

Lily Cai Chinese Dance: Having a Swirl Time

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It was impossible to separate the props from the dances in the works the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company brought to the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater this weekend. Tassels twirled, candles flickered, multicolored silk ribbons swam through the air. The dancers were their humble servants.

Cai's small, all-female company performed as part of the center's Prelude Festival, a performing arts sampler, running until Sept. 24, of the season ahead. (The center will also present a mammoth festival of Chinese art next month, ranging from the famed Beijing Opera to a fireworks display.) Cai's company hails from San Francisco, where the Shanghai-born choreographer has worked for 20 years. Her works combine modern and folk influences with classical Chinese dance.

The ribbons of "Silk Cascade," and Matthew Antaky's extraordinary lighting, were the stars of the show, with the ribbons changing color before your eyes: White became green, black, pink -- or magically multicolored -- before changing back to white again.

In this three-section work, set to music by Huan Zhi Li and John Adams, the dancers (clad, by turn, in red pajamas, black dresses, and black leotards and tights) remained in place much of the time, though their arms worked furiously to manipulate the huge ribbons. Cai, in an odd mid-performance chat ("Are you enjoying the show so far? Good!"), explained that the "Silk Cascade" had been inspired by Jackson Pollock's paintings, and the airborne squiggles did indeed look like paint squirting out of tubes. (They also took on the majestic shapes of calligraphy, the powerful swat of dragon tails and surging, rolling waves.)

The two other dances were less arresting. Dancers shimmied, slowly, in "Bamboo Girls" as Zhi You Shi and Chun Lin Yang's music tinkled happily.

Here, hats were the women's dance partners, and Antaky's lighting bathed them in gentle rain. "Candelas" was a solemn procession, with candles, to the much-used Adagietto of Mahler's Fifth Symphony.