



The Sacramento Bee

DANCE REVIEW

By William Glackin, Bee critic at Large
Monday, April 21, 1997

Lily Cai traces exotic history of Chinese dance

In the first six spellbinding minutes, Lily Cai and her Chinese Dance Company served notice to their audience in the Main Theater at UC Davis on Saturday night that they were in for an evening that would be not only exotic but brilliantly theatrical.

The piece was titled – perfectly - “Static and Dynamic.” The program added: “Inspired by the statue of Thousand Hands-Buddha.”

Against a changing projected backdrop of patterns of stylized hands, a figure like a statue of Buddha sat in a pool of white light. Strains of Asian music, perhaps produced on an electronic organ, came from the loudspeakers. The figure appeared to have seven pairs of arms and hands, the top two clasped above its head.

The arms began to dance. They contracted into a compact mass behind the figure and expanded again into the spokes of a circle. They curved up and down in configurations like the tentacles of a sea creature. The hands fluttered. As the percussive sounds of a gamelan orchestra joined the organ, the arms moved in slow rotation like a wheel. The motion was constant, and so were the changes in the backdrop. It was a fascinating sight, never the same twice. As the lights finally dimmed, you could see the hands glittering to the end. But the only figure you ever saw was the “statue,” and its basic position never changed.

When the storm of applause finally ebbed, Lily Cai Walked out from the wings without her headdress to greet the audience and describe what they were about to see: A remarkably varied program that sampled traditional Chinese dance as far back as the Tang Dynasty (618-907); went onto more modern vision, including the spectacular use of long, hotly colorful scarves manipulated like ribbons; and deployed the dancers of the company holding lighted candles in an elaborate, expanding dance ritual to the music of the slow movement from the Mahler Fifth Symphony.

The program was first of all an impressive demonstration of the talent of this former Shanghai leading dancer as a choreographer, and of the skill and art of her dancers. But even more, it was impressive as a theatrical production. The lighting, the sense of color in the costumes, the music – the work of composers Gang Situ and Gary Schwantes – and the sense of continuity in the way the major numbers were structured, all added up to an extremely astute and carefully administered sense of productions values.

The score was as good an example of this as was the dancing. The music for each dance piece was laid on in layers, and the layers themselves were studies in contrast that added atmosphere to the visions onstage. A heavy drum might be lightened by tinkling cymbals; organ chords were propelled forward by pizzicato strings; a bass clarinet added its voice to the mix.

The historical part of the show was particularly interesting for its props and costumes, and powerfully effective because of the emotional force the dancers put into it. Ada Liu and Phong Voong, each working in her own spotlight, one, erect, the other earthbound, danced with feeling in the Tang selection. Mandy Huang, Tammy Li, Rita Liang, Ada Liu and Lucy Yu, wearing big headdresses and manipulating bright red scarves, moved in slow uniformity in a dance from the Qing time (1644-1911.)

Lily Cai herself was full of sensuous moves in "Straw Hat Girl," a modern version of a provincial dance from Yunan. Most elaborate of all were the changes of patterns in "Dynasties," a synthesis of four eras in which, at one point, Lily Cai struggled against a storm of ribbons that was like a gantlet.

"Being From Here" was designed, a note said, to integrate the spirit and character of Chinese dance with contemporary American aesthetics. Sliding along the floor with their scarves or on their feet manipulating large, fringed fans, the dances formed and reformed in patterns that set up interesting visual counterpoint.

But the candle dance ("Candelas") was particularly fascinating in the way it related the lights to the bodies of the dancers holding them, a study in constantly changing motion and also a study of the dancers in relation to each other. More candles were added to the scene until the whole stage was alight with them.

The brief finale, "Spring Overture," seemed too similar to what had gone before to be necessary. "Candelas" seemed a more fitting climax to a terrific show. Coupled with Mahler's grave, achingly slow music, it cast a spell.