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## Cai's original dance programs about 'beauty and color'

By LISA MILLEGAN  
[lmillegan@modbee.com](mailto:lmillegan@modbee.com)

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The founder of San Francisco's Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company is so proud of her innovative dance routines that she hesitates to release video footage.

Cai works hard to create original programs and she doesn't want any competitors to steal her ideas.

Judging from the highlights reel she showed to this reporter, she has reason to be protective. Her "Silk Cascade" program, coming to the Gallo Center for the Arts next weekend, looks exciting, intense and adventurous.

Her company of six Asian female dancers will perform three pieces -- one with lighted candles, another with long ribbons and the other with broad bamboo hats.

"It's about beauty and color, everything I do," Cai said.

Raised in Shanghai and trained in Chinese classical dance, Cai became interested in more free-form modern dance after moving to the United States in 1983. She said she grew tired of the rigid rules of Chinese tradition and hated being corrected every time she took a liberty with a step.

"That's one thing I don't like about my culture," she said.

When she founded her company in 1988, she took joy in experimenting with new movements that never had been tried.

Set to the Gustav Mahler's gripping 5th Symphony, the candle dance "Candelas" has become one of Cai's signature works. Cai sees the candles as symbolic of self-sacrifice because they burn themselves to give light and warmth to others.

Eyes wide, speaking passionately and gesturing excitedly about the dance, Cai said the piece features dancers pulling up deep emotion from within and expressing it in a tightly focused way. The control of the movement is similar to that used in tai chi.

"Silk Cascade," the dance that gives the program its title, features brightly colored ribbons and lights. The piece's movements were inspired by the wild splatters of paint in Jackson Pollock's abstract artwork. The dancers' movements also are supposed to evoke Chinese calligraphy.

Finally, "Bamboo Girls" centers on young girls from Southern China who are shy in public and can let loose only in the bamboo forests. The dancers alternate between performing with a straight posture like a bamboo and a curved "S" shape.

Cai stresses that her dancers want to please the audience and aren't just performing for themselves. The dancers feed off the energy from the audience and give an exciting performance in return. She said people who show up for the performance won't be disappointed.

"If people really like dancing and performing arts, this is one of a kind," she said.



Ada Liu, 23, a member of the Lily Cai Dance Company, performs a modern Chinese ribbon dance May 17, 1998 during the Pacific Rim Street Fest. (The Sacramento Bee/Randy Pench) - Sacramento Bee Staff Photo - RANDY PENCH

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Phone: (209) 578-2000.