

Tai Chi master wins audience with paradox

BY MYLES KESTEN

One tip-off that a dance fever struck Convocation Hall Saturday night, was that after the show, the audience boogied out of the hall.

The inspiration came from Tai Chi master Al Chung-liang Huang and flutist Paul Horn, who drew 1,100 people to the sweltering hall for their invocation of the Butterfly Dream, a Taoist paradox about the nature of life and man's perception of reality.

Simply stated, the paradox consists of a philosophical problem. Suppose that during the night you dreamed you were a butterfly. In the morning you awoke to find out that you were merely human.

Who can prove that the morning is reality, and that you are really a human who dreamed of being a butterfly?

Through demonstration and example, Horn and Huang enacted the paradox on stage. Huang played butterfly to Horn's human, and Horn played butterfly to Huang's human.

As you can imagine, much of the evening was taken up with improvisation. Horn would play riff on his flute and inspire a dance from Huang. Then they would reverse roles. One would imitate the other's performance in his own vocabulary of expression, just as the audience interprets the performance of the actor in their active imagination.

Horn brought along some multi-media presentations which illustrated his method of artistic expression. A film showed him playing flute for a captive killer whale in Victoria that 'danced' to the inspiration of the flute. A slide presentation of his encounter with the Great Pyramid of Giza showed Horn 'dancing' (via his flute) to the splendor of the king's chamber.

Horn's presentations were pleasant but were not something that one could take away and call his own. They were one-way streets — either you liked them, or you didn't; and nobody but a Paul Horn would try such stunts.

Right from the start, Huang made it evident that his purpose was not to give the audience a virtuoso performance, but involve it in a personal experience.

His opening statements exploded the facade of theatre immediately. He began by giving the audience an explanation of Tao (pronounced dow), which was about as helpful as a rabbi giving the Spanish Inquisition a concise definition of divinity.

"Tao is Tao, it's the Tao that cannot be Tao, therefore we call it Tao. You are all en-Taoed," he said. The audience was ready to burn him. Then, in true Sinatra fashion, he crooned "Tao-be-Tao-be-Tao, Tao-be-Tao-be-Tao..." and the audience cracked up, totally, unabashedly.

Of course, Huang was playing, as a child would play. The audience loved it because it too, even in the sweltering heat of Convocation Hall, wanted to play. It didn't want a lecture.

Huang played all evening long through the medium of dance. He tuned in to Paul Horn, to the applause of the audience, even to a baby crying in the front rows, and created beautiful improvisations on Tai Chi exercises which amounted to a ballet of the soul. The more appreciation the audience showed him, the greater his performance became.

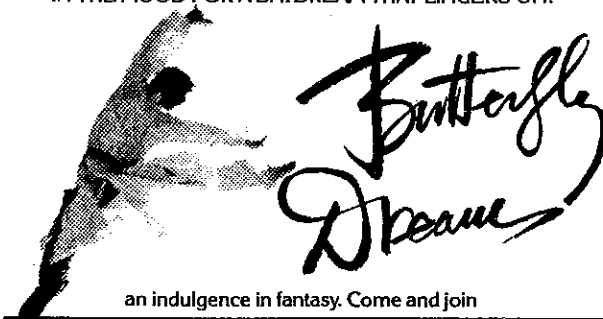
To the audience, Huang was the butterfly, matching acrobatics with a thorough control of movement that convinced the audience, if only for a moment, that he was the likeness of beauty. But to Huang, the audience was the butterfly. He needed their 'chi', or energy, to generate his own creativity.

What can't be ignored, however, is that the attraction of Huang's spontaneity had as much to do with his eastern training as a dancer, calligrapher, and musician, his experience in theatre, film and television, and his accumulated teaching knowledge (primarily of Tai Chi). They make him worth watching.

He is 42 years old and, to quote the man himself, "the synthesis of east and west." By that, one could understand him to be an artist who combines eastern discipline and western chutzpah; or one who has the strength and audacity to be himself.

His enthusiasm was a Saturday night fever of a different sort, sending up the performance, and sending out the audience into the cool evening air of a placid Toronto to boogie up the town.

IN THE MOOD FOR A DAYDREAM THAT LINGERS ON?



an indulgence in fantasy. Come and join

Al Chung-liang Huang

dancer and Tai Chi master. In concert with

Paul Horn

flautist, celebrating the wonders of the child. Saturday, August 26.

John Blofeld

orientalist, re-creating the delights of old China. Monday, August 28.

James Broughton

master of independent cinema, doing the dance of divine madness in a multi-media celebration. Tuesday, August 29.

Convocation Hall, University of Toronto, 8:30 p.m., \$5.50-\$7.70.

BASS
923-3080

Tickets available at all BASS outlets or use your CHARGEX/VISA by calling BASS 923-3080. Also on sale at box office evenings of performances.

CHARGEX
VISA