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Dancing with Props

Lily Cai - Chinese Dance Company

Terrace Theater, John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

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by George Jackson

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How can one not succumb to Lily Cai, who comes out in the middle of her girls' final number to wheedle the audience with a blend of chutzpah and charm? The moment the lights had gone down and the curtains opened for the first of Cai's three works, "Bamboo Girls", it was apparent that this company's production values were top notch. Illumination (by Matthew Antaky) varied the stage space from its atmosphere-heavy upper reaches down to the floor which it splattered with pattern. On the hats worn by the "feminine beauties" of the opener, the lighting seemed to make the broad, fringed brims spin. Costuming, although not elaborate from the neck down, was exquisitely tailored to reveal the all-female cast's contours.

Prior to Mme. Cai's pep talk there'd been grumbling in the audience that the intermissions were longer than the acts, but that quelled as the closer, "Silk Cascade", went on and on. Actually, Cai is expert in making short, pungent dance statements and even the extended finale was composed of smaller sections. All the choreography involved moving objects in addition to human bodies. In "Girls" it was the rotating hats, in "Candelas" each dancer carried two candles that flickered, and "Silk" turned out to be the ultimate ribbon dance. Cai limited use of the body with a miniaturist's skill and even the few broad strokes she sanctioned were strictly controlled.

The hats in the first piece sometimes masked the dancers' features, and body parts then arranged themselves as calligraphy. Movement for legs kept tightly together in tiny steps was resolved by flexings and anglings. Heads bent forward with their prominent hats were countered by distinctly protruding butts. The 5 girls, who were supposed to be

celebrating a Dai festival, minced and were coy but did it with deliberate delicacy and to tinkly, rhythmic music (by Zhi You Shi and Chu Lin Yang, remixed by Gang Situ).

"Candelas" was Cai's capsule version of Ausdruckstanz (expressionist dance), a ritual for all 6 of her dancers who stepped processionally with their candles, genuflected or curled up on the floor, then rose, stretched and aggregated, blossoming into an elliptical candelabra formation as the adagietto of Gustav Mahler's 5th symphony climaxed. After their ceremonial entrance, Cai had individualized the movement for each participant yet shaped the action into a total form. Only one dancer was left on stage at the very end. She stood in profile, and following Mahler's last chord, bowed her head with finality.

For "Silk Cascade" there was a splendid pallet. Red initiated the spectrum of colors, with the dancers dressed in it and holding two streamer ribbons that matched. Surprisingly, a green pair of streamers appeared, followed by other colors. The dancers were still dressed in tight red suits but with the appearance of contrasting loopings, circlings, snakings and flaggings, the body motion became distinct from that of the silk cloth. This piece's first portion was to conventional West-East music, "Spring Overture" by Huan Zhi Li. After Lily Cai's little talk, the work continued to the sound of John Adams' minimalist "Century Rolls". There were black and white displays of ribbon dancing, all black sections, and black with golden yellow. The effects, inspired by Jackson Pollack's paintings, were maximalist and yet much of the body motion that generated the ribbons' waving motions remained scrupulously limited.

Cuteness, exoticism, refinement and simplicity are the compass points between which Lily Cai picks her path. Her dances seem curiosities but perhaps they are more than that. Would they bear seeing a second time?

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