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Originality rules Cai's colorful style

By Mary Ellen Hunt

TIMES CORRESPONDENT

ONE OF THE foremost Chinese dance companies in the Bay Area, Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company blends the color and vividness of traditional Chinese folk dances with Lily Cai's own style of movement centered from the core of the body. It is a technique similar to the tai chi-based methods used by Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan.

San Francisco-based Lily Cai, which celebrates its 15th anniversary this year, brings its own special brand of dance theater to the stage with performances Nov. 14-15 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

And like Cloud Gate's Lin Hwai-Min, Cai choreographs to a slower rhythm. Her 1997 work "Candelas," which is set to the Adagietto of Mahler's Fifth Symphony and which audiences will have a chance to see again on the November program, has an elegiac simplicity to it.

But whereas Cloud Gate infuses its work with Western influences from Martha Graham to tanztheater, Cai consciously strives to keep her own style, derived purely from her own roots.

"I have never trained at all (in modern dance)," Cai says. "It doesn't mean I don't want to learn other things, and I watch a lot of other groups' performances. But ideally I do not want to get into a modern dance style, because sooner or later, you become somebody else."

Cai, who emigrated from China to the United States in 1983, began her career as a principal dancer in both ballet and folk dance at the Shanghai Opera House. Knowing how short the dancers' careers are -- at the Shanghai Opera, performers face mandatory retirement after age 30 -- Cai thought to herself, "Retire at 25 years old? No way! I love dancing too much. I decided to leave before they told me to leave first."

She was determined to have her own company but with no money and halting English, founding a dance troupe wasn't an easy task. Undaunted, Cai took a job as a bilingual aide in San Francisco's Galileo High School and by 1988 had established her own Chinese Dance Company, with the intention of creating a uniquely Chinese-American voice.

The six-member company will also perform its latest work, a commission for the 2003 San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival entitled "Si Ji" (translated as "the four seasons"), which showcases her dancers with Cai's trademark brilliant colors and materials.

"I love color," she says. "'Si Ji' uses about 70 yards of fabric, which is very difficult to choreograph and very hard for the dancers, but I wanted the colors of the seasons also to show my feelings."

DANCE PREVIEW

- WHO: Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company
- WHAT: 15th anniversary celebration
- WHERE: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 701 Mission St., S.F.
- WHEN: Nov. 14-15
- HOW MUCH: \$18-\$32
- CALL: 415-978-2787, www.ccpsf.org