



By Jean Schiffman
November 1998

Dance That Fuses East/West, Ancient/Modern

“I am not a good talker,” apologizes dancer/choreographer Lily Cai with an eager smile. Though Cai may not be confident about her (in fact quite adequate) English language skills, acquired by default 15 years ago, she is quite secure in her body’s ability to convey a lifetime of multicultural experience on-stage. In sneakers and slacks, hair pinned up in a dancer’s knot and round face make-up free, Cai looks very much like the shy girl from southern China who is the central figure of her latest dance piece, to have its world premiere at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts this month.

Cai, who was raised in Shanghai, has been drawing from her life experiences for the past 10 years to create a uniquely American dance form for San Francisco’s Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company: a blend of Chinese classical and folk genres and contemporary modern dance.

Presented in a swirl of peacock-bright colors and often mesmerizing stage pictures, Lily Cai’s work reflects her cultural roots, her deep love of individual expression and her enthusiasm for experimentation. In local performances and on tour worldwide (except in China – “They’re not ready for me there,” she says), critics and audiences are fascinated by her surprising fusion of ancient and contemporary themes and techniques. “I don’t want to say, ‘This is my culture, you must accept it,’ I want a blend....”

Cai’s new, as yet untitled, half-hour piece, six months in the making, focuses on an ineffable human quality rather than on a tangible central image, such as the candles, fans or scarves that prevail in some of her other pieces. “It is a shy and quite quality, a lonely experience of the type that everyone knows,” says Cai. That quality manifests itself in the persona of a southern Chinese girl. “There’s not much story,” she added. “To me, dance isn’t to tell a story. Some things you cannot tell, you must use your body to express.” Mask-like lantern-hats add a visual element to help evoke the piece’s delicate ambiance. Like her 1996 piece, *Begin from Here*, which is drawn from her immigrant past, this one is inspired by Cai’s own experiences.

Sent at age five to the prestigious Shanghai Opera House for intensive dance training by parents who recognized her talent, Cai learned Chinese classical dances thousands of years old, celebratory folk dances as danced in villages even today, the ballet system brought to China by the Soviets in the 1950s and, peripherally, foreign dances such as the mazurka and flamenco. A huge, government-owned performing arts organization of over 1,000 artists, the Opera House’s dance department alone has both a Western and a

traditional symphony, even a factory that makes the scenery. But at the time Cai trained there, modern dance was not on the curriculum.

IN 1983, on her own and speaking not a word of English, Cai left for San Francisco, relying on total immersion to learn the language. “At the Shanghai Opera House, after you reach a certain age, they ask you to leave because other young people need to come in,” explains Cai of her decision to emigrate. “In order to stay you would need to have a very good relationship with the boss. It’s very political. I say to myself, ‘If I stay here, someday they will send me to work in a supermarket, or to usher in a theater. If I am lucky I may become a dance teacher.’ But dance is my life.... I just loved it from the beginning.... I want a dance career like Martha Graham; weeks before she died she was still teaching. My 40s is too early to be kicked out. Your dance becomes more mature as you age.”

In San Francisco, people told her to forget her career aspirations, that there was no market for her ethnic dance. But, “I’m very stubborn,” she laughs. She auditioned for the Ethnic Dance Festival, and credits that annual event with keeping her dancing during the early years. She also began teaching – at the Chinese Folk Dance Association, at Galileo High School for 12 years – and became involved with the Chinese Cultural Association. And she met Shanghai-born, nationally known Bay Area composer Gang Situ, who became her partner, composing new music for much of her work. Cai’s premiere work is accompanied by a Situ score, performed by San Francisco-based Alexander String Quartet.

Without abandoning her training and cultural roots, Cai seized joyfully upon modern dance, which she’d seen performed by touring troupes in China. With no dance models to follow, she began to experiment with mixing the different genres. “The [type of dance] I was trained in pay lots of attention to form and style,” she explains, “but modern dance is really an individual experience.” Thrilled by companies like Alvin Ailey and the Netherlands Dance Company, she nevertheless was determined not to copy any other choreographer but to create something entirely new. In fusing the rigidity of folk, ballet and Chinese classical with the fluidity of movement and emotion that characterizes modern dance, she discovered a whole new world. “I can be a real person presenting ideas to the audience,” exults Cai. “That to me is so amazing and also very difficult.... That is the modern dance challenge to me, to create something out of your mind. I want people to... feel what I feel.”

It was at Galileo High School that she trained a group of young Chinese American girls and created a company in which they and she would perform. Seven of her former students have danced with her ever since. The company has been described in the press as “not only exotic but brilliantly theatrical” and “sheerly transfixing.” One critic commented that the dancers, “who spun like atoms...seemed to lack skeletons.” Although Cai didn’t set out to create an all-female company, she says, “In the villages [in China], the best folk dancers are the men. So I say to myself ‘It’s good to have all women, it’s unique.’”

Teaching young American dancers initially presented challenges for Cai, who trained six days a week, eight hours a day, for 10 years before she was permitted to perform. “Here, no way,” she says. “You tell them 10 years, they say good-bye.” Revamping her methods to find shortcuts to building up muscle strength and releasing energy, she discovered that her dancers’ bodies were relaxed enough to execute the movements and tap into energy sources without losing anything technically.

Cai also plunged into what was, for her, a new and more collaborative method of creating a dance. “In the past, in China, the choreographer puts the movement together, shows the dancer ‘Do this, do that,’ and the dancer just copies it. Now it’s the opposite. I bring the ideas to the studio. Sometimes I show the movement, but then I say, ‘I cannot see myself, can you take my idea, do it, see if it’s working or not. Make that move but show your person-quality to me.’ Then they do something of their own, and I say, ‘That was interesting, do that again,’”

Similarly, working with composer Gang Situ is a collaborative effort. “I create an image and have him look at it and tell him what kind of speed and rhythm and how long it should be, to give him some kind of inspiration. Then he writes some music and toward the end we will mix things together.”

Other times, a piece of music will be the impetus to create a dance. Such was the case for *Candelas*, a 1997 piece set to the fourth movement of Mahler’s Symphony No. 5. “First I decided I wanted to pick classical music for my new piece. I listened to many classical recordings, then I listened to this piece by Mahler, and it was so beautiful. And I said, ‘O.K., what kind of material to match that music?’ And I say ‘Candles is wonderful, candle is universal language, anybody understands a candle.’ “*The San Francisco Chronicle’s* Octavio Roca praised the dramatically illuminated *Candelas’* “sultry shoulder shimmies” and its stillness; the candles’ flames, he wrote, are “like so many petals of a dangerous flower.”

The stillness, juxtaposed with the most graceful, undulating movement, is typical of Cai’s work. “Sometimes you have to slow down to enjoy life,” says Cai. “When you eat something, you don’t just open your mouth and swallow. You have to take time, taste it. I hope audiences watching my show can savor it.”

Also on the bill with Cai’s as yet untitled world premiere are two pieces from her repertory: *Candelas*, and *Begin from Here*, with its dazzling ribbon dances and original music by Gang Situ and Gary Schwantes, restaged for these performances. November 6 and 7, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theatre, 700 Howard Street, 978-ARTS.