Main Feature

Profile: Lily Cai

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One word to describe the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company: beautiful. Whether it's a lightly titled head or an arm stretched out in an exaggerated line, no other term applies.

Founded in 1988 by Lily Cai, a former Shanghai Opera dancer, the company performs in a style that is neither purely Chinese nor purely American, but rather a blend of both.

Her works flow, always conveying a sense of Chinese femininity. The technique she has developed focuses on dancers' internal energy and movement from the center of the body.

She says, "If you look at my work, you would see that a Chinese wouldn't do that. But a choreographer born in United States wouldn't do that dance form, either.

"I wanted a Chinese American dance company. My background is in Chinese dance, so I keep some things, but create a unique dance and company."

After immigrating to the United States in 1983, Cai performed at the Ethnic Dance Festival as a soloist for six years and with her company for three.

But as she began experimenting and stretching the classical Chinese dance vocabulary, she wasn't accepted into the festival. She says, back then, the organizers saw her as "too modern. It was not authentic Chinese dance. They didn't consider it EDF material anymore."

For the festival's 25th anniversary, Executive Director Julie Mushet invited her back. The company will perform the world premiere of Si Ji, with music composed by Gang Situ.

Inspired by nature, art and personal feelings, Cai says she's never taken a modern dance class. She says, "I don't want to be someone else. But I watch good performances —

Alvin Ailey, Neverland from Holland. It makes me think about good quality, good presentation."

When working on a new piece, Cai spends time alone to conceptualize theme. "I want to create something that is unique, not like someone else. That's important to the artistry. And it's important to my creativity."

Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company will celebrate its 15th anniversary in November.