

EdFringe 2025: Practice of ZEN

Edinburgh News

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11 Aug 2025

Not being fluent in Cantonese, I relied on English subtitles on a TV screen beside the stage for Theatre Ronin's Practice of Zen; but my eye kept being drawn back to the elegance and beauty of the dancers and the sparse sets.

As a result, my notes were equally sparse; what I can tell you is that this production conjures an enchanted setting for a story inspired by a child on a Hong Kong rooftop.

As jumbo jets bank steeply for the old Kai Tak airport, almost touching the TV aerials of Kowloon City, the child's imagination takes flight.

Zen is a Buddhist doctrine seeking enlightenment through meditation and by decluttering the mind, and the producers suggest that this clarity transforms the set and performances.

I certainly appreciated this starkness and it perhaps even allowed me to meditate, relaxing to enjoy the pure visual and sound imagery of the performance, if not the narrator's entire story.

Within Zen is the world of Wuxia (pronounced Whoosha), a Chinese fiction genre combining dance with supernatural martial arts, also portrayed in the feature film Crouching tiger, Hidden Dragon.

The child's memories are those of the director/writer Alex Tam, who grew up in Hong Kong.

As the audience take their seats, an old TV shows grainy Wuxia films from the 1970s, but this sequence was too short for the last arrivals to see.

These fuel the fantasy on which the child (Tam) embellishes his story, which includes bullying, dreams, flying with birds, love, and in true operatic style, a transgender character.

Amid mannered sword fights among screeds of white paper, a wise man arrives to sooth the confusion in the child's mind, at last confirming that love is invincible.

A bird of mercy, conveyed touchingly by a folded paper eagle, bestows its Wuxianic blessing on the characters and calm is restored.

Which is what happened to Kowloon when Kai Tak closed in 1988.

For sheer sensuality and exquisite dance style this production is a delight.

Forget the martial arts; who needs fighting when love can conquer all?

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