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Camera, Action

by Li Cornfeld

LEE/Gendary reviewed October 14, 2008

“A good fight” says Bruce Lee’s martial arts teacher in Soomi Kim’s production, “should be like a small play, played seriously.” If the martial artist’s maxim holds true, then the production is like a good fight. A cleverly titled deconstruction of gender in the life of Asian-American action star Bruce Lee, *Lee/gendary* is remarkable for its graceful aggression and unapologetic self-seriousness.



Lee/gendary
Photo Credit: Steven Schreiber

The play tells Lee’s life story in a mostly linear fashion through a variety of contrasting performance techniques: found and imagined dialogue, live music and filmed projections, martial arts fight sequences and stylized dance all find their way into the single act production. Under the direction of Suzi Takahashi, the multidisciplinary performance achieves a fast-paced fluidity without ever growing sloppy or even rushed.

The talented ensemble plays a variety of roles, from nameless school bullies and adoring fans to lovers who deeply influenced Lee’s life. At times, the cast is divided into racially “appropriate” roles (for example, the white actors play British bullies and the Asian actors play Chinese bullies; both, it seems, motivated young Bruce to take up martial arts in self defense). In other moments, the cast functions as a chorus, where presence takes precedence over ethnicity.

While the other performers shift between a variety of recurring characters, Kim plays Bruce Lee at various stages of his life. A Korean-American theater performer trained in gymnastics, dance, and martial arts, she says in publicity materials that she was inspired to craft a piece about Bruce Lee after learning that he had been given a female name at birth in order to ward off evil spirits. Kim inhabits Bruce without irony. Her female body draws attention to the issue of gender; her committed performance disregards it as a non-issue. It’s an effective dichotomy, especially given that Lee’s identity is more often examined through a racial lens than a sexual one.



Lee/gendary
Photo Credit: Steven Schreiber

Although the production sometimes features male and female perspectives of Lee and of martial arts in general, it’s too smart to ascribe particular gendered meanings to different aspects of his identity; his human complexity is never diminished. The play missteps in its final moments, when Lee literally battles different aspects of himself to the death.

LEE/GENDARY

HERE Arts Center

Category: Experimental
Written by: Derek Nguyen
Directed by: Suzi Takahashi
Produced by: Not available.
Opens: October 14, 2008
Closes: October 30, 2008
Running Time: 1 hr 15 mins

Theater: HERE Arts Center
Address: 145 Avenue of the Americas
 New York, NY 10013
[Yahoo! Maps Directions](#)

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BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$20.00
 None available.
Phone: Online Ticketing Number
Online Ticketing:
[Show's Website](#)

CREDITS

Creative Team
Created by: Soomi Kim
Written by: Derek Nguyen
Directed by: Suzi Takahashi
Produced by: HERE Arts Center
Light Designer: Lucrecia Briceno

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Surrounding Kim with full-length mirrors, the ensemble would fit at home in a chorus scene of Lerner and Leowe's *Camelot* as the play's rapid-fire indications of Lee's inner turmoil give way to heavy-handedness.

A more sophisticated use of the chorus occurs in a scene during which the courtship, wedding, and marriage of Lee (Kim) to Linda (Ariel J. Shepley) is enacted in pantomime to the Everly Brothers' *All I Have to do is Dream*, which sets the sixties time period. More essential to the ambiance than period, however, is the ensemble, which lines the dimly-lit stage while executing slow, repetitive martial arts infused choreography and, occasionally, holding tea lights. Thanks to the performers' sense of intent and Takashi's steadfast direction, the scene achieves a whimsical aesthetic just short of ironic. That impressive balance suits the spirit of *Lee/gendary* beautifully.

About the only time irony enters the picture in *Lee/gendary* comes when the performers act out scenes from Lee's movies while lip-synching the soundtrack. Isolating the use of irony to those scenes highlights the discrepancy between Lee's inner life, which *Lee/gendary* purports to explore, and the life the films imply he led. It's a cute choice that reminds audience members less familiar with action films of the qualities of his success while providing his fans an opportunity to enjoy the hero's famous lines.

Lee/gendary has returned to the HERE Arts Center after premiering two summers ago in HERE's now-defunct American Living Room Festival. The show then received a slot in last year's First National Asian American Theater Festival. That production history makes itself apparent in this clean, confident production.



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Music Composed by:

Jen Shyu

Additional Music

Composed by: Adam Rogers

Choreographers: Soomi

Kim and Airon Armstrong

Tabla Player: Dibyarka Chatterjee

Cast

Soomi Kim as Bruce Lee

Shing Ka as

Yang/Cheun/Ensemble

Constance Parng as

Yin/Betty/Ensemble

Pai Sen Wang as Yip

Man/Ensemble

Ariel J. Shepley as

Linda/Ensemble

Walker Lewis as James

Coburn/Pierre

Berton/Ensemble

Crew

Stage Manager: Leta

Tremblay