

RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL

East meets West

Choreographer Lily Cai draws upon her Chinese heritage, Western experiences

[Richard LeComte](#)

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Suffering and injury are part of a professional dancer's life — or at least that's one philosophy. Choreographer Lily Cai disagrees vehemently; she finds beauty in strength.

"You should be strong, strong, strong, without injury," said Cai, whose Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company opens Artown on Thursday.

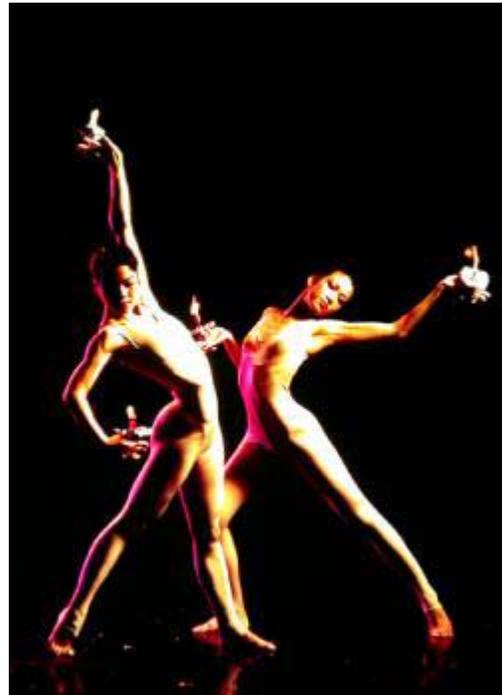
So she's developed a training regimen for her six-woman ensemble that mixes Chinese and Western philosophy — meditation, isometrics, ballet techniques and even weight-lifting. The result: An aesthetic that mixes beauty with longevity and power.

"People think Chinese women are soft, so good; let's create a soft image onstage, but inside very powerful," Cai said by telephone from San Francisco. "I want a soft-looking but very powerful presentation on the stage."

Cai founded the company in 1988; since then, she's developed a repertoire of dances that merge her experiences as a dancer in China with Western dance traditions, including ballet and modern.

"I've lived in this country for 21 years, and I'll never forget my culture," said Cai, who grew up in Shanghai and came to the United States with her family in 1983. "But I've also become involved in American culture. I've lived 21 years in this new land, and it's kind of like you've been changed automatically. American culture has influenced me a lot."

For example, "Silk Cascade," one of the dances on the Thursday program, merges Chinese ribbon dancing and high-tech production techniques. Cai drew inspiration from the paintings of American splatter-artist



COMING UP: Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company opens the month-long Artown festival with a Thursday show.

DETAILS

What: Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company **When:** Presentations start at 7:30 p.m. Thursday; opening night of Artown **Where:** Wingfield Park Amphitheater **Cost:** Free. Opening-night presentations will precede the performance. Get there early; opening night usually fills up Wingfield Park.

Details: Go to www.renoisartown.com or call 322-1538 **Discover the Arts:** The company will present a Discover the Arts event for children at 1 p.m. Thursday in Wingfield Park — the first of the July Artown festival. Bring water for the young ones. **On the Web:** The Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company is at www.ccpfsf.org

Jackson Pollock.

“When I was in New York five or six years ago, I saw his exhibition in a modern art museum,” she said. “I looked at the paintings and thought, ‘That’s my ribbon dance.’”

The company has toured extensively in the United States and earned awards, including two from the Isadora Duncan Dance Awards Committee. Her company also has shown up in some unexpected places — performing with the male chorus Chanticleer or opening for a Grateful Dead concert. But it’s Cai’s visuals that have impressed critics.

“There is something unerringly magical about the play of light on whirling fabric,” wrote Michael Wade Simpson in a 2003 San Francisco Chronicle review. “Her dancers are wonderfully adept at manipulating yards of silk (not to mention hats with braided fringe, and body-wrapping nets of gauze).”

Cai draws her inspiration both from the visual and the emotional — her dances come from the eyes and the gut, she said.

Creating her dances is especially difficult because she’s creating her melded Chinese and American styles from scratch.

“When I create a new piece, the process is slow, very slow,” she said. “Sometimes my husband (company composer and music director Gang Situ) gets frustrated. But almost everything I create is original. In a ballet, certain movements are already there. But for mine, it’s totally from scratch every time I create a new piece. I put one together, and if it’s not working, I tear it down again. It’s a slow process.”

That process puts her six dancers through unusual training that draws energy from what Cai refers to as “the middle of the body area, from the belly button, just like Martha Graham.”

Her brand of training sometimes gives pause to dancers trained in ballet, modern or Chinese dance. No matter.

“My dancers have to be willing to change what they have learned before to follow my kind of artistic direction,” she said.

Cai has been working out since her days in China, when she was a principal dancer with the Shanghai Opera House. Her training mixed classical ballet in the Russian tradition with classical Chinese and folk dance — but not much modern dance as practiced in the West. Moving to the United States gave her the opportunity to dance past the age of 30 — a key component of her philosophy.

“If you reach a certain age, they ask you to retire then,” she said. “But for me, 30? Retire? . . . Right now, there are new techniques to avoid body injury. A dancer can live on the stage longer, much longer than 30.”

Plus, the move to the United States allowed her to reinvent herself and her movements.

“In China, as a young student, they ask you to follow tradition,” she said. “In America, they want to create your culture — create a new thing. . . . When people see our company,

they think, 'What that company is is modern dance.' I kind of avoid that response. I see it as a Chinese-American dance form."

So Cai has continued, creating her own form of dance that merges the cultures of her life and will get Artown off to a visual feast.

"People ask me why you keep doing this," she said. "It's my dream. My American dream is to give American dance a Chinese face."

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