

DANCEVIEW

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FROM SAN FRANCISCO

by Rita Felciano

In its 23rd year, the **Lily Cai Dance Company** (August 13, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco) has established for itself a small but respected niche in the spectrum of Bay Area dance. Cai's latest endeavor in interpreting traditional Chinese ideas of womanhood, seen from a contemporary perspective, yielded two new quite different works.

Cai's approach to choreography relies on momentum and horizontal travels; she uses few aerial trajectories. The occasional leap becomes a major statement. Trained by Cai, the dancers are physically and temperamentally quite diverse but they seem to draw from a similar fountain of energy. They perform liquidly and with a strong focus but also with a sense of freedom.

The freshly minted *Connections* featured Cai's six dancers propelling themselves — leaning back, extending out and rotating — from office chairs on wheels. Not a particularly original idea but the chairs inserted a note of playfulness in what was a very formal work. Set to arrangements of Arvo Part — a risky choice since the music has been used so frequently — Cai found an internal rhythm that responded to the music's meditative quality.

Dressed in flowing white pants with dark "belts" and "necklaces," the dancers looked particularly good in expressive upper body movements in which arms reached out to the edges of the universe only to recoil. A long diagonal looked soft but in fact was as strong as steel. At times the women also seemed windblown; unisons melted like snowflakes. Images appeared out of nowhere. Two women shadowed a third only to be sucked up by the dark. Where did they go? And what was that balloon about? Yet for all its elegance and quiet beauty, ultimately, remained too monochromatic to sustain its twenty-minute length.

The second premiere, *Shifting*, greatly benefited

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from Cai's frequent collaborator, composer Gang Situ, who had assembled a musically literate and witty score drawn from traditional Chinese music. It gave coherence to a fragmented work whose individual episodes seemed designed to give each artist a moment in the spotlight.

Cai started her career in this country, exploring the ethnic cultures of China. She has, repeatedly, returned to that subject matter. For *Shifting* the fan and the handkerchief became essential props. I wish I were more familiar with the many Chinese cultures but the piece, charmingly, performed at least open a few windows. The 1997 *Candelas*, set to the fourth movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 5, has become something of a signature piece for the company. Here flashlights took the place of the traditional candles. It was an inexplicable substitution that tore the heart out of one of Cai's signature works.

Ballet dancers turned out *en masse* for **Zhukov Dance Theatre's** (Sept. 1, Z Space, San Francisco) fourth season. Zhukov danced as a Principal with San Francisco from 1989-1995 before joining the English National and honing his ballet master skills with the Swedish Ballet. Today, he is popular teacher and Director of Boys at San Francisco's City Ballet School. He also designs sets and costumes and creates videos and scores for his own choreography.

Zhukov works with pick-up companies. This year the ensemble consisted of five men and two women, all of them excellently trained, experienced performers. His full-evening premiere, *Dreams Recycled*, drew on personal dreams that six of the dancers had written down for Zhukov to explore. Allie Papazien, a power mover with good lines, wove herself through the piece like a tornado, but she didn't have a "dream" of her