorful segments sewn together and laid out on the floor.

The music was abstract and blended well into the background. Both the star and tarp were reminiscent of simple folk art and contrasted the minimalist stage settings of the previous dances.

Peiling made her way through these props, exploring a relationship with them. She danced with her star, then made her way to the tarp, at times completely covering her body with it so that it seemed as if its patterns and colors had a life of their own—whipping across the stage like a giant flag torn from its pole, or a tent with the errant leg or arm protruding from it.

In preparation for the dance, a stage-hand came on and set up a microphone downstage, indicating to the audience that something unusual was going to happen. Near the end of the dance, Peiling suddenly broke the “fourth wall” and made her way to the mic to begin reading, in both Chinese and English, from a set of cards she carried. They were simple statements about her life, like “I have become proficient in cooking,” “I bake as well” or “My mother has a Japanese name.” I wondered if these intriguing declarations were scripted on the card or if they were answers to questions the cards posed.

It was refreshing to hear Peiling vocalize during the performance, though I wished she had forgone the use of a microphone and just allowed her voice to resonate in the small theater.

Nonetheless, the scripted words spoken at the end of the final dance forged a deeper connection with the audience.

Peiling's dances were transparent yet at the same time full of color, imagery and story. In the program notes, Peiling stated that "The performer's body is the container that transforms movement through space and time into something meaningful to individual viewers." Although each dance was laden with cultural references that demonstrated, in the dancer's own words, the "postcolonial body," each of the five dances allowed the viewer to make their own personal interpretation.

Christopher Blasdel resided in Japan for 45 years and is a recognized master of the shakuhachi (Japan's traditional vertical bamboo flute). He has worked with dancers throughout his career, including the pioneering butoh dancers of the 1970's: Akira Kasai, Kazuo Ohno and others. He has written numerous reviews for books and concerts for the Japan Times. He presently resides in Hawai'i and teaches a course on Japanese music at the University of Hawai'i, Mānoa. www.yohmei.com