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By Rachel Howard of The Examiner Staff

Local Choreographers break ‘ethnic dance’ boundaries

Combination plate

The ethnic dance label doesn’t quite fit what Lily Cai does, either.

“Every time I receive some kind of survey they want us to say whether our company is ethnic, folk, modern, or ballet,” says the Shanghai native, who immigrated 16 years ago. “I don’t belong to ballet, I’m not really modern, I don’t consider us ethnic.”

In reality, Cai’s dance is a strangely beautiful combination of the three. Cai trained in Russian ballet and traditional Chinese dance as a dancer with the Shanghai Opera, and her works also use some of the sculpture elements of American modern dance, though she’s never studied any branch of it.

“I’ve never taken a class in America,” she says. “The reason is, I want to keep my own dance unique. After you learn so much from other people, eventually you start to lose yourself. And I said no. Keep myself and the material and the language I used to know. Start from here and go beyond.”

Her eight dancers, all year-round part-time employees with health benefits, rehearse three days a week at Dance Mission.

On a recent Wednesday they lean over and arch and round their backs as they tread their feet, experimenting with a new movement vocabulary loosely based on rice-farming postures and ancient dance forms from the southern region of China. Cai asks them to try out different combinations, addressing them in Mandarin dialect, even though none of the dancers speak it; they know Cantonese.

Some of these lithe performers have worked with Cai for 15 years, since she began teaching dance in San Francisco high school. All of her dancers are first generation Chinese Americans or Chinese-born immigrants; they just happened to make up the majority of Cia’s high school students, and they stuck with it.

But Cai’s on-tour audiences (by her survey the company tours more than any other San Francisco dance troupe) are overwhelmingly non-Asian, and every performance is calculated to educate, beginning with the most traditional dances and moving towards the

most modern. She says her viewers almost invariably enjoy the modern pieces most. For next season she's planning a new work to music by John Adams.

Few people who saw Cai's first works in the United States thought her company could survive. "When I first go to this country, people told me I should forget about dance," she remembers. "This country will not support art, unless you are Michael Jackson, they told me. This was the mid-eighties. But I was stubborn and tried to keep my dream."