The Passage of Time

A closer look at Elapse's time motif with Principal Jessica Collado

By Jasmine Fuller Cane

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Disha Zhang descended upon the Bayou City to create *Elapse*, her first piece for a major American ballet company as part of Houston Ballet's 50th anniversary. Using inspiration from Zeng Xiaogang's nature-tinged, introspective score, Zhang entered the studio brewing with the ballet's central theme of the passage of time. Through the universal language of dance and an accompanying translator, Zhang began her three-week stint building the ballet by exploring movement through improv with Houston Ballet dancers.

"Disha would put music on, and we

would test the waters," remembers Principal Jessica Collado, who was part of the original cast. "She'd ask us to pretend to be leaves or a tree falling to the ground. I think she was trying to find movement that incorporated nature on its descent or dying off."

The results from the improv sessions are manifested in the slow, drifting motions seen through the piece, whether it's a dancer sliding off into the shadows or lifts between partners mimicking a tree trunk and its growing branches. These movements alone give the essence of time or life lost, but juxtaposed with quick movements within seconds, time's

fickleness emerges as another illusion of each passing pulse.

"You hear that phrase all the time, 'the days are long, but the years are short.' It couldn't be more appropriate," Collado reflects. Now a mom of two, Collado was newly pregnant with her first-born at the ballet's premiere. "Sometimes the days feel epically long, but then I blink, and my son turned four."

"We are always losing something living our lives," said Zhang in an interview with *China Daily.* "I believe different people will feel different about my work depending on their ages and personal experiences."

RECURRING THEME

Over the course of the 18-minute piece, dancers repeatedly cover their face, which is left open to the viewer's interpretation. "A lot of times it also comes with deflating in the torso, which I think could be a sense of dying," Collado says.

LASER FOCUS

When it came to creating the ballet, Collado notes that Disha would demonstrate with intense focus in her eyes, "almost like she was peering into another world." This incorporated gaze is especially apparent in unison sections, offering opposition to covered eyes.

MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Humans, animals, nature – we all feel the effects of time, and Disha's costume selections echo this sentiment. Dancers don headpieces, fondly referred to as "branchlers," a mix of branches and antlers. Peer closer, and you'll see accompanying aged makeup and matching whisps of grey hair.



Elapse

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WHAT YOU'RE WATCHING

Originally debuted during Houston Ballet's 50th anniversary, *Elapse* is Disha Zhang's first piece choreographed for an American company. Through emotion-oriented choreography, *Elapse* expresses the passage of time and loss. Zhang offers a poem in tandem with the ballet:

Elapse (In Meaning of Time Passing By) 假如时光能回头,请你带我走; 假如时光能接受, 不再有分离和忧愁。 有人望着你,自由的向前走; 我愿变作你,从来就不回头。 假如时光换成我,也要泪儿流; 假如我是那时光,我也不回头。

Translation:

If the clock could turn back, let it take me away;
If time was more forgiving, goodbyes and sorrows would disappear.
A stranger gazes at you, coming towards you freely;
If only I could be like you, never looking back.
If time were me, time will weep;
if I were the time, may the past never be seen.

WHAT YOU'RE LISTENING TO

Inspiring Elapse's movement and theme is a score from Chinese composer and musician, Zeng Xiaogang. The score begins with the sound of a tree falling and continually combines sounds from nature, electronic beats, and melodies from the guqin, a traditional Chinese stringed instrument lauded for its subtlety and refinement. A guqin soloist, Xiaogang says of the instrument, "Guqin is the teacher and friend of my life."

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