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Chinese dance, modern twist

REBELLIOUS DANCE GURU LILY CAI TEACHES UNIQUE CHINESE-AMERICAN STYLE

By Anita Amirrezvani

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Choreographer Lily Cai is a dynamo who doesn't hesitate to turn traditional Chinese dance on its head.

"We break the rules," says Ada Liu, 30, who has danced with Cai for 15 years.

"Something different is my goal," says Cai, who works out of San Francisco. "I really admire American artists for that. In China" -- where she was a principal dancer with the Shanghai Opera House -- "I was always told to follow tradition."

On Friday and Saturday, the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company will celebrate its 15th anniversary with a world premiere called "Si Ji (Four Seasons)" and a retrospective of Cai's work. The shows will take place at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco.

Cai's dance company emerged out of classes she taught to Chinese students at Galileo High School in San Francisco in the mid-1980s. Three of her dancers -- half the troupe -- have been with her ever since.

Her unique approach to dance has won her major dance fellowships in California, as well as a commission to create dances for Bright Sheng's opera, "Madam Mao," at the Santa Fe Opera this year. Her national touring schedule is extensive.

Cai has a rich legacy to draw on, encompassing Chinese classical and folk dances, including those performed by the country's 50-plus government-classified minority groups. "I pick and choose," she says. "I also emphasize and exaggerate movement so that American audiences will see things right away."

Her shows typically are visual feasts of colorful costumes, sinuous movement by her all-female company and such characteristic Chinese dance props as ribbons, scarves and fans. But she'll use black and white ribbons -- traditionally considered inauspicious colors in Chinese culture, she says. She'll put her dancers in modest folk costumes for one part of a dance, then strip them down to leotards cut low in the back for the next. She'll also choreograph unreserved movements in the hips.

“Some Chinese people will look at that and think that Chinese people don't do that,” Liu says, even though such movement actually is common to the dances of some groups in China.

Cai's work often looks influenced by American modern dance because of its internalized focus. “Many times, Chinese dance emphasizes style and facial expression,” Cai notes. “I emphasize body language and internal power.”

Cai is a perfectionist, her dancers say. She doesn't even like them to take dance classes with other teachers, because she's so concerned about maintaining a purity of line and form.

Several members of her company have fought bravely to remain dancers. Phong Voong, 31, is a vocational nurse who has danced with Cai for more than half her life. She says her parents oppose her dancing career and have never seen her perform.

“Every time I go visit them, they say, ‘When are you going to stop dancing?’” Voong says. “They don't consider it as a career because you cannot make a living out of it.”

But she and other dancers persevere because they find that Cai's approach speaks to their experience as immigrants and as hyphenated Americans.

Liu, who came to the United States when she was 13, can't imagine being part of a traditional Chinese dance company. “Our point is to be Chinese-American,” she says. “We cannot go back to the old, old way.”

The Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company

A 15th-anniversary celebration, featuring the world premiere of “Si Ji (Four Seasons)” and a retrospective

Where: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater, 700 Howard St., San Francisco

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday

Tickets: \$18-\$32;

(415) 978-2787,

www.yerbabuenaarts.org

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