

Lily Cai Entertains

- Octovia Roca, Chronicle Dance Critic
Saturday, May 31, 1997

A curious double bill at Theater Artaud on Thursday night first created a lot of excitement and then nearly emptied the house as patrons rushed to the exit well before the end.

The stream of walk-outs during "Blue Mandarin," danced by London's Bi Ma Dance Company, grew so steady and diverting that it amounted to audience participation. On the other hand, there were moments of great beauty and some truly beautiful dancing in the evening's first half.

That was when Lily Cai Chinese Dance took the stage, with Cai's uniquely American melting pot of traditional pop and the cutting edge of post-modern dance. The all-female, quite beautiful company also boasts a determined desire to entertain. These are seductive dancers, and they had no trouble seducing the crowd in Cai's 1993 "Dynasty Suite," her 1996 "Begin From here" and in the world premiere of her "Candelas."

Serpentine Lines

All three dances glorified the female figure, with bodies often shaped into a serpentine line and hand movements sultry and feline. Cai's way with sculptural images is striking. The dance is set to a commissioned score by Gang Situ and Gary Schwantes that blends Chinese classical elements with an urbane international feel.

The groupings are as fluid as the phrasing, which was consistently lovely. The dancers moved from the Tang Dynasty's ribbon dances to the surprisingly sexy promenade on wooden platform shoes evoking the Qing era. A solo, "Straw Hat Girl," danced by Cai, pointed to her curiosity as much as to her solid ballet training at the Shanghai Opera. The finale, a parade of rich costumes and richer smiles, was stunning.

"Begin From Here" also uses banners and ribbons, sometimes in ways that might look best done by hundreds in a vast stadium, but elsewhere achieving surprising intimacy. If the moves at times fell somewhere between gymnastic display and a bout of disco fever, the anguished taped score by Situ and Schwantes kept the whole affair on a higher plane.

Best of all, the geometric patterns created by the women's standing on tall pedestals as they waved green banners in spirals to the floor created the sort of momentum that the late Alwin Nikolais would have applauded.

“Candelas,” danced to a tape of the ravishing fourth movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 5, began with a procession of candles by Mandy Huang, Tammy Li, Rita Liang, Ada Liu, Phong Voong and Lucy Yu. There were sultry shoulder shimmies, and often there was stillness.

The women played with fire, rising and collapsing, bringing the flames together like so many petals of a dangerous flower. Cai’s was often a disarmingly simple response to the monumental Mahler score. It was original and quite attractive.

‘Blue Mandarin’

“Blue Mandarin” is by Pit Fong Loh, a Malaysian choreographer working in Great Britain. I gather that the piece has something to do with the uncertainty facing Hong Kong as it is handed over to China, and there are moments near the end when the image of sad confusion and dashed hopes was clear and even touching.

But for an hour and a half, the four Bi Ma dancers did little but change from regulation Mao suits to Suzie Wong dresses and then to Gap outfits. Not much else went on in this aggressively boring dance, which not even the usually supportive Artaud audience could take sitting down. Seeing who would get up and leave next was the most entertaining part of the show.