

# BOONDOCKS SIMPLY INCREDIBLE

From the beginning it was simply incredible. "Mel Wong Will Dance in Forest." The headline jumped out of the pages of the weekly *Holbrook Tribune-News*. There it was, among the articles on upcoming bridge parties and rummage sales, and the ads for the "Church of Your Choice" and the "Large Selection of Western Wear" available out at the Holbrook Truck Stop.

Yes, it was true. Mel Wong, "one of today's premier modern-dance choreographers," was coming all the way from New York City to dance in the Petrified Forest, a stretch of badlands that already had a reputation as one of the eeriest places on the planet.

Mel Wong was on a quest to rediscover "the essence of dance." Folks in Holbrook probably had no idea the essence of dance had been lost, or that it was hiding in the colored rock formations outside of town. But as Mel Wong would say, the power, the spirit of the badlands would inspire a dance unlike any seen before.

"I know it sounds corny, but that's how I feel," says Mel Wong. "Every place has its aura. I try to capture it through movement."

Just exactly what Mel Wong does is hard to put into words. "I work

unconsciously," he explains.

But however he does it, Mel Wong has danced the Superstition Mountains, Baja California, the Great Wall of China. Last year, invited to be a visiting artist at Arizona State University, he happened to swing through the Petrified Forest. Struck by the landscape, right away he wanted to dance.

The people in charge of the Petrified Forest, the rangers who run it as a national park, didn't quite know what to do when Mel Wong asked for permission. It was, as far as anyone can tell, the first time anyone had wanted to capture the aura of a national park that way.

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So Mel Wong arrived in the Petrified Forest a few weeks ago, along with his entourage of six dancers and two filmmakers who were to record the event for a later staging in New York.

Folks in Holbrook found out what Mel was doing when they read the story in the local paper, which explained the intent of the dance was to make them "think about how our society would look if it were suddenly preserved and petrified."

For four days the dancers writhed and kicked and twirled and swooned in costume over the stark terrain, attracting crowds of stunned tourists who had traveled hundreds of miles to the park expecting to find anything but what they actually found. The tourists had come

from places like Ohio and North Dakota, which have, one would assume, entirely different types of auras than those Mel Wong was capturing in the Petrified Forest.

As Mel Wong and his dancers would tell you, the dance in the forest summed up several different "spaces," and just about every aspect was "incredible."

It began with a ritual sacrifice at Blue Mesa, a space of eroded mounds banded in purples, dark blues, mauves and grays. There was a procession of dancers dressed in white; then a nude woman lay motionless on the ground as Mel, clad only in a white loincloth, danced above her on top of a nearby mound.

Mel was capturing the essence of something, a bird, perhaps an eagle. Nobody was quite sure. But everyone agreed it was incredible.

In the days that followed, through rain and lightning and under clouds and sun, Mel's unconscious ideas took shape as the camera rolled. He had his dancers dancing on the mounds until pounds of the wet clay stuck to their Reeboks. They climbed onto ledges, stuck their heads into crevices, threw pebbles on the ground, rubbed each other all over with mud. Sometimes they wore black leotards with white bands that made them one with the geology.

In one very incredible space they found a lone bush growing and danced around it with slow spiritual gestures. On a crumbling lava field, they donned colored jackets and sunglasses and sat in folding chairs.

The climactic event, though, was the wallow in the Rio Puerco. The dancers had been warned about the quicksand, but the danger of the space only made the

whole thing even more incredible. As a crowd of tourists gawked from a highway bridge, the dancers rolled around in the muddy water and muck, wearing only flesh-colored leotards. They squeezed the mud between their fingers and felt the power there.

Finally it was over, time for Mel Wong to go back to his own space, a loft apartment in New York. Eventually the film that captured the essence of dance in the Petrified Forest will be shown in a theatre in New York. Mel Wong's dancers will perform live, and special musical compositions will be played. It will, no one doubts, be quite incredible.

But the final product of Mel Wong's unconsciousness may never make it back to Holbrook. Funding for a road tour is in doubt. The Arizona Commission on the Arts refused to back the project, and the National Endowment of the Arts doled out a miserly \$4,000. The government of Ronald Reagan doesn't exactly believe in paying people to wallow around in the Rio Puerco.

Perhaps it's just as well. Folks in Holbrook didn't really seem that interested in finding out how their society would look if it were suddenly petrified. Not many joined the crowds of gaping tourists at the park. They were probably busy with the other happenings that week: Out at the fairgrounds, the county fair was going on, with the big calf scramble, the Rodeo Queen Dance and a performance by A-Yan-A the trick buffalo — which was, in its own way, incredible.

## BY RAY RING