

Lily Cai Dance Company shows traditional movement, modernized

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Lily Cai, whose six-member, all-female dance troupe performed at the Duncan Theatre in Lake Worth over the weekend, aims to contradict the stereotype that Chinese women are demure and subservient. "People think the Chinese woman is soft, but internally, she is very powerful," Cai told audiences. That power was apparent the Lily Cai Dance Company's program, a blend of ancient Chinese dance forms with a modern aesthetic.

Cai, a former principal dancer with the Shanghai Opera House, explained in detail the elements of form, movement and costuming for her choreography, including the serpentine and feline movement of the opener, Dynasty Suite. To a commissioned score by Gang Situ and Gary Schwantes, the dancers posed, strutted and danced in gorgeous traditional Chinese dress offering a compendium of authentic Chinese dances from 770 B.C. to the present.

In one subset of Dynasty Suite, "Basket Girls from Zhou," the dancers effortlessly melded their bodies while carrying slender poles that held their baskets. "Dances from Tang" was visually spectacular, as the artists created waves of electric color with brightly hued silk streamers that spun, whiled and sashayed, teasing gravity. In "Straw Hat Girl," an inventive modern solo in the D'ai style, the dancer languished with what looked like an upside-down sombrero pinned to her head. Her arms spread outward and curved slowly toward her body in a hypnotically snakelike fashion.

The second piece on the program, Begin From Here, traced Cai's personal journey from her arrival to America 20 years ago through the ensuing culture shock and her challenges in creating a dance company. The highlight occurred when three dancers stood on wood platforms performing a kaleidoscope of ribbon dances with gymnastic skill and elegance.

In the ritualistic Candelas, set to Mahler's Symphony No. 5, each dancer appeared on stage carrying lit candles in each hand. Cai's choreography brilliantly celebrated the female form as her dancers fashioned their bodies into arc shapes, combined with difficult leg extensions while lifting blazing lights. The effect of a rotating circle of light was magical.