

The 14th Incarnation

Review by Steve Capra

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The Buddha Prince is a magical outdoor piece presented by TigerLion Works. It traces the life of His Holiness The Dalai Llama, from his birth to his exile in India. The story is presented by an actor playing His Holiness as an adult, respectfully representing him with a delicate Tibetan accent and a voice that breaks occasionally into falsetto. The premise is that he's talking to a NY Times reporter – played very nicely with a tense physical life unlike any in the DL's milieu. As the priest presents his life, we see him as a child and as that unfortunate adolescent burdened with representing his country when the Chinese invaded.

The script is based on epic theater techniques – but they've been made gentle. There's extraordinary mask work - yaks, monkeys and tigers dance, using their distinctive and natural movements. The play is presented in Central Park, and we cover a few acres as we travel from one scene to the next (it calls itself "a walking play"). The yaks and monkeys lead the way, and sometimes the tigers just *hang out* on the shrubbery – it's wonderful. Place is defined mostly by prayer flags and wicker screens.

The story begins in the child's birth town, where he was identified as the 14th incarnation of the Dalai Lama by a government search party, and thus chosen to be the future spiritual and governmental leader of Tibet. When the leader of the search party speaks, she's echoed by another actress. It's a great way for the characters to lose individuality (although I don't see why the search party has been made to look like clowns).

We travel with him to Lhasa, on his unfortunate trip to China, and finally to India. Each culture is expressed through music and dance. In the Himalayas, the musicians use drums, cymbals, and Tibetan horns several feet long - they have an unearthly sound. Sometimes the native instruments are combined with banjos and accordions. China is represented by a backdrop of Mao, and the army's harsh march is at odds with the grace we've been watching. Finally, in India, the dancers do the Dragon Dance under that long, colorful dragon puppet.

We're given some genuine insights into this singular life. "I did not know what it meant to be The Dalai Lama" he tells us as we watch the child carried in a litter from his home to live in The Potala in Lhasa. And later, when the young man has made the error of trusting the Chinese: "I felt that Mao was completely genuine.... I was young."

The play's structure is nicely served when at the end the young man (he was 24 when he was exiled) gives his mantle to the older DL – it sews the play together. And when the reporter decides to stay in India in the DL's entourage, we're absorbed into the fabric.

I would have liked to see the exile to India as the climax of the play rather than its end – there's material in the DL's life to sustain a second act, as Buddhism was reborn and the holy man became an international celebrity. The production is in fact presented to coincide with his teaching tours. But be that as it may - this is a delightful piece. No staging could be lovelier than the leaves falling on this whimsical and thoughtful production.