

# thINKIngDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Rich Tong

## From the Studio: "MAYDAY" with Grace Tong

by ankita

On a summer evening in Seattle, I walked into Base: Experimental Arts+Space to review choreographer Grace Tong's latest trio, *MAYDAY MAYDAY MAYDAY*, and interview her about *MAYDAY*'s upcoming run at NOD Theater.

Entering the studio, Tong was flustered; *MAYDAY* was part of a self-produced national tour, co-produced with choreographer Heather Dutton. Dutton had just tested positive for COVID and needed to remove her work from the Seattle tour stop, while Tong needed to carry on with preparing for the next day's show. Five years out from 2020, and COVID is still sending artists reeling.

Despite *MAYDAY*'s alarm-bell title and the administrative chaos surrounding the sudden change in show plans, Tong deftly kept her cast calm while she herself flitted around the studio, juggling the roles of director, choreographer, producer, and performer. As she tightened a yellow bow in her hair, I stole a moment to chat with her about the work I was about to witness. Once I was seated, watching *MAYDAY*'s buoyant half-hour collage of animated doom, Tong's words began to come alive –

Tong defined *MAYDAY* as a triptych "built on parodying assimilation as a repetitive process," as seen in events like "cleaning, the humor of clowning, and the formation of seaglass—organic practices of whittling away at edges."

The first part of the triptych began with clear references to cleaning. The ensemble brushed one another's bodies, sometimes gently, sometimes vigorously, always with Tong's intention to "make something new/clean/palatable/soft—easier to look at or feel." This assimilative aspect of cleaning slowly shifted to a display of incongruent power dynamics, with performers Rachel Ha-Eun Lee and Tong facing off against Hiroka Nagai's ethereal, but stubborn persona. Dead-set on being seated on the floor, Nagai was repeatedly wrestled off the ground by Lee and Tong, only to resist and drop down to the ground with a comedic "plunk." Nagai then abandoned her manufactured game, wandering the room, falling sporadically in ways that increasingly tested Tong and Lee's collective efforts to catch

her. In the end, Lee and Tong stood laughing while Nagai yelled on the floor.

The trio then outfitted themselves in protective gear, signaling the beginning of section two. They teetered around the space, testing the limits of their gear-hardened bodies through off-balance headstands, kneespins, and other bruise-worthy physical challenges. Through the physicality, social dynamics shone clear in the imaginary weight straining Lee's back and Nagai's exuberant exploration of her body's capacities. As Tong described to me, each of the performers represented "a different facet of the community." Nagai was "the protected," testing boundaries. Lee was the figurehead, protecting. Tong was a follower, waiting for Nagai's lead.

The last section began as Nagai again took the lead, changing the game and shedding her protective gear, much to Lee and Tong's dismay. Suddenly, the performers were not human; they were bodies in a landscape, tumbling forward in a haunted current, binding one foot and releasing, moving downstage. The audio built as bodies tangled and untangled, whittling away like sea glass.

Concluding on this somber note, *MAYDAYMAYDAYMAYDAY* left me intrigued by the abundance within this whimsical work about wasting away. I had a hard time placing MAYDAY's aesthetics, and I wanted to ask Tong how she self-defines her work and its challenges. After doling out post-show notes, and a much-needed exhale, Tong answered some of these lingering questions about how MAYDAY came to be –

**ankita sharma:** I was struck by the multiple modalities of making that I saw in *MAYDAY* – what processes inform your body of work?

**Grace Yi-Li Tong:** My compositions are made through movement collage and face dance. Just as with paper collages, movement collages build new ideas out of ideas that already exist. Face dance, on the other hand, is something that I coined, which is now a big part of my practice. At one point, I got bored with dancing and started making fun of myself, working with my face as the leader of the movement. When I used my face, I could build different characters that wouldn't exist by leading from my right knee, left elbow, or other parts of the body, which I was taught to lead from growing up in post-modern dance.

I started doing timed movement studies where I would stretch the face for extended periods. I thought about how to distort my entire being from the face and then bring it back to something more human, palatable, recognizable. Now, when I start new work with a group, we explore how to distort the body using magnitude, speed, and geography of the face.

**as:** Where do you think that impulse to make fun of things came from?

**GT:** It came from having to fit into dance spaces that didn't feel good to me. There's something resistant about making fun of the restrictive expectations of ballet and modern training.

**as:** What are some expectations that others place on your artistry now?

**GT:** Everyone expects me to make work about "being Asian." My actual interest is in making work about my body and what people expect out of it - observing social phenomena and redefining those parameters. I've also never fit into one genre. You know, people will recognize that I am being a clown, and then they see a whole dance-based show. I'm inspired by things like clowning and pantomime and their clarity and theatricality, but I don't solely fit into them. I'm influenced by all of my learnings in abstract dance and dance theater.

**as:** Does not identifying with a genre make it more necessary to self-produce?

**GT:** Yes, this self-produced tour was a response to a general scarcity of opportunities in the industry and also to a scarcity of opportunities that fit my work. It's hard to describe my work in a 3-word tagline. The best way to describe work is performance, so I self-produced.

**as:** What challenges have you faced self-producing?

**GT:** The biggest hurdle has been people getting COVID. We can't change the show date, the housing, or travel easily. So, I've been learning how to protect dancers while honoring the work that goes into producing a show, wearing multiple hats. You need a lot of flexibility as a self-producer, which they don't necessarily prepare you for in a BFA program...

**as:** Would you recommend that early-career artists self-produce?

**GT:** It depends—I committed to self-producing because I wanted to share my work even though I don't currently have institutional support. Making performance is tricky because you need to share it, and there's just not always the option to do that. You could be waiting a long time applying for things, so if you want to soften that stress of "I don't have a platform to share my work," then I would recommend at least thinking about it.

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Wrapping up our conversation, I was glad to hear that Tong was undeterred by the difficulties of self-producing. I left the studio pondering the challenge of mutability—which in her case was the challenge of finding institutions that can support Asian aesthetics without classical references; clowning infused with the discipline of a highly-trained dancer; and playful theatrics that underscore sardonic meaning. As institutionalized opportunities dwindle, I hope artists can follow in her footsteps and find ways to share their work, even if it means taking on new challenges and carving their own path.

[MAYDAYMAYDAYMAYDAY](#), Grace Tong, NOD Theater, August 28-29.

ankita in conversation with [Grace Yi-Li Tong](#), In-Person Interview, August 27.

Homepage Image Description: *A mischievous joy permeates the image, as one performer with blunt black bangs seems to cheer with an open-mouthed grin, shoulders reaching up to her ears. To her left, another stands gazing at her, with a grin just as wide, but a tad more sinister, an open jazz hand covering her face. Behind the first is a taller person with a yellow bow, tucking something into the first performer's black-and-white luxury jumpsuit.*

Article Page Image Description: *3 performers stand onstage—the first in an all-white mesh skirt and tulle skirt, blankly looking directly at the camera with a forced smile, one hand to the head, and the other on her stomach. To her right, two performers mingle, teasing each other and laughing. One is outfitted in protective gear—a helmet, kneepad, elbow pads—and a multicolored SHEIN shirt with yellow bermuda shorts. The other is in a yellow poncho, gleefully sticking her tongue out, taunting her companion.*

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