

Spektator: Rough Harmonies

Greg Beatty

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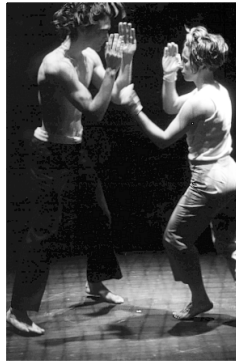
At first glance, dance and martial arts seem incompatible. While the former generally exalts the grace and beauty of the human body, the latter, at least in its Hollywood incarnation, celebrates violence and mayhem. But for Lee Su-Feh and David McIntosh, co-founders of the Vancouver-based Battery Opera, no such contradiction exists. Both are long-time devotees of Tai Chi. They use the discipline to inform their understanding of dance and movement, resulting in an intriguing synergy that was evident in New Dance Horizons' presentation of *Spektator*.

Lee was born in Malaysia and studied traditional Malay and Javanese dance, as well as Modern technique. McIntosh was born in Kentucky, and studied at the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, where he made art videos and played punk rock. Speaking about their involvement in Tai Chi, Lee said, "The superficial [Western] understanding of martial arts is that it's about kicking someone's ass - that element is there. But when you study [Tai Chi], you can't separate it from its underlying philosophy. Taoism is very important. It's all about living in harmony with your environment. "In a dance context, this philosophy affects how Lee and McIntosh interact with their partners and the audience. *Spektator* was mounted as part of NDH's Intempco series, where

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local and visiting artists are assembled to create a temporary dance company. Joining Lee and McIntosh were Patricia Colbert-Houle, Susan Elliott, Billy Marchenski, Jennifer Murray and Philip Sarsons.



1. Battery Opera, 2000. *Spektator*

As with previous Battery Opera productions like *Gecko Eats Fly*, 1998, and *Wake!*, 1999, *Spektator* offered a postmodern melange of dance, theatre, performance and music. Described as an "epic exploration of gladiator chickens," it was inspired by a trip Lee and McIntosh made to the Philippines, where they attended a cockfight. Such testosterone-driven spectacles attract widespread opprobrium in North America, and in many jurisdictions are even illegal. But Burkhard Bilger, in his book *Noodling for Flatheads*, defends cockfighting as a valid, albeit marginalized, cultural pursuit. And somewhat hypocritically, mainstream society has its own spectacles that often result in injury, or even death to participants, activities like boxing, auto-racing and the lesser blood sports of hockey and football.

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In *Spektator*, Lee and McIntosh did not seek to glorify violence. Rather, they were interested in exploring the different agendas that operate in a cockfighting/boxing ring.

For roosters, it's literally a matter of life and death, while boxers, who traditionally come from underprivileged backgrounds, see it as a possible escape from poverty. Then there are the trainers, judges, referees and audience members. Betting figures prominently in both sports; emotional ties are also common, with boxers, in particular, regarded as heroes in their home communities. Finally, like all contact sports, cockfighting and boxing permit people to vicariously express their own aggression.

Spektator opened with McIntosh and Elliott on stage, the former dressed in a tuxedo, the latter in a delicate black dress with a dangling hem. While Elliott performed a dance incorporating angular arm gestures, McIntosh outlined a large square on the floor with chalk. As each side was completed, Elliott was constrained until eventually she was trapped. Then stretching out on the floor McIntosh used his body as a compass to trace a circle within the square. The dual evocation of a boxing/cockfighting ring extended to the performers themselves, who assumed both human and avian identities. In the next vignette, McIntosh was joined in the ring by Colbert-Houle, Marchenski, Murray and Sarsons (Lee did not perform in *Spektator*, but did a separate duet domestic with McIntosh). Each strutted like a rooster, emitting the occasional nervous squawk. The four supporting dancers then went to different corners of the stage, where they practiced fight moves

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while McIntosh shouted and gesticulated in imitation of a bookie soliciting bets from a frenzied crowd. What followed were two scenes where Murray and Marchenski trained with Sarsons and Colbert-House, respectively. After removing Murray's green dress to reveal a sports bra and shorts, Sarsons shadowboxed with her. As the pace accelerated, she became agitated. After several minutes, he reached out to calm her, then forcefully kissed her. They were subsequently interrupted by a bare-chested Marchenski, who entered from the wings for his training session. Striking an authoritative pose, Colbert-House verbally and physically taunted him, first referring to him as a chicken when he was clearly human, then with her superior reflexes, easily evading his attempts to swat her hands, until he was reduced to flailing in frustration. But, as with Murray and Sarsons, a moment of tenderness ensued, perhaps symbolizing the hate/love relationship many athletes have with those who push them to excel.

The climactic scene involved a fight between Murray and Marchenski. As with similar real-life contests, this one was infused with ritual and ceremony, but once carried into the ring by their trainers, the combatants were alone. Facing each other, they grew progressively more belligerent until Murray kicked Marchenski in the belly; in real cockfights, spurs are attached to the roosters' talons to enhance their kicking capacity. Marchenski stood frozen for a moment and slowly crumpled to the floor as the lifeblood seeped from him. Bathed in red light when he expired, he was examined by McIntosh to ensure he was dead. Then, accompanied by a lament, everyone departed, any sorrow Colbert-Houle might

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have felt quickly forgotten as she shifted her focus to her next fight.



2. Battery Opera, 2000. *Spektator*

Inevitably, when you have people imitating chickens, an element of humour creeps in. While this was not fatal to *Spektator*, I found myself wishing that the bloodlust that characterizes a cockfight or boxing match could have been more dramatically evoked. The major obstacle is that much of this fervour is generated by the crowd. Each slash of the combatants' talons or thud of their gloved fists provokes a primal spasm of aggression mixed with fear. The suddenness with which Murray disposed of Marchenski precluded this from happening. Of course, in the final analysis, they were simply play-fighting. To have them engage in a prolonged battle likely would have been a mistake. A sound recording of a real cockfight or boxing match might have helped add atmospheric tension. But until McIntosh and Lee find a way to transform a genteel dance audience into a bloodthirsty mob, *Spektator* will be hard-pressed to capture the true intensity of such events.

Spektator was presented by New Dance Horizons at the Globe Theatre, Regina, May 18 and 19 2001.

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Greg Beatty is a Regina-based freelance critic with a special interest in the arts. With the assistance of a Saskatchewan Arts Board grant, he is currently compiling an anthology of his writings with the goal of offering an overview of visual art practice in Regina during the 90s. He is also a contributing editor for the Regina alternative newspaper *Prairie Dog*, and is scheduled to host Arts (W)rap on Regina's community radio station CJTR.

Photo Credits

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