

Introducing BeijingDance/LDTX *by Debra Cash*

BeijingDance/LDTX

Boston Debut

April 1 & 2, 2011 | Tsai Performance Center

Friday, 7:30pm | Saturday, 8pm

Willy Tsao is a phenomenon, the spark behind three distinct Chinese dance companies in Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Beijing. None, he is quick to stress, are the Willy Tsao Dance Company; each is a platform for the emerging talents of contemporary Chinese choreographers. What connects them is Tsao's philosophy of individual expression, the new voice of Chinese freedom for a new century.

China came late to modern dance. Wu Xiaobang, who studied German expressionist technique in Japan in the early 1930s and used it to create patriotic dances to support the Chinese war effort against Japan, would later play an important role in documenting Chinese folk traditions. But after 1949, Wu's work was pushed aside by bombastic—and kitsch—Soviet-style ballet that put revolutionary heroines brandishing bayonets into toe shoes. American modern dance was considered just one more form of decadent western imperialism, described dismissively as “fierce floods and savage beasts.”

Hong Kong may have been spared the excesses of the Cultural Revolution but that didn't mean modern dance had a foothold there. Ten-year-old Willy Tsao happened to see touring American dancer Louis Falco—and says he instantly fell in love with the art form—but there was no venue where he could take dance classes or see more contemporary choreography. Besides, Tsao had his future mapped out: he was expected to take over his wealthy family's Hong Kong business, a conglomerate that included textiles, a printing business, and property management.

In 1973, as an undergraduate at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, Tsao was delighted when he opened his course catalog and saw a modern dance class offered. He signed up for an introductory class taught by Kathy Iverson (now Mohn), who had trained in the styles of Doris Humphrey and Alwin Nikolais. Hooked, he studied in New York and London during summer breaks and was seriously considered for a role in *The King and I* in the West End. He even experimented with choreography, creating a few early pieces for Iverson's small touring group. But as he recently said “at most I thought it would be something I loved to do, a hobby.”

Tsao graduated, returned to Hong Kong and, in 1979, earned his MBA. He did indeed start working with the family business, but carved out time to start Hong Kong's first professional modern dance company, City Contemporary Dance Company. “It's okay if you want to run a dance company but you need to run it as a business” he says today. “I think it's healthier to make the most of the resources available.”

Modern dance in mainland China took a bit longer. Tsao recalls when he was first invited to teach modern dance at the Beijing Dance Academy and for the Guangdong Dance School in Guangzhou in the late '80s and early '90s as part of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door policy initiatives. Government officials were skeptical and apprehensive. “They considered modern dance some sort of American capitalism or as if you were going to encourage the dancers to defect to the west [during] international tours. But the dancers saw that the door was wide open. Nobody wants to defect if you can come home.”

Today, Tsao hosts a week-long summer festival in Guangzhou where these three Chinese modern dance companies appear alongside three invited international troupes. Days are open for master classes. Anyone who wants to show his or her work can present it to the more than 400 young dancers who arrive from all parts of China. Tsao has even managed to push the boundary of his audiences' expectations by staging projects like the gently absurd site specific work he produced in a Shanghai mall, where dancers waved their arms as they rode escalators and made puppet-like motions among the mannequins.

When Tsao founded BeijingDance / LDTX (Lei Dong Tian Xia) in September 2005, it became mainland China's first independent professional modern dance troupe.

The program on this Boston debut engagement brings together two works by the company's deputy artistic director, Li Hanzhong, and his dancer-wife, Ma Bo. *The Cold Dagger*, originally an evening-length work, is condensed into an intense game of *weigi* (Go) with fluent martial arts-inspired partnering shifting across a grid. *The Cold Dagger* sets the theme of disciplined and rhythmic ensemble dancing—a feature of both the ethnic dance forms and classical ballet that formed the training of most of BeijingDance/LDTX's 14 dancers—punctuated by free, challenging solos and duets. *All River Red* by the same couple has become something of a BeijingDance/LDTX signature. Set to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, it has more than a whiff of the reassessment of Maoist excesses and the blind sacrifice of the individual in the service of not nature but ideology. “When it was first created almost ten years ago a lot of people were scared of those images,” Tsao says, “but when we performed it in Beijing, the students went wild.”

One Table N Chairs is in part Tsao's irreverent retort to the critics within and outside China who expect Chinese modern dance to be assembled from familiar cultural materials. “Everyone wants us to use Chinese handkerchiefs, ribbons, swords,” he says. Instead, he spliced together elements from different Chinese opera scores—in different modes, sung in different dialects—invented a schematic story line, and then instructed the dancers to perform only a single traditional Chinese opera pose and follow it with invented embellishments. The result, in its fixed form, shows an ambivalent relationship to tradition and a move towards the idiosyncrasy of contemporary self-expression.

Sky, to John Adams' minimalist *Shaker Loops*, is Liu Bin's exploration of China's—and the planetary—environmental crisis. It brings another celestial metaphor to the company whose name, Lei Dong Tian Xia, translates as Thunder Rumbles Under Heaven, a rough, if unintended gloss on the classical I Ching hexagram Wu Wang. That hexagram counsels *Do not anticipate the future or hold on to the past at this point. Nip cynicism in the bud so intuition can flow.* Willy Tsao chose the name because it sounds good in Chinese. And because it implies that the sky is the limit.