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DANCE Q&A with Lily Cai

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The Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company brings its unique combination of modern dance and traditional Chinese forms to the Ferst Center on November 12. Founder, choreographer, and artistic director Lily Cai sat down to tell us a little about her company, how she helps her dancers find their Chi, and what it was like to perform for 16000 Deadheads.

You started out as a dancer with the Shanghai Opera House. Can you tell me about that?

Shanghai Opera House had two different departments—dance and opera—and over 1000 employees. It was a big company, fully funded by the government. In the early 1950s Russia and China had a very close relationship. Russia sent a lot of artists to set up systems for China because Mao had taken over everything in 1948, so it was run by Russians. In the dance department we did Chinese classical—different dances from over 5000 years of Chinese history—then we had folk—ethnic dance as well, with over 56 different ethnic groups. We also had to learn foreign styles of dance. And we also did ballet. The opera department sang Western style operas. That's why the Shanghai Opera House was such a big house.

It was just like a school system in that sometimes we spent years learning something we never used. Of course, education is important, but in China, for instance, we had to do a lot of somersaults as part of our training. One girl even broke her neck. We never did somersaults once on the stage, but they asked us to do it. We did Mao's wife's favorite drama "White-Haired Girl." They made a movie of it, a dance of it, an opera. The whole country had to do that from 1966 to 1976. It was crazy! We just did a lot of things that weren't necessary. I just feel I'm richer since I found my own training techniques since I came to the United States. Now I just feel: What we need the most, what's missing, let's do that.

Is that what led you to move to the United States?

As a dancer they asked you to retire when you hit 30. For me at 30 years old, you have a better understanding of dance than when you were 14 or 15. They got rid of the older dancers—and 30-year-olds were considered old!—and then let young girls 14 or 15 years old take over. For me, I decided that I should control my own future. I worked very hard to get here.

Did you found your own company right after you arrived in the US?

Actually, no. I wanted to. But when I first came here, I didn't speak English at all. It was so hard! I felt so stupid. I didn't know the names of streets, and I couldn't ask anyone. You turn on the TV and you can't understand anything. I cried for three years. People said to me I should do something other than dance: "Why don't you learn interior design? Why don't you learn physical therapy? Why don't you learn acupuncture or banking?" All kinds of suggestions. Then finally, I met my husband who is a composer, and we had the same dream. We just stayed persistent. And now it's been 20 years. I'm lucky I didn't quit. I'm happy with what I'm doing now.



Lily Cai

JIM HAIR

How do you select your dancers?

I want to have a dancer who has a passion. This is a tough job. They must have a love, a passion. But they also have to be a gentle, nice person. I do not want chaos because we only have six people. And one person can damage your whole group. And we're all girls. I don't want this girl crying because of what that girl said. Luckily, 20 plus years...: We've never had that problem. Lucky us!

What sort of training do they go through?

I start with meditation. Eyes totally closed, I tell the dancers to sense yourself, feel yourself, feel your energy: Chi. Sense your body strength. I spend at least an hour just trying to get the dancers to sense themselves. I say to my dancers, whenever you move, Chi starts first. Just like when you cry, you don't just cry. You're angry, you're moved inside, your Chi starts, *then* you cry. With dance it's the same. It flows out. You should sense movements then the movements should flow out. I feel that way the movement is more natural... and much more powerful.

How would you describe the basic difference between the Chinese style of dancing and Western style of dancing?

The way we move is derived from the culture. It's like Chinese calligraphy. When there's a competition of calligraphy, they want to see how people structure the character, how the Chi is moving. It makes calligraphy an art form. We have that kind of heritage inside of us. No

matter what, it's there. We move inside the space. After one character is finished we move to the next. Basically we are writing in one space for a long time, then move to another space and write there. We dance in the space, concentrating on the internal and the power and the Chi. Not like Western style, people "write" very fast through the space. Sometimes audiences say they wish we were moving more, and I say no. Our form is about sensing more, feeling more.

You've performed all over the world. Is there one particular performance you think of as a real highlight?

Can I tell you? The Grateful Dead! It was just two years before Jerry Garcia passed away. It was Chinese New Year, and they wanted a Chinese performing arts group to open their show. When people first approached us, I didn't know who the Grateful Dead were! They said "Oh, you must know. They're an American rock and roll icon. You must know." But I had never even attended a rock and roll concert before in my life! It was my first one. After that I learned a great deal, especially after I faced 16000 of what they call "Deadheads." It was an unforgettable experience. As a dance company, you almost never face an audience of 16000 people. It was so phenomenal. In general, audiences are quiet watching you. They were not a quiet audience! They cheered for us. The Deadheads had made a dragon and were moving it around the Oakland Coliseum. They used laser hand lights to project to the stage, they used balloons everywhere in the audience. It was amazing. It was just—I 'll never forget it.

Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company performs on Friday, November 12 at 8 p.m at the Ferst Center for the Arts at Georgia Tech. For more information, contact the Ferst Center Box Office at 404-894-9600 or visit www.ferstcenter.org.

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