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Life is a Dream

by CHARLES L. MEE

Originally produced under the title of
My House is Collapsing Toward One Side

Conceived by Christy Honigman and Charles L. Mee
Choreographed and performed by Dawn Saito
Music composed by Myra Melford
Designed by Christy Honigman
Directed by Charles L. Mee

(In its premier at Dance Theatre Workshop, the music was performed
live by Myra Melford, J.A. Deane, Michelle Kinney, and Susan McKeown.)

1

Silence.

A light up very slowly on Dawn, entering up left, hanging up her hat
on the hook, coming toward the center and downstage, as she speaks:

We were in bed
making love in the daylight
there were sounds of voices and movements around the house
but I was not so attentive to them
I heard him whisper in my ear
–teasing me–
to come again
but this time

be very quiet.

Music on this last word.

2

Rolling slowly upstage, with music, in contorted torment and pleasure.

3

Dawn speaks (underscored with music):

I thought:

My house was collapsing toward one side,

the roof had slid off,

and the whole house was leaning against the house next door,

my father's house,

or

my lover's house

and I thought:

this can't go on.

4

Piano solo,

while Dawn sits quietly, and the lights come up behind the scrim to reveal the musicians.

5

Summer afternoon light suffuses stage,
and Dawn slips out of her suit as she speaks:

We slept in the room at the Inn,

there were two fans

bringing air on our bodies

each fan with a different rhythm

he was holding me,

my back up against his body, his stomach

he slept and I listened to his breath in my ear

sometimes it seemed he would stop breathing for a moment
I would pull him closer to me
hoping to hear his breathing restored
and I would have a brief feeling of panic
until I heard him breathe again

Dawn emerges from the pile of clothes,
a butterfly out of the cocoon,
stepping out as though a light comes from inside,
coming downstage center.

6

She turns upstage and then:
whirls with music
ending up curled up on the floor, facing upstage—

7

followed by
this SONG
(while Dawn slowly rolls over to face audience):

Noon
on a summer day
when the weather is so hot
I can't think what to do with myself.
I keep waving my fan
but there isn't a breath of fresh air.
And then, just as I'm thinking
of putting my hand in a bowl of iced water
suddenly:
a letter arrives,
written on a sheet of fine
brilliant red paper
attached to an orchid in full bloom
and I think
how deeply my friend must feel

to have taken such trouble
on such a suffocating day

8

Autumn light

Dawn, lying on floor facing the audience,
speaking this text (in tandem with Myra):

There are some things that cannot be compared:

Night and day.

Summer and winter.

Rain and mist.

Things that are near though distant:

Paradise.

The course of a boat across the water.

Relations between a man and a woman.

When one has stopped loving somebody,
one feels that he has become someone else,
even though he is still the same person.

9

Dawn sits up with big light cue to shift mood,
and speaks:

It was as if
a box of matches
had been struck by a hammer.

I heard no sound
but the glass was shattered on the floor.

I took a deep breath and then
mud and sand were sucked into my mouth.
And then,

I noticed that
the side of my own body
was on fire.

When we reached the river bank,
the river was filled with bodies.
At the same moment, a fire broke out.
And then large pieces of hail began to fall
and my face started hurting.
I stood up in the water
the bodies were floating away from me.

Their fingertips burst into flame
and gradually
the fire spread over their entire bodies.
I was shocked:
hands and fingers that could hold babies,
or turn pages,
just burned away.

10

As lights come back up on musicians this time, they now are in front
of a black backdrop for the remainder of the piece, and we are in a
world of winter darkness.

SONG (partly spoken):

We have cigarettes made of tea;
two hundred and thirty three grams of bread a day;
a package of feta cheese;
the kerosene is running out;
day by day our lamps get dimmer;
only incurable optimists believe they will be buried
next to their families;
there are tanks below our windows;
We no longer switch on the light in our apartments;
no longer use our dinner dishes;
the piles of plastic water buckets in the hallways

no longer bother us;
we've forgotten what it is like to be irritated

by a television commercial;
we don't get angry at the mailman for coming late;
because there is no longer a mailman.

During the song,
Dawn takes off her acid slip,
wrecks her hair,
smears red and black make up down her cheeks
and begins crab walk to up left corner.

11

The Bus Ride

Bus ride music begins immediately on end of song.
Dawn flees for a moment upstage left, then back around to center,
then comes directly downstage with this text (underscored with
music):

I had been holding my son in my arms,
when a young woman in front of me said, "Please
take this seat."
We were just changing places
when suddenly there was a strange sound.

All at once it was dark
and before I knew it,
I had jumped outside.
Fragments of glass had lodged in my son's head.
But he looked at my face and smiled.
He did not understand what had happened.
I had plenty of milk
which he drank all that day.
I think my child sucked the poison right out of my body.
And soon after that

he died.

Dawn is crushed down to the ground, with a boot on her neck.

12

The Shattered Leg—prolonged silence, stillness, at center stage.

Music of deep tragedy. Keening.

Our focus goes to the musicians—who are in the light.

13

Then Dawn speaks with increasing happiness/joy:

When we looked at the moon and Venus
there was a field just in front of us, a farm,
at first I had my back to him
he stood behind me
we looked in silence
then I turned around
so that he could still see the sky
and, while we kissed, there was the sound of a train in the distance,
the whistle, the locomotive rhythm
he put his tongue deep in my mouth
I imagined the train going in a tunnel
the sound of a moving train
so endless, like a heart beat
impossible to imagine it ever stopping.

14

Dawn moves to right in disjointed roll, with music, while Myra speaks:

MYRA

On a blanket in the grass
I was resting
feeling very relaxed
waiting for him to come back
and suddenly,

as if he had dropped down from the sky
he was on top of me
I said
oh
what do you want to do with me?

From roll rising into:
Mouth check: feeling inside mouth as though to find out what is
(still?) there—backing upstage right and going into

15

Crazy Dance with music

16

and segues from end of dance into old lady
then backing straight up,
from down left to up left
body on fire

17

Running Collapsing Running Collapse

start diagonal cross to down right
with 3 collapses—
accompanied by
music with Dante text:

O voi che per la via d'Amor passate,
attendete e guardate
s'elli è dolore alcun, quanto 'l mio, grave;
e prego sol ch'audir mi sofferiate,
e poi immaginate
s'io son d'ogni tormento ostale e chiave.
Amor, non già per mia poca bontate,
ma per sua nobiltate,
mi pose in vita sì dolce e soave,
ch'io mi sentia dir dietro spesse fiata:

«Deo, per qual dignitate
così leggiadro questi lo core have?»
Or ho perduta tutta mia baldanza,
che si movea d'amoroso tesoro;
ond'io pover dimoro,
in guisa che di dir mi ven dottanza.
Sì che volendo far come coloro
che per vergogna celan lor mancanza,
di fuor mostro allegrezza,
e dentro da lo core struggo e ploro.

[TRANSLATION:

O you who on the road of love pass by,
Attend and see
If any grief there be as heavy as mine.
Hear me and then consider: am not I
The keep and key
Of all the torments sorrow can combine?
Not my slight worth but Love's nobility
Did once to me
A life of sweet serenity assign.
Often behind me I hear men sigh:
'How can he be
Deserving of such joy beyond confine?'
All my elation has now ebbed away
Which once came flowing from Love's treasure-store,
And I, now poor,
Lack even words, and know not what to say.
And so, like those who secretly endure,
Their needs concealing from the light of day,
In aspect gay,
Within my heart I pine and grieve the more.]

18

The light of spring.

A tree in spring: beginning in a liquid pool, butterflies inside the
mind, Dawn rises in sinuous figure 8, one arm straight up into air
with the body following the arm

As Dawn rises and begins arcing movement to exit,
Myra speaks solo:

Of all human qualities, the greatest is sympathy–
for clouds even
or snow
meadows
the banks of ditches
wet ravines
turf bogs
rotted wood
silk stockings
buttons
combs of horn
birds nests
prisms
jasmine
orange flower water
lessons for the flute
hummingbirds
a quill pen
a red umbrella
some faded thing
handkerchiefs made of lawn
of cambric
of Irish linen
of Chinese silk
seagulls
the white of an egg
an earth worm in vinegar
an earth worm in honey
dog's blood
the dung beetle
driftwood
a pebble right side up
the bark of an elm
the ash of an old shoe
a mouse cut in two
goat dung

an earthen cup
a new wooden chest
blue spruce
pale eyes
black pitch
a child eating strawberries
duck eggs
beach parsley
wet lips
club moss
In spring the dawn.
In summer the nights.
In autumn the evenings
In winter the early mornings
the burning firewood
piles of white ashes
the ground white with frost
spring water welling up
the hum of the insects
piano virtuosos
orchestras
the human voice
the pear tree
The sunlight you see in water as you pour it from a pitcher into a
bowl.
The earth itself.
Dirt.
Music comes in at end of text.

19

Through the meadow exit:
an arc toward stage left,
up and around to exit stage right.

Music continues with slow fade to darkness.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT:

The text for this piece was composed the way Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces in the late teens and early twenties. Some of the texts were inspired by or taken from the work of Sei Shonagon, the survivors of Hiroshima, Dante Alighieri, Zlatko Dizdarevic, and Dawn Saito, among others.

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