



By Anita Amirrezvani
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Lily Cai's Chinese troupe transforms traditions

Lily Cai, a specialist in Chinese classical and folk dance, has won audiences in San Francisco and around the country by making bold innovations to the dance traditions of her native land.

Cai came to California in 1983 with the dream of creating a dance company that would go beyond the approaches she had mastered as a dancer at the Shanghai Opera House. "I thought if I kept doing the traditional dance, there's no more challenge, so I always think of new ways I can present it," she says.

It's an approach that has made the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company a popular touring group and has earned Cai several prestigious fellowships for choreography in recent years. The company will perform its annual home concert Friday and Saturday at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

One example of Cai's many innovations is the way she transforms the Chinese ribbon dance, a traditional folk dance staple. At a recent rehearsal at the Dance Mission studios in San Francisco, her dancers showed off a ribbon dance unlike any other. Holding long white cascades of silk high behind their backs, the dancers manipulated the fabric to Gang Situ's music for violin and erhu (a Chinese stringed instrument).

You could see the music in the movement of the ribbons, which was expressed sometimes as short percussive bursts, other times as sinuous swirls. The dancers were rehearsing one section of a work called "Strings Calligraphy," which evokes the parallels between the creation of music and of the written word. It will be performed to live music by the New Century Chamber Orchestra.

Another dance, "Silk Cascade," will push the ribbon dance experiments even further in its world premiere this weekend. While the dancers manipulate 18-foot ribbons, Crockett artist Ed Tannenbaum will capture their movements with a video camera, manipulating them with color and projecting them onto a screen. The artwork looks like a painting full of swirling colors is being created before one's eyes.

"I love visuals and the senses," says Cai. "When I choreograph, I keep those two things in my mind."

During Friday's rehearsal, Cai communicated with her dancers in a mixture of Mandarin, Cantonese and English. Most of the dancers are graduates of Galileo High School, where Cai taught dance for 12 years. Having come to the United States without money, a job or English skills, that was the best way she knew of to select and train young women to perform in her unique style.

"When I first came to this country, people told me to forget my dreams because there's no support – unless you're Michael Jackson," she says. "I'm lucky I've been so stubborn."

Cai's choreography is influenced by the work of some of her favorite modern dance companies – Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, Nederlands Dans Theatre and Pilobolus. But unlike much modern dance, where male and female bodies often perform interchangeable roles, Cai's choreography looks specially designed to be feminine. "When I create any kind of thing, I want people to feel the quality of the Chinese female," she says.

In "Bamboo Girls," another premiere on this weekend's program, the setting seems to be rural China and the female dancers seem playful, sensual, coy and shy. They wear upside-down straw hats with long beaded fringes that sway playfully around their faces, in response to their swinging bodies and joyful jumps.

Cai decided to turn the hats upside down because she liked the visual effect. She doesn't hesitate to experiment with costume styles, music or dance steps, while creating work that remains firmly rooted in her Chinese identity. "That's why I like to live in this country, because your eyes are open and your mind is open," she says.