

Review: Chinese dance troupe engages, entertains

October 02, 2013 11:00 pm • [By KANDRA HAHN / For the Lincoln Journal Star](#) [\(1\) Comments](#)

Lily Cai said she would bring Chinese dance “made in the U.S.A.” to the Lied Center for Performing Arts on Wednesday evening. And when she did, an appreciative audience, many of them on their feet, gave the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company a warm and lingering round of applause in thanks.

The show was well-designed to engage and entertain with four distinct parts danced by a company of six women. Strong use of colored lighting enlarged the impact of the staging and costumes. The troupe brought its own recorded music produced by music director Gang Situ and for which the dances had been designed.

The program opened with a “Dynasty Suite,” evoking several ancient eras and ending with modern cues. A second presentation “Bamboo Girls” was folkloric in nature, showing shy Chinese village girls finding themselves through dance.

The show ended with two signature pieces. First, “Candelas,” in which taking inspiration from Mahler’s Symphony No. 5, 4th Movement, Cai designed a piece to be danced on a dark stage with lit candles. “Silk Cascade,” a dramatic ribbon dance, was the finale.

Cai was on hand to talk to audience members at a pre-show chat in which she offered her thoughts on differences between the classical Chinese dance forms she learned and practiced in the Shanghai Opera House Dance Troupe before emigrating for the United States in 1983. In China, she said, the focus in dance is on technique and adherence to form. “In the U.S., soul comes first,” she said.

She said dance critics often review her work looking for movement across the stage. But here, she said, her dance takes a turn toward the Chinese, paying more attention to movement within a given space. She used a comparison between western handwriting which moves quickly across the page and Chinese calligraphy which involves drawing a detailed character in a smaller space but which, when complete, represents a complete word.

The performance was sponsored by The Confucius Institute of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as part of its mission to promote and teach Chinese language and culture in Nebraska.

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