

## Review

by Michael Iachetta

They are staging the multimedia "Counting the Children," subtitled "a poignant story of lost childhood," this weekend at the Mark Ruhala Studio, 10 Washington Ave., Hastings, in a performance that can best be described as poetry in motion with artistic overtones. It is billed as a collaboration among Westchester's finest creative talents – and it comes close to living up to its billing as it focuses on a dreamy theme that, in essence, asks "Where do all lost childhoods go?"

As the Mark Ruhala Performance Ensemble presents the work, "Counting the Children" becomes more than an award-winning tone poem by poet/critic/essayist Dana Gioia, a finalist for the 1992 National Book Critics Award in criticism. Gioia's collection of poems, "The Gods of Winter," in which "Counting the Children" appears, was chosen by London's Poetry Society Book Club as its main selection, an honor rarely given to American authors.

The poem is heady stuff, with symbols clanging if not clashing against the backdrop of a wall-length mirror that reflects figures dancing to original new-age music worthy of recording.

Gioia tells the generational, melting-pot story of a Chinese accountant whose father worked with an abacus while he

# 'Counting the Children' long on art, short on dance



Debi Flower, Jo Ann Ogawa, Eleanor Jardim-Green and Susu Hauser in "Counting the Children" at Mark Ruhala Studio in Hastings tonight and March 13 at 8:30 p.m.

uses an adding machine/computer to try to make life add up to something he feels was in the bones of his ancestors, dimly remembered or never met. When one of his wealthy kin dies without

a will, authorities send the accountant, Mr. Choi, to audit the estate.

That's how our hero, played by the talented Jo Ann Ogawa, winds up in the house of a rich recluse with a double life – a one-time seductress who winds up as a bag lady of sorts roaming the town at night, sifting through garbage and collecting discarded dolls. The result is a veritable valley of dolls, rows upon row of dolls stretching across a wall that must be close to 70 feet long.

Those dolls have been painted into a stirring mural that spills over into paintings that line the studio walls. And as the work progresses, those paintings come to life in the form of dance students from Mark Ruhala's Performance and Children's Ensemble.

As the work unfolds, the staging shifts from pantomime to dance as the dolls' owner – the lithe, lovely and versatile Teresa Perret – sketches her lifestyle, with all its ups and downs, in Martha Grahamesque moves with accents of Agnes De Mille.

As this is going on, we have an omnipresent narrator, the silken-voiced dancer Michael Day, reciting Gioia's poetry like a disembodied spirit, while atonal sounds resound around him. At times, those sounds become chants from an assembly of living dolls hanging out around a piano/synthesizer.

All these goings-on lead up to Mr. Choi dreaming troubled dreams and fearing for the life of his daughter, the ancient faces returning in the child, the accountant striving for "the perfect and eternal in the way that only numbers are, intangible but real, infinitely divisible yet whole. But we do not possess it in ourselves. We die, and it abides, and we are one with all our ancestors, while it divides, over and over, common to us all."

Heady stuff, indeed. Or pretentious  
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claptrap. It all depends on one's point of view. From where we were sitting, it shaped up as a mind-stretching artsy-craftsy entertainment long on picturesque poetry yet short on real dance, heavy on improvisation yet standing tall artistically with strong music by Robert Lindner, ably backed up by Tom Green on synthesizer, and with striking set design and paintings by Lisa Samalin, Joanne Pagano and Claire Watson Garcia.

If you desired, you could sit on cushions placed in a circle with a kind of sandbox in the middle and you could play with toys in that sandbox as you searched for your own lost childhood, with mimes as guides. I opted for a straight-backed chair by the piano.

After a while, I began thinking of the evening as a kind of "Hello, Dolly!" with angst instead of Carol Channing. I wanted to see more dancing, not necessarily of the "Chorus Line" variety. More meaningful movement was needed to flesh out the words, words, words.

As it stands now, only the eccentric doll collector did any real dancing while the rest of the cast went through the motions.

All in all, though, "Counting the Children" is worth seeing. The presentation figures to mature with time and get better with more performances. And MRPE is worth encouraging as a not-for-profit theater dedicated to bringing fresh works to the stage. Tickets: \$20. Information/reservations: 478-5825.