

Vision, Strength and Stamina

AXIS and Lily Cai celebrate 20 years

By Julia Hollas

The Bay Area dance scene could be characterized in any number of terms. "Experimental" and "rich" come to mind. In less flattering terms (and with no intent to offend), I've also heard "spastic" and "diffused." In truth, depending on the times and circumstances faced, all artists and members of this community have gone through both sides of, and intersecting combinations of, these polar states of mind. As time passes, and we face the waxing and waning of funding, audience interest, and even self-belief in our own work, we take note when an unreservedly different artistic viewpoint claims longevity. What's their secret? (Is there a secret?) This month, and on the same weekend, two trailblazing companies are celebrating their 20th anniversaries—AXIS Dance Company and Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company.

Known for blending ancient Chinese forms with modern dance techniques in visually stunning performances, thematically Cai's company explores Chinese women—looking at their histories and present to illuminate the strength, complexity and beauty within. Cai's dancers, all Chinese and Chinese-American females, train with her uniquely developed dance technique, which she has crafted over the years to help dancers harness their inner strength, avoid injury and connect to a personal impetus for movement. Using clear, emotive movements, evocative props and often original music scores composed by Cai's husband, Gang Situ, the company's performances are rich in imagery and visual effect. The company has toured in the U.S., Europe and Mexico (including theaters such as the Kennedy Center and the San Francisco Opera House), and Cai's choreography has been commissioned by companies from the Santa Fe Opera to Ballet Memphis. This month Cai's company celebrates twenty years during two nights of performances at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, which features selected excerpts from audience favorites, and a world premiere.

AXIS Dance Company, also celebrating a Silver Anniversary November 14–16, is well-known as an innovator in physically integrated dance and a contender on the contemporary dance scene. The company's dancers, some with and some without physical disabilities, have performed in various venues in the Bay Area and on tour throughout the U.S., Germany and Russia, dancing repertory by renowned choreographers such as Bill T. Jones, Stephen Petronio and Ann Carlson. AXIS' current Home Season purposefully focuses on Bay Area choreographers. The company will perform a favorite from their 2007 repertoire by Joe Goode, the Bay Area premiere of a work by Kate Weare and two world premieres by choreographers Sonya Delawda and Alex Ketley.

Ketley, formerly a dancer with the San Francisco Ballet and LINES Ballet, currently directs The Foundry, his own ten-year-old company. "There is a great weight that



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— Lily Cai

comes with the accumulation of information," Ketley said. "When you first start to do work, I think that you're just amazed that you can do anything—like I kick my leg to the right, then twenty people kick their leg to the right, and it goes onstage, and—wow!—but with time the sense of importance in what you're trying to say grows. When I look at AXIS, Alonso [King] or Joe [Goode]—they have been influenced by years of work within the Bay Area... There's no substitute for time in a certain way."

Cai agrees, saying that it takes time for a dance company—like any business—to develop. Cai immigrated to the Bay Area from China in the early 80s and, "like any normal immigrant,"

didn't have a job, didn't speak English and experienced a great deal of culture shock. Then again, "like any normal immigrant, she learned English, acclimated and the culture shock lessened. In 1986, she got a job teaching Chinese Dance at Galileo High School in San Francisco. This group of students, who knew nothing about dance or music, was the blank slate upon which Cai began developing her training techniques. Eventually these young girls morphed into the first incarnation of her company. One dancer, Phong Young, is still with her and will be performing in the twentieth anniversary show. "A dance form needs time to build up," Cai said. "If you love it, just keep doing it. Something will be happening."

Cai said she has loved dance since she was a little girl. The youngest of five siblings, her parents noticed her cleverness early. Her father, dying from cancer, wanted her to become a doctor and save people's lives. "I thought about it," Cai said, "but dance took my spirit."

The love of it, this original motivating factor, is what draws many artists to dance—and keeps us in it. When asked if she had any advice for younger artists, along with having a flexible way to make a living while your dance career blossoms, AXIS artistic director Judith Smith said, "Don't get in this business unless it's the only thing you can do—and I mean that on every level.... I don't think you can do it if you don't really, really, really, have the passion."

AXIS Dance Company first began in 1987 and grew out of a movement class for women who use wheelchairs, taught by founding director Thais Mazur. With the intention to create one performance piece for the Dance Brigade's "Furious Feet: the Dance Festival for Social Change" in 1988, Mazur gathered a group of people with and without disabilities. Smith came to the experience having done about four years of martial arts and some improvisation, and found it exciting to explore her range of movement with others. "I think what really happened is that we all got hooked," Smith said.

AXIS spent the next ten years creating their choreography collaboratively as a company, learning about their unique vocabulary and dance form. They performed several shows using aerial apparatus, in the Dance Brigade's "Revolutionary Nutcracker Sweetie" and were asked to create works for various dance and disability awareness events. From early on, outreach and educational activities, as well as performance, are important aspects of AXIS' continued mission.

Not having a dance background, Smith educated herself by seeing as much dance as possible, and began to think that other choreographers could do really interesting work with AXIS' distinctive blend of movers. In 1997, the company split over an "exciting and scary" change of direction. This shift saw the company go from only creating and presenting the work of members of the company to the current AXIS model of com-

missioning local and national choreographers to create work on the company. In what Smith characterized as a "sad, difficult divorce," Mazur and some of the dancers left the company, Smith ended up with a lot of the administrative responsibility, and the five remaining members continued on with the intention to be a cutting-edge dance company, one that performed high-quality work, with an expanded educational program. "We didn't have much money, but we had a lot of enthusiasm and community support," she said. Smith sees this direction as a pivotal move, one that raised the company's profile nationally and brought about their success at bridging to a contemporary dance company that commissions original work.

A similar courage to go in her own direction is how Cai credits her longevity in the field. She has a strong sense of the stage as a canvas, and often begins with imagery to complexly layering her movement, staging and production elements. Coaching her dancers, in addition to helping solve any issues their bodies have in the choreography,

Cai helps them discover what personally motivates them to dance; just as your brain motivates your mouth to speak, Cai wants her dancers to feel an internal energy before they move. In this artistic process, Cai sees each day as a new possibility to further hone and bring about an artistic vision that is uniquely her own.

Cai's creation process takes four to five months, in contrast to her teacher in China, who mounts a dance production in a single month. Cai said that both she and her teacher are proud of their respective methods: her teacher that she can create in a short period of time, and Cai that she has patience for the long process that results in her authentically formed ideas. Cai's advice to young companies encourages them to also find their own clear vision, to "find your own face on the stage. Be your own."

Both AXIS and Lily Cai, having started down unique paths, have come upon the realities of running a company in the larger cultural climate, including the lack of funding for the arts and a general societal lack of knowledge and awareness of dance. Cai advises, "Don't complain. Just find a way to solve the problems... I always say, 'be a magician' – think of all kinds of ways to make it happen." Of the challenges of making it work in a harsh environment, Smith said, "No matter what level you're working on—a five or seven figure budget—we're all getting up every day and doing the fucking impossible on nothing—I didn't foresee that." While AXIS has grown from being a group of people who pitched in to cover production costs to a company that now pays dancers about twice the Bay Area's average and boasts an international touring schedule; and Lily Cai's company has grown from a classroom of students to a professional group with yearly productions and touring. No matter what anniversary you're facing, it takes creativity—as well as practicality and business sense—to survive.

Cai talks about being successful in dance as building a stable four-legged table—if you neglect one of the legs the table will wobble. The first of Cai's metaphorical table legs is the production—you must have access to choreography, costumes, music, etc.—or you must create your own. The second leg is dancer training—you must have an avenue for your dancers to approach your work. People compose the third leg of the table—you want to be surrounded by individuals with patience and passion, something Cai says is very important to her. The final standing leg of Cai's table is the practical side of running a company. "It's a business," said Cai. "Be the best in the business."

When asked if she would change anything about AXIS' past twenty years, Smith said she would not change the artistic or educational learning curve of the company. The supporting

gambit of stuff, however, could have used some assistance. "I think a lot of us... start with the idea of being involved in the artistic process, and then you have to learn a lot about administration. It would have been nice if there had been a manual," Smith said. While counting herself lucky to have great community and individual support over the years, were AXIS to start out again, Smith would first develop a mentoring relationship with someone who had been in the dance

business, thus staving off the loneliness of solely pounding away at the administrative load. Then she would "make sure that we had a very clear organizational structure, with all of the boring, monotonous stuff that you need to run a company," such as job descriptions, contracts, personnel review, etc.

Cai and Smith state that, history aside, there is still more to be done. Among the many milestones reached for each group, getting to celebrate 20-years as a

dance company is definitely one of them, Smith said. Other than just the number, she said the achievement rests in "having the stamina and still having something to say and work to do." Similarly, Cai credits "discovery and development—that's what keeps me still here." In the coming years, Cai hopes to organize and document her training techniques to develop dancers, and would like to test them on other companies and bodies. And always, "make a good show."

Julia Hollas is a dancer and arts administrator. She currently dances with the San Francisco Conservatory of Dance and serves as administrative manager for the Conservatory and Dandelion Dance Theater.

Pictured right: Tammy Li, Lily Cai Chinese Dance Company, photo by Marty Sohl. Pictured left: AXIS Dance Company in Margaret Jenkins' "Waypoint," photo by Trib La Pride.