



# NEWS Winter 2004 Dance Critics Association

*“Writers have to stand up for  
dance. Where money and power  
are valued above all else,  
dance is considered  
‘not enough.’”*

*—Eva Yaa Asantewaa,  
page 10*

*“ Even the dancers, who claim they don’t  
bother about reviews, complain when there  
aren’t any. They say, ‘We did this,  
there was applause...but then  
no record that it happened,  
as if we didn’t exist.’”*

*—George Jackson, page 10*

## S.F. Dancers Go to Bat for Dance Critics Karyn Collins

Choreographer Brenda Way is leading a group of more than 100 choreographers, based in and around San Francisco, who are protesting the lack of a full-time dance critic at the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Way, the artistic director of ODC/San Francisco, said the group was originally formed about a year ago to react to state funding cuts to the arts. Way said she and other choreographers are unhappy that the *Chronicle* has not replaced critic Octavio Roca, who left the paper last August to become the dance critic at the *Miami Herald*.

"One of the things that matters to us, we've all agreed, is the dialogue with professional critics," Way said. "They are absolutely the third important leg of the stool, the people who help our audiences think in a sophisticated way about what we do."

Way said the *Chronicle* now uses four freelancers to cover some of the dance events in the San Francisco area.

"But freelancers are part-time. And they don't cover everything. This is a very arts-identified town, and it's really a crime not to have a full-time voice," Way said.

Way and the group of choreographers aren't the only ones talking about the San Francisco situation. The Voice of Dance Web site has been the host of a heated discussion about the *Chronicle's* failure to name a new full-time dance critic.

In response to the criticism on the Voice of Dance Web site, David Wiegand, an editor for the *Chronicle's* Datebook section, which includes arts coverage, said the delay in replacing Roca was not part of a plan to eliminate or reduce dance coverage in the *Chronicle*.

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DCA NEWS: Letter From Chairman, 2004 Conference, DCA Call for Candidates, 30/30 campaign (2-4).  
Critics Matter: Letter to the Editor, Shreveport Times, Dance Magazine, CRITIC ON THE JOB (5-14)  
BOOKS: *No Fixed Points*, Books Column: *Nationalisms* (15-22). Books Received: (25)



### East Side Story

#### *Lily Cai's Choreography for Bright Sheng's opera Madame Mao*

**T**here is a lively dance dimension to *Madame Mao*, the eagerly anticipated opera by composer Bright Sheng and librettist Colin Graham, which was commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera for its 2003 season and was given its world première in Santa Fe's Crosby Theater on 26 July 2003. To get to the dance, though, one needs a little background on the work and its composer.

A work about the cruelty and hardships of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Sheng's opera focuses on the story of the rise and fall of Jiang Ching, the actress who is now known around the world as Madame Mao and who is represented on stage by two singers: for the older Jiang Ching ("Jiang I"), mezzo-soprano Robynne Redmon; and, for the younger Jiang, in her twenties, ("Jiang II"), lyric soprano Anna Christy. These two figures also embody the contrasting twin themes that Sheng sees in Madame Mao's personality, and that he characterizes as repression and revenge. (The opera includes a scene where the older Jiang Ching summarily shoots a few professionals and wealthy citizens unlucky enough to be caught in the sweeping purges and banishments that she and her husband perpetrated on millions of Chinese citizens.) *Madame Mao* also represents the experience of Sheng's own family, who, during the Cultural Revolution, were sent to Chinghai Province bordering Tibet, where Sheng taught himself piano while absorbing the folk traditions of the many cultures coexisting in this Chinese outback. Sheng learned folk melodies from his Silk Road teachers, studied later at the Shanghai Conservatory, and, after immigrating to the United States in 1982, earned degrees from Queens College and Columbia. He blends the sonorities of East and West.

The composer generally based the events of the opera on historical facts, bent enough to serve the drama; Sheng notes, though, that in reality, Madame Mao lived a dramatic, nearly mythical life. The suffering portrayed in the story also indirectly reflects the shock, brutality, and dislocation that Sheng witnessed and personally survived.

In the United States, Sheng eventually became Leonard Bernstein's informal musical apprentice. His mentor's influence is clear in the theatricality of *Madame Mao*: Sheng's music for this opera, more than his previous compositions, brings out the lyricism and sonorities associated with Bernstein's work. The opera's duets and trios alternate introspective tenderness and spine-tingling directness as the story line leads to Madame Mao's humiliation and ultimate death.

For his librettist and stage director, Sheng sought out Colin Graham, the seasoned artistic director of Opera Theatre Saint Louis, where Graham has directed 55 world premières and 350 other operas, including—with rarer clarity—most of Benjamin Britten's oeuvre. In a phone interview following the première, the choreographer, Lily Cai, described how she collaborated with Sheng and Graham. By the time she and I spoke, she was back home in San Francisco and I had seen the opera's dress rehearsal and its final performance. Both presentations had received long and enthusiastic standing ovations.

Though I have immersed myself in opera for many years, I am not an opera critic. I write about dance, especially about dance in opera, and its integration with the art's other performance elements. Still, I found this opera dramatically electrifying and aesthetically satisfying. The austere metallic, abstract set, accented with intense jewel tones, fit the sharply focused theme. The two Jiang Chings sang a sublime lullaby, contrasting with the rich austerity of the opera's melodies. I found puzzling one critic's description of the opera as melodramatic. Graham and Sheng crafted a drama skillfully and entirely credibly in my view. As a dance critic, I found the choreography fascinating, though the dancers looked a bit uncomfortable in the step-and-halt choreography of the waltz, and a bit restrained in the usually hyperexuberant Chinese Opera gymnastics. Another day or two of rehearsals would have fixed the dancers' ease with Cai's blend of Eastern and Western movement.

**S**heng felt stymied at first about an appropriate choreographer for *Madame Mao*, which calls for a number of dances. However, as he and Graham worked on the libretto, Cai, a Shanghai-born dancer and choreographer who has been living in San Francisco for the past two decades, was sending out the Lily Cai Dance Company's demo tapes. Cai's dances marry Eastern and Western aesthetics with a visual panache reminiscent of Alwin Nikolais's boldly abstracting integration of dance, props, and sculptural costume. She asked her husband, the composer Gang Situ—an acquaintance of Sheng's

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(both are from Shanghai, though they met in the U.S.)--to give the composer a copy of her dance video.

Sheng's response in his enthusiastic phone call to her was, "Wow!" He had found the right choreographer for his new opera.

In fact, the collaboration did not prove entirely successful for Cai: she didn't have the rehearsal time to achieve all she wanted from her dancers. The tale of her work on *Madame Mao*, however, provides a fascinating window on the process of collaboration in the musical theater and illuminates what elements need to be in place for a choreographer's contribution to an opera to mesh successfully with the production as a whole.

Cai's dance background is strong. In China, she danced with the Shanghai Opera House, a company employing over a thousand artists that is set up on the Russian model, with a ballet and an opera department. There, Cai learned both Western and Eastern dance forms: Russian ballet, ethnic folk dances (Flamenco, mazurka), and Chinese folk dances. Two orchestras--one of Chinese instruments, the other of Western symphonic instruments--accompanied the opera singers and dancers.

During the interview, Cai described Chinese movement forms as falling into two categories: one, the classical Chinese dance, and the other, ethnic or folk traditions. Classical Chinese dance embraces the curve or circle as its premise, whether the body is moving or in a pose. "Whatever your emotion," Cai said, "it is expressed in a reserved way, curved, like a ball, a circular body posture. When you move, your body movements also have to follow that principle: just the opposite of ballet, which is point and stretch, straight and open."

The Chinese folk tradition, she continued, encompasses 5,000 years of history. Each dynasty had a unique dance form, documented in its art work. The circle is not the premise for all of the various aesthetics of China's 56 ethnic groups: each has its own dance style. "We have thousands of different dance forms," she said, "but when we study, we learn each of the 56 forms, their rhythm, posture, and the way the body moves." Cai emphasized that everyday objects--ribbons, chopsticks, and fans--are vital components of both Chinese classical dance and Chinese folkdance. They function as props to help the dancers to express emotion and technique: "It's movement created from daily life."

When Cai emigrated to San Francisco 20 years ago, she began to experiment with a fusion style that "my Chinese teachers never did before." Her company is comprised of Chinese dancers who are immigrants like herself, but who have no previous training in their native country's dance traditions. When Sheng chose her as his choreographer in Santa Fe, she expected that the dancers

of her company would also be hired for *Madame Mao*. "This time," Cai reasoned, "I can use my roots, with dancers who do not have any idea of Chinese traditions, to achieve something new." However, these dancers were not employed for the opera. Instead, Cai and Laura Scozzi, the choreographer for *La Belle Hélène*--the other Santa Fe production with a major dance component that summer--auditioned and hired their dancers in New York. The eight dancers (Margaret Beaver, Allesandra Corona, Ben Hartley, Karina Michaels, Robert McFarland, Karen Moore, James Pierce, and Barry Wizorek) would be performing in both operas. None had a background in Chinese dance.

Many choreographers report that, like Cai, they find the first hurdle to working in opera is having to train dancers in the brief time usually allotted to dance rehearsals. And, because stage time in opera is so tightly rationed, the choreographers, themselves, must hit the ground running. Before rehearsals begin, they must be on intimate terms with the musical score and possess a clear

vocabulary of dance combinations ready to set on the dancers. Because no recordings of Sheng's score were yet available, and Cai couldn't read an orchestral score on her own, she had to rely upon her husband to help her read the score and play the music, so she could begin to develop the choreography. "My husband would tell me, 'Here are some trumpets coming, some drums coming. Make something special for that part.'"

As the dress rehearsal drew near, and the dancers still hadn't quite mastered the Chinese Opera dance style, Cai said she was wringing her hands. She first met the dancers in the studio on June 30th, and opening night was July 26th--a rehearsal period that was two weeks less than she had anticipated. (Usually, a dancer's contract with the opera is for six weeks.) And although she'd been told that dance rehearsals would last six hours a day, six days a week, the reality was that the dancers would rehearse just 20 hours a week. "Only a week to set everything up on stage! The dancers needed time to get the ideas; they felt uncomfortable." Still, by the day of the dress rehearsal, Cai considered the dancers adequately comfortable with the movement.

The spine-chilling relationship of Chairman Mao with his wife Jiang Ching is interwoven with strong dance scenes. One, "The Dance of Life," is a waltz scene where Mao humiliates Jiang, in her presence, by pursuing several women, played by dancers dressed in Western garb. (One dancer wears a nurse's uniform; the others are dressed in business clothes.)

In staging the opera's dances, Cai collaborated with Graham, and she explained to him that the waltz--specified in Act I--is not a part of Chinese culture. (Nor

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was she on familiar terms with this dance form.) She asked Graham if she could create something different than a waltz. He was hesitant: as he explained to Cai, Madame Mao was, in her early life, very much immersed in Western culture. "But if it's 100 per cent waltz, it's not interesting to me," Cai remembered telling him. "I'm not an expert at the waltz. I had to convince Colin that I wanted to do something different. He said, 'Show me.' And when I did, he said, 'Great! Do it!'"

The result was an arresting blend of waltzing and formal pauses. With what looked like Art Déco arm movements (actually based on the Chinese circle theme), the dancers would briefly halt and frame their torsos with their arms. The women then raised their arms while strutting, knees deeply bent. In Cai's words, the dance was a blend of "the waltz with Chinese village elements. They have no meaning; it is like a folkdance movement." The dancers "bow to each other; it's like you start an American barn dance, a polite dialogue." In rehearsal, Cai found her own dialogues with Graham empowering: when their conceptions about a dance scene were dissimilar, he encouraged her to try a number of her own choreographic ideas. As she put it emphatically, "He made this opera work."

To Cai's delight, Graham also consulted her frequently about the costumes, especially in the matter of color. For a scene about the Chinese Opera, Cai remembers advising him that, "whoever is strong, give a strong color to. Girls should wear red. Sky blue, though, is more powerful than red, theatrically speaking, and it represents heaven, the kingdom power, especially for the fighting segment." Cai also described how the concept of yin and yang figured in her choice of costume color as well. Even so, because *Madame Mao* is a modern opera, she explained to Graham that it wasn't necessary to follow the traditional color choices to the letter.

To appreciate how important Cai's advice was, it's useful to know that, from the subdued colors and movements of "The Dance of Life," the opera shifted to a vividly colorful scene from Chinese Opera, whose choreography Cai had devised from a synthesis of martial arts, ballet, folk, and Chinese classical elements. This folktale-based, opera-within-an-opera, recounts the story of Empress Mu's rise to power. Chivalric courtship and noble warriors mirrored the strains of domestic politics in Mao's own household and his eventual renunciation of his wife. This mirroring is reinforced by the doubling of roles: in the Chinese Opera, Madame Mao sings the part of the Warrior Maiden, Mu. The Empress Yang Paifeng is sung by Zizhen, Mao's former wife, whom he abandoned for Jiang. Mao sings the part of General Gao, who is also the Emperor. The two women, Yang and Liu/Mu, the Warrior Maiden, fight; their warriors also

hurl themselves at one another, while Gao, over whom they are fighting, attempts to separate them. Eventually, Gao is attracted to Mu. The libretto calls for Yang to rampage "in madness when she sees the way Gao and Mu look at each other."

**T**he costume designer had some challenges in this scene. Dancers jumped with sharply bent knees, which required clothing that would permit them the freedom to do so; two dancers twirled swords in each hand; four dancers brandished long poles, which they used like stakes; two more carried shields. And the choice of colors was crucial, as they would both help to establish the scene's theatrical authenticity as Chinese Opera and evoke the tensions of the previous scene, "The Dance of Life."

Santa Fe Opera's costumers found that, paradoxically, the cost of fabric and fabrication for the Chinese Opera clothing would be prohibitively expensive if the costumes were made in the U.S., and so they acquired the costumes directly from Beijing. Fresh from the Chinese capital, these costumes provided a silken swath of gold brocade over brilliant pink, crimson, and orange, which contrasted sharply with the restrained blue and gray cotton of the People's Revolution costumes. Those more somber colors make another appearance in Act Two, where, during a reprise of "The Dance of Life," the libretto calls for the young Jiang II to dance with Mao. Their dance is interrupted by Four Beauties, each of whom dances with Mao as well, and, during these encounters, the Chairman strips each Beauty to her slip. At Santa Fe, blue and other dark colors dominated the dancers' clothing. (In this scene of dance and mime, the dancing Jiang II's thoughts read in the libretto--"She recalls her final disenchantment with Mao." Her words are sung by Jiang I. The singers and dancers intermix throughout the scene, thoroughly integrating the art forms.)

Cai chose to interweave traditional Chinese dance with the scene of Jiang Ching's demise, which occurs after she has been sentenced to hanging by a People's Court. Sheng had the Chinese Opera dancers return as soldiers, their hats sporting huge feathered plumes. After lighting up the stage with gymnastic cavorting, they were replaced by the opera chorus, representing the Red Guard, who are specified by the libretto to dress in "the cold gray light of realism."

Ultimately, Cai explained, she felt a mixture of satisfaction and frustration working on *Madame Mao*--especially in her efforts to put her own creative stamp on the Chinese Opera scenes within the pressured rehearsal period: "I always see myself as a pioneer in Chinese dance. People who live in China would never do that kind of dance; for American-born Chinese, they wouldn't do that kind of dance either. So it's unique, and when I

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got this opera job, I wanted to do something unique; but you need the time."

Having seen Cai's demo tape of her dynamic company's lush, technically polished and colorful work, I can attest that her vision is no pipe dream. Cai's good fortune is to see her choreography bloom in her own dance company. But the lesson of her collaboration in Santa Fe seems to be that, unless one is the artistic director as well as the choreographer of an opera--that is, unless one works in opera with the independence of Susan Marshall, or Mark Morris, or Meredith Monk, or Robert Wilson--opera collaboration can be a challenging trade-off for a choreographer, one as constricting as it is enriching.

## ● Janet B. Eigner

*Janet B. Eigner, a psychologist and psychotherapist, works in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Instead of filing the dance review clippings that carpet her home office, she prefers writing poetry and dance reviews, published locally and nationally.*

## Announcements

The Music Division of the Library of Congress is pleased to announce the launch of a new Web site, I Hear America Singing (IHAS), a portal to the Library's music and performing arts collections available at <http://www.loc.gov/ihass/>.

I Hear America Singing integrates the collections, commissions, and live concerts of the Library of Congress, allowing users to discover the Library's music and performing-arts collections through a single gateway on the Web. The site brings together thousands of materials digitized from the Library's vast collections of sheet music, sound recordings, moving images, manuscripts, photographs, and oral histories, along with essays by Library staff and other leading researchers in the performing arts. It showcases the world-renowned tradition of live performing arts at the Library by featuring cybercasts of new concerts and offering a wide selection of historic concerts from the archives, including premières of important works of contemporary classical music. It makes education a vital component by cybercasting performing arts-related symposia and panels held at the Library and making them available to users. I Hear America Singing will also become a "virtual community" for scholars, musicians, and music aficionados. Researchers will be able to comment online on the materials presented and share their own conclusions and insights about them. Content appealing to the K-12 community of teachers and students will be added in future releases.

The debut release of I Hear America Singing offers the following special features:

- Selections from jazz legend Gerry Mulligan's collection at the Library of Congress, including his previously unreleased oral autobiography, original scores and manuscripts, and recordings;
- "Life in 19th-Century Ohio," a capsule example of how music reflects social history, based on the lively musical life of Cincinnati a century and a-half ago;
- "Patriotic Melodies," which features the stories behind of some of America's most important national songs;
- Walt Whitman's poem "I Hear America Singing," with an interpretation by the Library's poetry specialist and a reading of the poem by former U.S. Poet Laureate Billy Collins;
- A collection of historical sheet music published from 1800 to 1922.

Forthcoming additions to I Hear America Singing will include concerts performed at the Library of Congress, including specially commissioned pieces and cybercasts; Civil War sheet music; and African-American popular music from the early 20th century.

Please submit any questions you may have about this Web site to the Library of Congress's Music Division at: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/askalib/ask-perform.html>

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