

KING KONGERT

Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company, Lincoln Center, Fort Collins, October 20, 2007.

By Tim Van Schmidt

Colorful costumes, interesting props, cool lighting, riveting music and arresting images. All of these things were very evident in the Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company performance at the Lincoln Center last night. What was NOT evident was the constant motion that is usually associated with contemporary dance. Instead, this company presented a program filled with series after series of visually stimulating vignettes, where the motion it takes to get to each little vignette is not particularly as important as the resulting image itself.

This is not entirely a personal observation. Cai herself came out and explained the difference between her company's style and that of many others after the opening piece. According to Cai, the difference is inherent in cultural roots- that Chinese dance is about dancing WITHIN a space, not through it, like Western dance. This kind of internalization resulted in less actual movement on stage but a refined sense of control and composure. Motion for motion's sake- to be impressive with feats of challenging physical dexterity- just wasn't the agenda for the Lily Cai company.

A perfect example of how this worked was in the piece "Dance from Qing" from Cai's "Dynasty Suite." The dancers were dressed in colorful, embroidered costumes with impressive headdresses. On their feet were high heeled shoes- with the heel in the center of the shoe- and this particular dance was about the grace and poise it takes to move smoothly under those conditions. The dancers did not do acrobatics on the shoes, or attempt to gyrate- they simply moved with slow, dignified deliberation, the swing of their hands, holding red kerchiefs, marking the progress of the piece across the stage. The effect was splendid in its simplicity and resonating power.

Those red kerchiefs were not just an accessory for "Dance from Qing." Instead, as Cai explained herself, the use of props was a deliberate part of the company's aesthetic. The props- the red kerchiefs, designer baskets on the ends of poles, long colorful ribbons- helped fill in some of the stage imagery while the company was concentrating on dancing "within" their space.

The most effect “props,” of course, were the pairs of flaming candles each dancer manipulated throughout the last piece, “Candelas.” These weren’t just flashlights representing candles, but real fire, which cut through the darkness in the theater like no artificial light can do. It certainly had an otherworldly effect, arousing a primal kind of fascination and fear- I couldn’t help but hope that everything was well in line as the curtains closed close to these flames at the end of the show.

All of this is not to say that the Lily Cai group is in the business of recreating Chinese folk dances. While fully based on ancient forms, there were often moments in the show that allowed for contemporary times to creep in. Those moments were sometimes startling. For example, the first part of the “Dynasty Suite,” “Basket Girls- Dance from Zhou,” featured a style of dance that started with a little motion, then a pose- the women extending their back ends far behind them- something Cai brought to the audience’s attention during her brief time on stage. Later in the suite, during “Straw Hat Girl,” the same pose- the extended back end- was echoed (actually as it was throughout many of the pieces) but in this case, the motion included some modern shimmying and shaking that turned an ancient exercise in poise into a little steamy bit of bump and grind.

The spare but effective lighting also served to accentuate the dance pieces in ways the ancients probably did not conceive of. This was most evident during the piece “Begin from Here,” that featured company members swirling long brightly colored ribbons from the tops of pedestals. The ribbons themselves were interesting to see, but the spotlighting, trained not on the dancers but on the swirling ribbons, turned them into something more- a mesmerizing visual image that engulfed the dancers, all dressed in red suits.

It should also be reported that the music for the concert was at times more intense, perhaps even more exhilarating than the dance itself, also revealing modern sensibilities. Original music by music director Gang Situ and Gary Schwantes during the first two chunks of the program vacillated between the use of traditional sounding instruments in a traditional sounding setting, to full bodied arrangements achieving deep electronic power. The Gustav Mahler piece used to back up “Candelas” was equally powerful emotionally and an excellent counterpoint to the other music. Combined WITH the dance, then, the music played a significant role in assuring the success of the performance.

For those looking for the “usual” in a modern dance performance, this event might have been disappointing for a lack of physical business. For those open to experiencing a unique vision, starting with touchstones to the far gone past then spicing things up with contemporary elements, the Lily Cai concert was satisfying indeed.