

*--CAAM Chinese Dance Theater: Dancers' Profiles*

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In anticipation of CAAM CDT's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Production, "Magnificence: A Splendid Journey" on January 26 and 27, 2013, I interviewed several teenage dancers shortly before they headed into the studio for class. They knew that I wanted to learn more about their life as Chinese dancers and they were happy to talk about their experiences. Even as our conversation wandered, it always came back to Chinese dance and culture. Since I had seen them perform their strikingly beautiful dances on stage, I had a frame of reference as they described their love of learning Chinese dance. Although I was only able to talk to this small group of dancers, I think their experiences are typical of dancers at CAAM CDT.

With almost three quarters of a century of training among them, Janna Fitzgerald (South St. Paul), Anne Kane (West St. Paul), Julia Kane (West St. Paul), Andrea Manolov (Minneapolis), Hanwen Wong (Shoreview), and all Juniors at High Schools throughout the Twin Cities, none could remember a time they weren't dancing at CAAM CDT. Within the group, four were born in China and adopted at a very young age into Caucasian families and one was born in Twin Cities to parents from Beijing and Malaysia. They confirmed that CAAM CDT's dancers come from all backgrounds and origins, making this dance theater unique in our region.

As our discussion veered to their dancing skills, they revealed that they love performing splits in midair as well as twisting leaps. Unlike Western style dance, the Chinese dancer I learned must be able to twist and turn in many directions while jumping in mid-air as well as on the floor. Try touching your foot to your head in mid-air! These dancers need flexibility and strength in abundance to carry this off!

CAAM Chinese Dance Theater is performing classical Chinese dance including Chinese folk dance. China is a multi-ethnic country, and although 90% of the population are Han, 55 distinct other ethnic minorities live in the country., each contributing to Chinese dance its own unique style and long history tied to its

ethnic origin. As a result Chinese dance encompasses many varied forms, some delicate and graceful while others are robust and lithe supple while others are robust and powerful; but each requires strength and flexibility.

Chinese classical dance shares origins with Chinese opera, including movements that use long silken sleeves and masks. Embodied in various cultural painted relics in grottos, murals and pottery figures, Chinese dance also focuses on these classic poses and forms alike. To help students better grasp concepts in Chinese dance, Artistic Director Lili Teng trains the students' physical energy (yun or kungfu) as well as in "combinations". While the "kungfu" focuses on external techniques, "combinations" combines art expression, combination and infiltration they truly embody the essence of Chinese style and aesthetic. "Kungfu" focuses on physical techniques while "combination" merges it with artistic expression, a true embodiment of Chinese dance. Casually inserting complex dance terms in their conversation, I know they have received solid training at CAAM CDT. As the strength training shares similarities to Western ballet training, it's no surprise Hanwen and Andrea also are top performers on their high schools' dance teams. What agile dancers they become, comfortable with both Asian and European styles!

Reminiscing about countless dances and performances over more than a decade of production performances, they didn't hesitate to name their favorites: "Happy Childhood", "Little Shepherdesses", "Tang Hu Lu", "The Love Song of Kangding", "An Amusing Game", "Charming Mulberry Blossoms", a combination of classic and ethnic dances from CAAM CDT's 20 years of repertoire. These dances have their childhood and memory, the tender regard for girls and dream. Within these dances is a significant part of their childhood, which they recall with great fondness. In these dances, childhood innocence and no naughty teenage life is like the imprint left in the Chinese dance in their fresh and elegant temperament, there are graceful in intelligent figure. The virtues of innocence and coming of age are clearly themes that influence these dancers' fresh and elegant temperament. I was impressed with the graceful and intelligent aura about them. Slowly settling into their hearts and souls, through their black eyes, their skin, hair, and their dancing torsos, these young women are truly nurtured by the roots of Chinese culture.

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Chinese dance, these young women were very emotional. Agreeing they all love CAAM Chinese Dance Theater like a family, they all said they have forged friendships for a lifetime. While strengthening their identify as young Chinese Americans, they also felt learning Chinese dance and culture will have lifelong benefits. I had to chuckle when two mentioned that strict Chinese teaching techniques also had positive influence on other aspects of their lives!

Before I knew it, these poised young women went back to class and I resumed my normal day. Their easy laughter and the professed love of Chinese dance left a lasting impression. As CAAM CDT enters its 21<sup>st</sup> year, we already know that its influence in the lives of the dancers and their families is profound, but how profound we wouldn't really know for decades to come. But I do know that this anniversary celebration, like my conversation with these maturing dancers, leaves me feeling joyful and pleased.