

Sculpting with dancers

Lily Cai Dancers blend Chinese traditions with Western influences

Catey Sullivan, Contributor

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Gazing at the wild swirls of a massive Jackson Pollock painting more than a decade ago, Lily Cai saw dancers.

"It was the first Pollock I'd seen," said the Chinese-born choreographer and longtime performer with the Shanghai Opera. "I just stared and said, 'Wow.' That's my ribbon dance."

"Ribbon Cascade" -- during which six dancers twine and spin more than 200 brightly colored silk ribbons through an airborne representation of a Pollock painting -- is one of three pieces the Lily Cai Dancers will perform Sunday at College of Lake County.

Cai, a San Francisco resident, founded her dance troupe in 1988, after coming to the United States in 1983 in search of creative outlets she couldn't find in China.

"It's not so much like this now, but in 1983, China was kind of stuck," she said. "The whole country was not moving. I wanted to do something new, to create something new."

That she did. The Lily Cai Dancers fuse Western ballet, modern dance and traditional Chinese dance into pieces such as the Pollock-inspired ribbon dance.

"Western ballet is (based on) stretching and pointing, on beautiful elongation," Cai said. "Chinese classical dance is more circular. Modern dance is about creating your own characters and being individual."

By combining the fundamentals of all three dance forms in her work, Cai developed the creative outlet she couldn't find in 1980s China. One of her creations, "Candelas," is performed by dancers balancing lit candles on their palms. That piece, Cai said, is an ode to humility and tranquility, qualities embodied by candles.

"Chinese people always say the candle is selfless -- it burns itself up to give light to other people. Also, we say the personality of the candle is one of peace and tranquility. These things we capture in the dance," Cai said.

Gwethalyn Bronner, director of the James Lumber Center for the Performing Arts at the College of Lake County, first saw the Lily Cai dancers two years ago and has been trying to book them since.

"They were so graceful and fluid," she said. "It was like these dancers didn't have any bones in their bodies. I was totally engaged by the choreography and the body's capacity for movement. They made their movements look effortless."

Such grace seems even more impressive when one considers that several of the Lily Cai dancers are older than 30 -- an age considered past prime in the intensely youth-oriented world of professional dance performers.

Cai uses a training system she devised herself to keep dancers lithe and supple.

"I want to challenge age, to keep my dancers into their 80s. We work to develop internal body energy and muscle strength using Chi," she said of the force that, according to Buddhist philosophy, energizes universe and permeates all aspects of the human body.

"I look for lines and beauty when I choreograph," Cai said. "It's like sculpting. I think in my next life, I may be a sculptor. I love to create these shapes and forms so much."

Lily Cai Dancers

7 p.m. Sunday

College of Lake County James Lumber Center for the Performing Arts Mainstage, 19351 W. Washington St., Grayslake

\$28; \$25 CLC students and seniors, \$15 children under 12

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