

Entertainment

CHOOSING HER PATH

CHOREOGRAPHER GOES AGAINST HER FATHER'S WISHES TO FORGE CAREER IN CHINESE DANCE

By *Lori Gilbert*

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Record Staff Writer

Lily Cai's father wanted her, the youngest of his five children, to become a doctor.

Dying of cancer at 48, he told his wife that the baby of the family was the smartest one, and when he was gone, she should encourage her to become a doctor so other people didn't die young.

Cai, who came to the United States in 1983, never became a doctor and never prevented anyone from dying of cancer, but she's kept alive Chinese traditions with her Lily Cai Dance Company.

She brings her unique blend of Chinese dance that dates back thousands of years with American modern dance to the Grand Theatre Center for the Arts on Saturday. Tickets for the 8 p.m. show are \$25 and \$30.

"I ran away from my father's will and became a performing artist," Cai said.

It really was her family's idea.

As the Cultural Revolution in her native China was ending, citizens were sent to re-education centers. Rather than see the little girl sent off to become a farmer, her siblings encouraged their mother to enroll her in dance, a much respected profession in China.

She went on to become a premiere dancer with the Shanghai Opera House Dance Troupe.

"You practice six days a week, eight hours a day," Cai said. "It's really powerful. The training is good. The only thing is, arts are political. The work is very much like political art. The government owned the company. When you hit 30, they ask you to retire. They definitely want you to go. They believe dancing belongs to pretty, young girls. Before they asked me to leave, I chose my way to leave."

She left her hometown of Shanghai, moved to the United States, settled in Sacramento and became immersed in the language and customs of her new country.

She'd chosen Sacramento because it was a capital and she assumed it was rich with culture. She was wrong.

"After 5 o'clock, the city is so quiet," Cai said. "I came from Shanghai. I like New York."

Though she never lived in the city that never sleeps, Cai eventually moved to San Francisco,

where she was hired by Galileo High School to teach Chinese dance, an entity Cai said is unfamiliar to most outside of her homeland.

"They only know Chinese acrobats and Chinese food," Cai lamented.

The students she taught for four years formed her first company in 1988. One of them, Phong Voong, continues to dance with the troupe.

They've performed across the country, introducing dance from various Chinese eras and cultures. Cai, who no longer dances but continues to serve as choreographer and artistic director, blends ballet and modern dance into her shows that introduce some of the traditional dances of her country.

When native Chinese see her show, they tell her it's beautiful, she said, which convinces her she's doing something right.

The show she brings to Tracy traces Chinese history through dances from the Zhou (770-221 B.C.), Tang (618-907 A.D.), Qing (1644-1911 A.D.), and Dai (contemporary) dynasties.

Her newest dance is "SenseScape."

"After I've created so many pieces already, I reached a point where I wanted people to feel more, to sense: sense the floor, sense your internal power," Cai said. "When we're training, I don't want them opening their eyes. Everything can interrupt your attention. When you shut your eyes, you see nothing. You're totally alone. You feel the inside, sense your body, your movement. 'Sense' is a word I use all the time."

Her husband, conductor Gang Situ, suggested the name.

The final act of the current show features her ribbon dance, in which nearly 200 black and white ribbons reflect the lights and create a colorful, swirling effect on stage. Making sure the desired effect is achieved, Cai is known to spend eight hours before each show reviewing each light cue in each theater.

The result is a show that Cai believes is one of quality.

"That's what I'm most proud of," she said, "that I can provide that kind of quality control."

That attention to detail has kept her company performing for more than 20 years.

Although she doesn't perform on stage, she still dances. She hopes to dance until she's 80.

"It keeps you young," she insisted. "Happier. Healthier."

Her siblings look at her, their baby sister now in her late 40s, and remind her she doesn't own a home and never had children.

"Everybody can buy a house. Not everybody can do this," Cai said. "My sisters and brothers are here, and they say, 'You have no house, no baby. What you doing?' That's my life. This is my baby. I'd rather spend more time researching, thinking and being the best in my field."

Contact reporter Lori Gilbert at (209) 546-8284 or lgilbert@recordnet.com.

Preview

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Lily Cai Chinese Dance

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Grand Theatre Center for the Arts, 715 Central Ave., Tracy

Admission: \$25, \$30, available at the box office, at www.athegrand.org and at (209) 831-6858