

'SenseScape': Chinese dance tradition updated

Mary Ellen Hunt

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Traditional, classical Chinese dance gets a fresh flourish of energy in Lily Cai's newest creation, "SenseScape."

The Shanghai-born Cai is known for her blend of modern dance and Chinese influences, but whatever dance idiom she chooses, Cai's trademark is to give each work a unique texture. Cai - who founded her troupe in 1988 - credits the initial impetus of "SenseScape" to composer Gang Situ, her longtime collaborative partner, who has created a partly original, partly sampled score for the work.

"It's about the human senses and the chi," Cai says, referencing the concept of energy and flow of life forces. "My technique itself is about the chi. In the past when I've choreographed, always I see an image first, but this time, I worked from the inside. I keep telling my dancers that the movement is just the result, like when you laugh or cry, you sense the sadness or happiness, then you start the action."

Cai says her process begins with simply developing a technique and vocabulary with the dancers, often working with props or sometimes elegant costumes. Only afterward does she collect together the ideas, choreography and improvisatory material.

"I'm slow," Cai says with a laugh. "I'm very slow to create a new piece, because every time I start from scratch - even start from the body training - because I believe each dance has to have to a unique sense of movement."

The world premiere of "SenseScape" also marks Cai's first collaboration with the musicians of Melody of China. It's not the first time the six-member Melody of China has played for dance. They've enjoyed notable successes with Alonzo King's Lines Ballet and Oakland Ballet.

"We try to mesh together with the dancers," says Yangqin Zhao, the ensemble's director, who plays the elegant stringed *yangqin*, a Chinese instrument similar to the hammered dulcimer. "And in my

experience, the audience really seems to love the idea of live music and dance together."

The ensemble, known not only for performing classical Chinese works but also for adventurous collaborations with Western classical and jazz musicians, has performed several of Gang's compositions too, adding their own liveliness to what Cai calls "the Situ magic."

Asked if the kind of fusion and collaboration they've forged in "SenseScape" would have been possible in China, Cai answers with a categorical no.

There would not be the luxury of taking her time to create the piece, she says.

"Plus there would be political issues," she says. "I was in the Shanghai Opera House. The company director doesn't know about art, but still they are the leader, so if I had made some choreography, they'd have to look at it and they'd give you lots of opinions - this is no good, that's no good. Sometimes, I remember seeing the director fall asleep during a run. Then he'd wake up and talk. And have opinions."

"Here we play the music of all different composers," Zhao adds, "play the music we want to. We have more freedom here."

8 p.m. today. \$28-\$35. Cowell Theater, Fort Mason, 99 Marina Blvd., S.F. (415) 345-7575.
www.lilycaidance.org.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2009/12/10/NSPD1AV80D.DTL>

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