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Dogugaeshi is a stunning little gem with zen-like charms and ethereal atmosphere

The sound of two hands, clapping

BY JON SANTIAGO

A virtuoso theatrical meditation, Dogugaeshi invites its audience to slow down, lean forward, focus, participate. Underscore participate. This is more than a beautiful display, it is an invitation to actively lose yourself in simply paying attention. Few other works reward patience and a willingness to open oneself to dream-like wonder as handsomely as this one.

Puppeteer Basil Twist has created a lyrical, sensual homage to time with this interplay of hand-painted screens, video projections, puppets, and the ethereal musical accompaniment of Yumiko Tanaka. Appearing on a revolving platform to the right of the stage Tanaka creates haunting soundscapes with her shamisen and koto.

The principal action of the work is in the movement of the screens: horizontally shifting into view, turning to reveal new images, coming together, splitting apart. The effect is slow moving, graceful as a Tai Chi master's dance and equally mesmerizing.

Dogugaeshi achieves amazing visual depth as it marks cycles of creation, decay, and destruction. There is no plot line per se, although there is an evolving narrative. Through images of a traditional Japanese interior with walls of paper screens we see the room assemble itself in infinite regression, fall into disrepair, become overtaken by stylized renderings of wind and water, dragons, golden carp. One world ends, another begins. Cycles renew themselves.

As an art form, Dogugaeshi was in peril of dying out altogether. In a short video sequence, a group of older Japanese women reminisce about their experiences with the Dogugaeshi style of theater. This work, commissioned by the Japan Society of New York, is a meeting of the traditional and the contemporary, a revival and reinvention.

Dogugaeshi is a surreal open-air bazaar of images. It feels generous and gaudy, dignified and heady. Pop art, geometrical patterns, traditional Japanese painting, eye-catching waves of color that offset monochrome subtlety collude in creating this dreamscape.

While most of the music is provided by Tanaka, there's also drumming, chanting, stormy sound effects, snatches of Japanese pop tunes, and a blip of something that may have been a techno version of Debussy's Claire de Lune.

It's a beautiful, spell-binding evening but it's not for everyone. This work is not about consuming entertainment as much as it is giving yourself over to its zen-like calm and self-assurance. If you are willing to do so, you'll find yourself in very good hands indeed