



## The Bridges of Lily Cai

by Jeff Webster

*If you would have me weep, you must first of all feel grief yourself.*  
--Horace

**From New York to New Delhi** and from Pretoria to Prague, politicians, diplomats, and business leaders of many perspectives strive to bridge cultural chasms – to find a *common* ground.

IN San Francisco, one 30-year-old woman and her associates are doing something about it. The Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company is exposing diverse audiences to a unique blend of traditional and contemporary movement – movement with meaning.

*Common Ground*, the company's major production for 1995, was a collaboration with Dimensions Dance Theater, an African American company. The reviews were rave and the message was significant. Working together, two disparate communities can achieve great things. Differences of style, background, and point of view were scattered away like leaves in a breeze when audiences of many races and ethnic origins displayed overwhelming approval.

The idea for this unique fusion came after the Los Angeles riots. "I was brought up to believe that dance was always about something, that it could always do something," said Cai after the debut of *Common Ground*. "... and with my dance, I could help to ... end these stupid prejudices and so we could all talk to each other."

The company's Executive Director and composer, Gang Situ, describes the audience's reactions, "Not only did people give us standing ovations, they were jumping up and down."

*The artist cannot get along with a public ...*  
-- Andre Gide

*Common Ground* was an enormous success, and the formula for measuring that success is not complex. Situ explains, "If it's a good show, you can feel it. We also receive a lot of letters, faxes and phone calls after a performance."

Audience member Victoria Kirby wrote such a letter. It reads, in part, "It was wonderful to see the seats filled with old and young people from many ethnic backgrounds and hear the prolonged standing ovation at the end. I wanted to see the entire work gain right then!"

The company does not look to critical reviews for validation. “Reviewers have different tastes,” said Situ. However, *Common Ground* seems to have uncommonly appealing. A typical review noted of the collaboration, “... the most successful program I have seen so far.”

*An art is only great and significant if it is one that all may enjoy.*  
-- W. Somerset Maugham

Acceptance brings notice leading to increased bookings – also an indicator of achievement. Situ says that the company receives many invitations to perform at convention-related events. He adds, “Cultural attractions are one reason conventions and trade shows come to San Francisco.” He believes that Lily Cai’s company and other arts groups bring a great deal of business to the Bay Area. “Colorful culture attracts people.”

Describing further the economic effects of the performing arts, Situ began listing some of those benefiting from their performances. A quick accounting includes: six permanent dancers with others hired as needed, a grant writer and public relations agency, booking agents, recording studios, multi-media production companies, lighting designers, graphic artists, printers, stage crews, transportation companies, costumers, and those who profit from theatre rentals.

The Lily Cai company mounts one major new production each year. They also participate in about twenty other events annually. One particular booking, as the opening for a band, was particularly memorable. “Bill Graham Presents called,” related Situ, “and asked if we would perform for 16,000 people with Jerry Garcia and The grateful dead. Being unfamiliar with American rock & roll, we didn’t know who that was. Then, we weren’t sure if the Deadheads would accept Chinese dance, but we did pretty well.”

Another important performance helped celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the United Nations. Cai and Situ considered the invitation a “big honor.” They were further rewarded when a large color photo of their dance appeared in the San Francisco Chronicle.

Emphasizing the expense behind a big show, Situ says, “People see only the front of the stage and not what happens behind the curtain. “That, says Situ, is where grants come in.” “Without grants from the California Arts Council and others, we would have to close our doors. The grant process creates a healthy competition between the performing arts groups. There is a certain amount of money available, and with many groups applying for that money, you have to be good.”

He says that as important as the financial boost of a grant is, there is another benefit ... artistic development. “You cannot get a grant unless you have reached a certain level,” say Situ. “The grant guidelines say you have to reach a certain level, artistically and administratively. You have to be in good shape.”

Grants cover about 50% of the company's operating budget, the remainder coming from fund-raisers, donations, and ticket sales. Besides grants to the company, Lily Cai has been a seven-time recipient of an artist in residence fellowship. And, Situ, as a composer, has also received individual fellowships.

*Art teaches nothing, except the significance of life.*  
-- Henry Miller

The performances, each with hundreds of details to handle, would be enough for many artists. But not Lily Cai. A very important part of her life – and her art – is to teach and inspire others. Each year, she conducts approximately 100 performances and classes at schools from the Bay Area all the way to Ellsworth, Maine. And, students from those classes have found their way into Lily Cai productions.

Her ability to connect with people may be instrumental to the company's success. Commenting on their reception by audiences, Situ says, "... they don't want to leave. They want to talk to you. Lily likes to talk to an audiences right away after a performance. She goes backstage, does a quick change and comes back out to talk to the audience."

Cai also devotes time as a committee member of the International Dance Festival and the Bay Area Isadora Duncan Awards.

Situ, who composes original music for the company, regrets that for now, music must be recorded. A small company – even a highly regarded one- simply cannot afford an orchestra. For their next major performance, however, that will change... in a big way. Scheduled for June, 1996 is another collaboration. This time with the Bay Area Women's Philharmonic and the choral ensemble, Chanticleer.

Although that production is the current focus of the company, their long-term goals include more national appearances. And, looking at how far Lily Cai has come in a relatively short time, no one could doubt she and her company will fulfill their dreams. That's because Cai believes in herself and her adopted homeland saying, "Everything is possible here."