

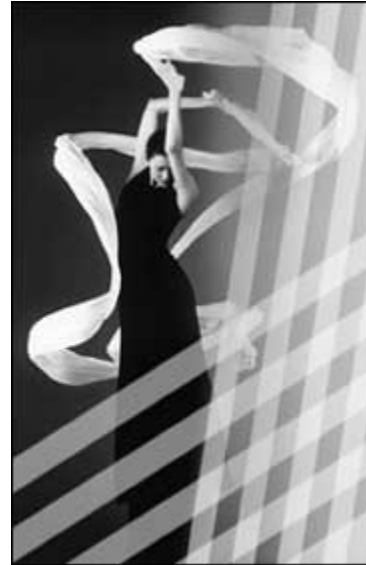
A Vision of Grace

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By Edward Park

What makes a woman beautiful? Is it the sway in her hips? The tilt of her head? Perhaps the nape of the neck, inadvertently revealed. Perhaps it is all too transient, too fleeting to grasp. But perhaps, one dance company with an extraordinary vision can offer the world some illuminating insights in a spectacular fashion.

Since the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company was founded in 1988 by a former principal dancer with the Shanghai Opera, it has become a nationally acclaimed pioneer in fusing traditional and modern dance forms by finding harmony between Chinese and Western aesthetic sensibilities. Blending together such disparate influences requires a great deal of patience, experimentation and above all, clarity of artistic purpose. A central theme in Lily Cai's philosophy is to recapture the nuanced movements of feminine beauty at different angles using scenery and music.



The company's talent consists of seven exceptional dancers, mostly from Chinese dance backgrounds, with three to five years of professional experience prior to joining. However, their dance routines are surprisingly different from their training. Cai explains her criteria for selecting her dancers: "[The most important qualities are] artistic talent, hard work — and I need a person who really loves dance. When they dance, they [must be willing to be] giving."

Culling from her own experiences, Cai seeks to reconcile the expressiveness of modern dance with the subtle beauty of Chinese dance. In describing Lily Cai's choreographic method, one dancer, Ruth Chen, says, "The company [is about] seven dancers becoming one woman. All the dancers, after a while, are able to cock their head the same way and angle their body the same way. She works with a lot of inner qualities. American Dance companies have a tendency to say 'do big leg splits and jumps,' but [Lily Cai] is more Chinese. There's more of that 'finding your own inner energy.' She would give us the idea and music, invite us to try it out, and if one dancer catches it, she'll say 'stop, and look at this dancer. This is the image I want you to get.'"

While her style may be hard to place on the continuum of artistic genres, Cai's unique ability to accommodate and meld a seamless mixture between styles and disciplines speaks to the notion of art as an organic process – a form not bound by the demands of convention.

The fruits of this process have most recently culminated in *Three Movements*, a performance to be held at the Yerba Buena Center Theatre this weekend, showcasing the premiere of two exciting new pieces. Their work in the past has been immensely popular, receiving accolades from across the country for the exhilarating visual imagery and groundbreaking originality.

"Silk Cascade," the first piece to debut on Friday night, is an innovative collaboration between the company and renown new media artist Ed Tannenbaum (whose installations have been displayed at the Exploratorium, along with other pieces currently on tour in Europe, Asia and the Americas).

While attending a conference in New York two years ago, Cai viewed an exhibit featuring Jackson Pollock's paintings at the Museum of Modern Art. Soon after, she was moved to call upon Bay Area video artist Tannenbaum with an idea. Set to a sweeping score by John Adams and inspired in part by Pollock's painting, "Silk Cascade" reproduces the process on a grand scale, taking the audience from moments of quiet intensity to triumphant bouts of activity in a fantastic flurry of rhythm and color.

Dancers perform with over a hundred interchanging ribbons on stage while Tannenbaum – with some ingenious computer-driven alterations – simultaneously renders the piece on a large projection screen in the background. The product is a dizzying array of effects that are as vivid as they are variegated-kaleidoscopic ribbons dappled with color that fade, movements that appear as brushstrokes that overlap and mingle, then trail and disappear. Tannenbaum becomes more than just an artist in a static medium. He becomes in his own words, "like a jazz performer, except I have to make my own instruments."

The dancing, too, seems to reflect a wide variety of influences — at times as feminine as classical Chinese opera, at times as poised as modern dance, at times even reminiscent of dervishes of Islamic mysticism. The lithe grace and apparent ease with which the dancers move belies the physical rigor involved — the ribbons, 18 foot banners of multicolored silk, whirl, suspend, arc, and loop, dwarfing the black-clad dancers as they create the mesmerizing illusion that the ribbons are moving on their own volition, gracefully swept by invisible winds.

"Bamboo Girl," another new piece debuting on Friday, takes the audience on a gleeful jaunt through rural China. A rather comical departure from the two other works, Bamboo Girl seeks to capture a feeling of festive pageantry, with playful caricatures of village life. The music, played with a Chinese flute, creates an ethereal atmosphere fitting with the vibrant costume and scenery.

Another performance is titled “Strings Calligraphy,” and has been popular with the troupe in the past. A somber and muscular dance, it pays homage to the art of Chinese calligraphy and features a quartet of musicians playing both western instruments and the *erhu*, a traditional Chinese instrument. The score, composed by Gang Situ, and played by the New Century Chamber Orchestra with Jiebing Chen on the *erhu*, serves to emphasize the studied and purposeful spontaneity of the brushstrokes in Chinese writing.

It is a rare and stirring occasion when art seems to transcend explicit cultural expression and opts for mature artistic vision. Still, Cai manages to maintain universal appeal with an unpretentious and stylish elegance in her work. Part *Fantasia*, part cultural exploration, *Three Performances* promises an unforgettable experience for audiences of any age.

Three Movements is being performed at the Yerba Buena Center Theatre, 700 Howard Street (at 3rd) on Friday, Nov. 16 and Saturday, Nov. 17. Tickets range from \$18 to \$28 and are available at the Yerba Buena Center Theatre or by calling 415-978-2787.

For more information on the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company, go to www.ccpsf.org. On Ed Tannenbaum, go to www.et-arts.com