

## Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Lunar New Year Celebration: Year of the Rooster

by Giovannah Philippeaux  
EDGE Media Network Contributor  
Wednesday Jan 25, 2017



This gray Sunday afternoon saw a gloriously diverse crowd of varying races, genders, and ages, gathering to ring in the Chinese New Year. From toddlers to elderly couples, people slowly trickled in for what would surely be a respite from a grueling weekend. It was the celebration of diversity, creativity, and inclusion that makes the "**Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Lunar New Year Celebration: Year of the Rooster**", a great experience for the entire family.

The Company's Executive Director, Andrew Chiang, began the performance with a warming story of his mother. Born in the Year of the Rooster, Chiang's mother would insist that she was born in the Year of the Phoenix, the feminine compliment to the rooster.

Chiang stated that the Phoenix is considered the apex of birds and the ultimate symbol of feminine strength. Its cries wake up everyone, wakes up the world to act -- to make our lives full and joyous. Commenting on Saturday's historic event, Chiang noted on how it was representative of the Phoenix's rising.

Sunday's performance featured the unique talents of The Company's dancers as they gracefully expressed Artistic Director Nai-Ni Chen's hypnotic choreography. The afternoon also featured the talents of Carrie Jin and Yueqin Chen, both of the Chinese Music Ensemble of New York. Playing the ancient "sheng," a wind instrument dating back to China's 1100 BC, Jin performed the piece "Golden Phoenix." Prior to the elegant performance, the audience had been told that the "sheng" was exported to Europe and influenced the development of the pipe organ and harmonica.

Yueqin Chen performed two pieces on what is termed the "moon guitar" or "ruan." A string instrument dating back over 2,000 years, the "ruan" offers a melodic and soothing sound. The compelling performance of "Camel Bells on the Silk Road" was a musical celebration of the cultural and religious diversity found along the ancient Silk Road. As the program states, "The music depicts an ancient caravan... traveling through the Silk Road. The melody incorporates folk tunes from the Muslim minority living in the Xinjiang Province of China."

The afternoon featured two contemporary pieces that highlighted the significant relationship between humanity and nature. Chen's "Way of Five" series is an exploration of the five elements: wood, water, fire, metal, and earth. There's a distinctive piece for each element. An insightful study of the ancient Chinese philosophy that creation and destruction are fundamental elements of nature, the series focused

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on how "each element, as part of the forces of nature, creates another in harmony and destroys another in conflict."

A captivating and rhythmically pulsing piece, "Way of Five - Fire," is meant to ignite the fire within us all. Vibrantly red dancers move across a stark landscape propelled by a righteous power. Be it passion or anger, it is a testament to the power of creativity and expression.

Standing in sharp contrast to "Fire" is "Way of Five - Earth." Speaking to the stability and grounding provided by the Earth, the piece's gray hue is a reminder of the delicate balance that nature strikes between uncompromising strength, grace, and rigidity.

"The Flying Goddesses" and "Peacocks Under the Moonlight" are also worth noting as the more traditional pieces celebrate the elegance, beauty, and commanding power of the feminine; a theme that ran throughout the show as it celebrated the Year of The Rooster and Phoenix.

A mix of narration, dance, and musical performances, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Lunar New Year Celebration: Year of the Rooster is a great experience for anyone wanting to learn more about the rich and inclusive history of the Lunar New Year. A reminder of why art is relevant, the show calls attention to our capacity for inclusion, creativity, growth, and education. This program was partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts' Challenge America Fast Track program.

*"Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Lunar New Year Celebration: Year of the Rooster" played on Sunday, January 22 at The Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts at Brooklyn College, Whitman Theatre, 2900 Avenue H, Brooklyn, New York 11210. For tickets or information, call 718-951-4500 or visit <http://www.brooklyncenter.org>.*

Link to Original Posting: <http://fireisland.edgemedianetwork.com/entertainment/theatre//209670>

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## NATURAL PHENOMENON

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company was founded to “bridge the gap of understanding between cultures,” and a collaboration between the company and a school for students with special needs has done just that. In turn, it has expanded the abilities – and the possibilities – of everyone involved. In February, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company began working with the A. Harry Moore Laboratory School on the campus of New Jersey City

University, one of the oldest schools dedicated to special education in the state. After extensive discussion with teachers and the principal and observing the students, the company developed a curriculum that encourages students to envision images of natural phenomenon and use them to create movement. Physical education teacher Lori Bierig tells Nai-Ni Chen that students are using parts of their bodies that are seldom

used. One student who rarely moves his right arm has thrived as he swims forward in his imaginary ocean. Principal Steven Goldberg says, “Whenever we ask our students how they would like to be treated they inevitably say just like everyone else. To watch our students be able to take the stage and dance just like everyone else is truly heartwarming and uplifting.” To learn more, visit [nainichen.org](http://nainichen.org). **||**



Actor, singer John Lloyd Young with students from the Manuel Fernandez Roig School.



Bo Pang [left] is a teaching artist in residence with Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company at the A. Harry Moore Laboratory School in New Jersey.

## BUENA VISTA CULTURE CLUB

Here’s a Cuban revolution of an entirely different sort. For the first time, the U.S. government will support artistic cultural exchanges between U.S. and Cuban artists through two new artist exchange opportunities administered by the National Endowment for the Arts. The awards, which total \$100,000, are intended to foster deeper cooperation through the common bonds of arts and culture.

The exchange opportunities build on existing NEA programs that promote artistic exchange, education, and cross-cultural connections — USArtists International and Southern Exposure: Performing Arts of Latin America. Each program will receive \$50,000 to fund the expanded activities.

“This \$100,000 is not a one-time contribution. Instead, it represents the beginning of a long-term investment which will strengthen the cultural

connection between our two nations,” said NEA chairman Jane Chu. “Both of these exchange opportunities will further enrich the conversations between our two countries. It will provide even more opportunities for personal interaction. By sharing our art forms with each other – person to person and community to community – we are creating new paths for understanding, appreciation and fraternity.” **||**

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# Garden *Variety*

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**BEYOND BUBBLY:** Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company rings in the Chinese New Year with complex choreography and colorful costumes.



[CULTURE CORNER] BY TAMMY LA GORCE

## A Celebration—and Much More

IT'S FEBRUARY, AND THAT MEANS plenty of attention for the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company.

Since its launch in Fort Lee in 1988, the 12-member troupe has shown up to chase off winter doldrums with its Chinese New Year celebration at venues around New York and New Jersey. NJPAC in Newark has practically engraved the celebration on its calendar; this year's shows on February 6 and 7 mark 18 years of performances there.

But the troupe ([nainichen.org](http://nainichen.org))

stays active with a variety of programs throughout the year. It is currently in residence on the campus of New Jersey City University in Jersey City.

"From the beginning, we've believed in being balanced, in bringing people a combination of modern dance and traditional Chinese dance," says founder Nai-Ni Chen, who lives in Englewood Cliffs with her husband, Andy Chiang, the company's executive director. "Through a lot of experience, we've learned how to help people cross cultural boundar-

ies. That's been our journey."

Even the Chinese New Year celebration changes every year to reflect the Chinese zodiac; this year's performance is called "Year of the Monkey." Such performances represent the traditional Chinese side of the company's programming. On the other hand, Chen estimates that half the company's performances are strictly modern dance with touches of Chinese influence.

"Some of our dancers trained in classical ballet or contemporary dance

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and have to learn Chinese dance. Some performances are all modern, with no obvious traditional Chinese elements," says Chen, who started dancing as a 4-year-old in Taiwan and later trained there in ballet before attending a Chinese performance arts school. In 1982, after performing with the renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan, she enrolled at New York University. "After I came to the States, I was more focused on making dance," she says.

Chen's eye as a curator was much in evidence at a recent five-hour rehearsal of a modern piece called "Whirlwind" in the Jersey City studio. As Chen watched for missteps, a group of non-dance students clustered at the back of the room to gape at the nine male and female dancers in tights, some with bandaged feet, who twirled, leaped and bent their bodies rhythmically to a Middle Eastern soundtrack. "Whirlwind" is a new piece inspired by Chen and Chiang's 2012 trip to the Silk Road.

"The choreography of this one is complex," says Chen. "It incorporates folk dance and influences from Indian dance and Arab rhythms. A lot of times in dance, we're trying to communicate things that can't be said."

Chen's communication within the company, which has performed in 41 states and travels internationally, is often more direct.

"Nai-Ni gives us notes after every rehearsal," says Greta Campo, a 26-year-old dancer from Italy who studied and danced with the Martha Graham Dance Company in New York before landing a spot in the company four years ago. "She sees everything, like what transitions need to improve, if a movement needs to be sharper."

Chiang handles external communications, which enables him to help match performances with expectations. For example, narration guides schoolchildren through shows like the Chinese New Year celebration. Feedback also provides an education on what can't be left out of a performance. For the New Year celebration, the colorful ribbon dance is essential, as is the traditional dragon dance—where a team of dancers moves a flexible dragon using poles.

"Everybody wants to see that," Chiang says. "It's mandatory." ■



[BOOKS] BY LAUREN PAYNE

## Funny Girl

"DIVORCE IS SO CRUSHING," says new author V.C. Chickering. "It's so hard to think that any good will come of it."

But Chickering, a Bernardsville native and former TV writer for Comedy Central, Discovery, Lifetime and other networks, has gotten something out of it: her first novel, *Nookietown*.

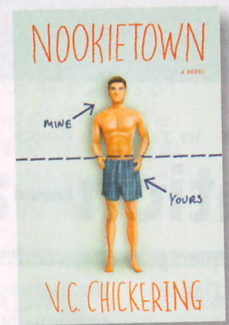
Following her divorce in 2010, the 40-something writer discovered a common thread within her circle of girlfriends: The married ones wanted less sex, while her single friends were clamoring for more. Over drinks, they would discuss kids, sports schedules, "all the normal things," says Chickering. "When they'd get to me, I'd explain that the only thing I'm missing is a little bit of sex." Without fail, the married women offered their husbands. "They'd make the joke, then we'd move on," she says. "But it happened so many times, with so many women, from so many walks of my life. The idea was born."

Chickering began to write during the summer of 2011 in Bay Head. "I

didn't go to the beach or tennis," she says. "I'm on a strict diet." Writing she reached 100,000 words in the new year. She received feedback. "I gave it to my married women, many of whom says. Ultimately, St.

signed her TV rights. Her brother, Nookie, in month, is a sometime funny now women and divorced with-you sex—with course. The fictional

community that is similar to such locales as Montclair and Maplewood—where with her family (she details). "Sections of love letters to New Jersey love the sense of humor. We're tough broads





Thursday, February 11, 2016

## Nai-Ni Chen excels as both dancer and choreographer at NJPAC



Nai-Ni Chen is more than a choreographer. She is also a beautiful dancer, as she demonstrated again on Saturday when her Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company presented its Lunar New Year celebration, “The Year of the Monkey,” at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark.

As the graceful soloist in “Mirage,” a contemporary composition inspired by the land and people of Xinjiang, in Northwest China, Chen managed to steal her own show. Chen makes her entrance veiled, but while the gauzy fabric adds an atmosphere of mystery, she seems to use it less than she did in 2009, when “Mirage” was new. What stands out now is the

dancer’s masterful technique — particularly the wonderful definition of her arms, with hands flicking to accent the sinuous movement. She is also deeply musical, drawing viewers into a spin with her as she turns with precise steps. The ensemble members attack their parts with flaming energy, especially Yusaku Komori; and it’s easy to become caught up in the vibrant choreography set to music by Glen Velez. Yet Chen’s exactitude and inspiration take “Mirage” to another level.

The same could be said of Gu Feng, the guest artist who starred as the Monkey King in “Havoc in the Heavenly Palace,” an excerpt from traditional Kunqu Opera that concluded the program. Curled up with a monkey’s rounded posture or splaying his body in acrobatic leaps, Gu revealed a wonderful agility as he submerged himself in his role.

In this scene, the Monkey King has arrived at the palace of the Jade Emperor, in heaven. The Monkey King looks forward to hobnobbing with the gods at a banquet, but finding himself disinvented he takes revenge by feasting on the peaches of immortality and quaffing the Emperor’s wine. Observing the mischievous expression on Gu’s face as he nibbles the peaches and guzzles from the wine pot is as delightful as watching him twirl his staff, effortlessly fending off attacks from the Emperor’s retainers and the Commander of the Celestial Warriors. The havoc promised in the title quickly ensues as furious martial artists, apsaras waving streamers and the snaking New Year Dragon all crowd onto the stage. None of this commotion bothers the Monkey King in the least. He remains unflappable and unharmed, popping out gleefully in the final tableau.



Saturday’s performance also featured students in the Nai-Ni Chen Youth Program, the littlest ones fluttering their hands as they portrayed “Fish in a Small Brook,” the older ones fanning out from a line and tapping on small boxes in the “Yi Ethnic Dance.” The Chinese Music Ensemble of New York provided live accompaniment for the “Mongolian Chopstick Dance,” a percussive work that Chen’s professional company danced boisterously. The musicians had their own showcase, too, with Yangzhou Gan, the soloist, playing racing melodies on the hammered dulcimer. Joined by musicians on traditional string and wind instruments, she also led the ensemble in performing tunes that were joyful and melancholy by turns.

Chen also revived “Movable Figures” (1991), a contemporary piece with a metallic sheen set to music by Anestis Logothetis. Here the choreographer departs from her usually fluid and rebounding style to create a dance inspired by the stiff and isolated movements of shadow puppets. Profiles dominate, although the choreographer may also acknowledge the stage’s depth by arranging figures on a diagonal. Tugging back and forth is to be expected, but Chen also includes surprising moments when dancers vault over one another or duck below. Breaking up parallels are moments when dancers cross and intersect in complex figures. “Movable Figures” possesses a striking clarity and a purposefulness that recall Chen’s own dancing.

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company will perform again at noon and 3 p.m. Feb. 21 at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Free with museum admission; visit [amnh.org](http://amnh.org).

Photos by Andrew Chiang

<http://www.njarts.net/dance/nai-ni-chen-excels-as-both-dancer-and-choreographer-at-njpac/>



Wednesday, February 10, 2016

## **BWW Review: Blending the Beauty of the East and West with NAI-NI CHEN DANCE COMPANY**



Brooklyn Center for the Performing Arts at Brooklyn College, in conjunction with its third Annual Lunar New Year Celebration, partnered once again with the prestigious Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in an all new celebration of Chinese arts and culture. Under the direction of renowned traditional dancer of Taiwan, Nai-Ni Chen, this ethnically diverse Chinese-American company seeks to bridge the gap of cultural understanding and appreciation of American modern dance and Asian art.

For the traditional Chinese dance section of the program, the company performed the *Double Lions Welcoming Spring* -- one of the most popular dances performed in the Chinese New Year Celebration. You don't have to be familiar with traditional Chinese dance to recognize this piece. Said to have originated during the Tang Dynasty 3,000 years ago, the dance is seen as a prayer of peace symbolizing harmony on earth. I loved the level of athleticism among the dancers from the jumps, flips, high kicks, and spins. This particular production of the Lion Dance is performed in the Northern part of China. Other pieces included the *Mongolian Chopstick Dance* featuring graceful circular gestures as the dancers made sounds by hitting chopsticks against each other, their bodies, and the floor, and *Joy* -- a fan dance by the Korean ethnic group of Northeast China.

For the Western modern dance portion of the show, the company performed a piece entitled *Mirage*. This was inspired by the unique rhythms and dance movements of the Uyghur people of Xinjiang, China. What an absolutely stunning piece! The wonderful partner work, the beautiful lines, and strong technique show just how talented these dancers are. The piece, *Movable Figures*, was an exploration of the motion and expression of shadow puppets on a two-dimensional stage. It had an Egyptian-like feel with many straight lines and quick and sharp movements.

This year's Lunar New Year Celebration commemorates the Year of the Monkey, a year characterized by cleverness, curiosity, and playful mischief. As a very special treat, internationally acclaimed and silver medalist, Feng Gu of the Beijing Kunqu Theater, performed the role of the Monkey King in an excerpt from *Havoc in the Heavenly Palace*, detailing the legend of the Monkey King. What a sensational piece! With the acrobatics, and cool tricks juggling flags, swords, and sticks, it's no wonder that Mr. Gu is a leading artist and a top five medalist in the worldwide Monkey King competition!

With thrilling choreography, traditional music, and dazzling acrobats, this festive family-friendly event skillfully showcased the elegance of traditional Asian art and the beauty of American modern dance.

Be sure to catch this stunning group as they celebrate the Year of the Monkey throughout the New York Metropolitan area with performances at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the American Museum of Natural History, Flushing Town Hall and more!

Please visit their website at [www.nainichen.org](http://www.nainichen.org) for more information.

Photo Credit: Joseph Wagner

<http://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwdance/article/BWW-Review-Blending-the-Beauty-of-the-East-and-West-with-NAI-NI-CHEN-DANCE-COMPANY-20160210>



Monday, January 25, 2016

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**NYC-ARTS Top Five is your cheat sheet to what's happening this week in New York City and beyond.**



### **Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's Lunar New Year Celebration**

**Walt Whitman Theatre at Brooklyn Center for the  
Performing Arts**

Sun, Jan 31 at 3pm

This festive, family-friendly event will showcase thrilling choreography inspired by shadow puppetry, playful dancing lions, beautiful melodies performed on authentic Chinese instruments, and special guest artist Gu Feng, a principal performer from the Beijing Kunqu Theater, performing his award-winning interpretation of the role of the Monkey King.

Monday, December 21, 2015

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## Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Receives Challenge America Award From NEA



(Washington, DC) -- The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has been granted a \$10,000 Challenge America award from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). All totaled, the NEA has grants equaling more than \$27.6 million in its first funding round for fiscal year 2016. The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company grant is to help support its annual lunar New Year festival in New Jersey and New York.

The Challenge America category supports projects that extend the reach of the arts to underserved populations whose opportunities to experience the arts are limited by geography, ethnicity, economics, or disability. Challenge America grants are comparatively small investments that have a big impact in their communities.

NEA Chairman Jane Chu said, "The arts are part of our everyday lives - no matter who you are or where you live - they have the power to transform individuals, spark economic vibrancy in communities, and transcend the boundaries across diverse sectors of society. Supporting projects like the one from Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company offers more opportunities to engage in the arts every day."

In its first 50 years, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awarded more than \$5 billion in grants to recipients in every state and U.S. jurisdiction, the only arts funder in the nation to do so.

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and your donation is 100% tax-deductible. To make a donation to Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, [click here](#).

Some of the programs run by the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company include:

**Main Stage and on Tour** - The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is one of the most artistically excellent dance troupes in the US with over 20 national tours, 9 tours abroad and recipient of grant award from the President's Committee for the Arts. The Company has been producing annual festival for the Lunar New Year in NY/NJ for the past 20 years.

**Assembly programs for K-12 Students** - Over a million children in NY, NJ, PA and CT has their first encounter with the Chinese American heritage and culture through our in-school assembly.

**Educational Workshops** - In residence in as many as 10 schools each year, the dancers of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company work with classroom teachers to create an integrated, globally themed curriculum for their school. The in-depth exposure and long term impact changes the student's perspective on their role in the society and the vision of their future.

**Community Dance Workshops** - Preserving the dance culture in the Chinese American community, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Workshop Program has been working with a growing group of young dancers and their amazing, dedicated parents in Edison/Metuchen, NJ.

**Health, Fitness and Obesity Prevention** – The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company works with audiences and students to help them understand the healthy discipline of the dancers, to bring a message of lifelong healthy eating and proper exercise habits to their lives.

**Dance for Students and Adults with Disability** - Our latest venture is our efforts to work with a population who traditionally do not have enough access to dance. We have taught and performed for adults with cerebral palsy, and special students with a variety of physical and mental abilities in the last few months. Working with them affirms that dance can cross many boundaries, and can help everyone to live a life of health, joy and creativity.

<http://www.newjerseystage.com/articles/getarticle.php?ID=6535>



Thursday, October 1, 2015

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## **Richard Ridge Will Moderate Dancers Over 40's Panel on 10/14**

Dancers Over 40 celebrates diversity in dance with Can't Stop the Music! Can't Stop the Dance! Diversity All Around Us! - featuring DO40 Advisory Board member Jerry Mitchell's new musical comedy, Gotta Dance - the incredible true story of ten determined dreamers who have three things in common: they love to dance, they have something to prove and they are all over 60. They battle pain, prejudice, self-doubt and each other for a chance to bust a move at center court in front of 20,000 screaming fans at a national basketball team's half time show. That panel will be moderated by BroadwayWorld's Richard Ridge. Also featured, a celebration of African-American, Hispanic and Asian artists including DO40 member Gus Solomon jr's dance company Paradigm, and members of his company, Carmen de Lavallade, Sarita Allen, Hope Clarke and Karen Brown (Dance Theater of Harlem, Complexions, Ailey, Dunham Companies), as well as Dr. Mel A. Tomlinson (Dance Theater of Harlem, Ailey, NYCB), Gemze de Lappe (Agnes de Mille) Gail Reese (Ailey, Donald McKayle, Talley Beatty, Agnes de Mille) Fernando Carrillo (Ailey II, Ballet Hispanico), Solomon Dumas (Garth Fagan, Ronald K. Brown, Ailey II), Jill Williams (The Clark Center), Complexions Ballet, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company and Baayork Lee and the National Asian Arts Project.



DO40 is also pleased to present a special panel with Yaël Tamar Lewin, author of the Janet Collins biography, Night's Dancer, about the first African-American ballerina to perform at the Metropolitan Opera. And throughout the evening there will be live performances by the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, The National Asian Arts Project as well as a special performance from our June DO40 CARES dance concert, held at the Ailey Citigroup Theater.

Tickets (on sale now): \$45 for non-members (\$65 for premium seats); \$25 for members of Dancers Over 40 with discount code. Reservations: Telecharge, 212-239-6200 or [www.telecharge.com](http://www.telecharge.com); DO40 members call 212-947-8844 or [www.broadwayoffers.com](http://www.broadwayoffers.com) with discount code. St. Luke's Box Office open 2 - 6pm daily, at 308 West 46th Street. For more information on DO40 and this event, call the DO40 Hotline at 212-330-7016.

<http://www.broadwayworld.com/article/Richard-Ridge-Will-Moderate-Dancers-Over-40s-Panel-on-1014-20151001>

Wednesday, September 9, 2015

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## NJPAC Presents Dancemakers on Diversity: Sharing Common Ground in a Multicultural Art



(NEWARK, NJ) -- To herald its 2015-16 season of international dance, **New Jersey Performing Arts Center** (NJPAC) presents *Dancemakers on Diversity: Sharing Common Ground in a Multicultural Art*, a remarkable gathering and conversation with seven accomplished choreographers, on Thursday, Oct. 29 from 7 to 8:30 p.m. in NJPAC's Chase Room. Admission is free.

The participants, recognized as champions for diversity in an art form often identified by its "white swan" classicism, include **Nai-Ni Chen**, choreographer and artistic director of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company; **Carolyn Dorfman**, artistic director of Carolyn Dorfman Dance; **Virginia Johnson**, artistic director of Dance Theatre of Harlem; **Karen**

**Love**, founder and artistic director of Umoja Dance Company; **Nasha Thomas**, national director of AileyCamp (Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater); and **Jennifer Weber**, artistic director of Decadancetheatre.

Dance Theatre of Harlem Resident Choreographer **Robert Garland** serves as moderator.

The panelists, whose companies will be featured on NJPAC's stages during the 2015-16 season, represent different genres of dance, from classical ballet and hip-hop to modern dance and African drumming. Some of the issues to be explored by these women directors include the creation and education of multicultural audiences; the marginalization experienced by nontraditional dance groups; and the internet's role in revolutionizing or diminishing art.

"There is a dance explosion at NJPAC. This year we are proud to present a dynamic array of incredible dance artists representing myriad styles and cultures," said **Donna Walker-Kuhne**, NJPAC's Vice President of Community Engagement. "We thought it important and valuable to explore how these amazing women - who are leaders in their field - navigate the dance world with their choreography, arts education and performances."

For dance fans who want to get up and off their feet, NJPAC offers a series of seven **free dance workshops** throughout northern New Jersey from October through May. Presented by *NJPAC in YOUR Community!*, these special events require advance registration, which can be found at [NJPAC.org/community](http://NJPAC.org/community).

Many leaders of New Jersey's dance scene are volunteer members of the Celebrate Dance Committee, created last year under NJPAC's Advisory Council to promote and engage new and current audiences for dance performances at the Arts Center. The Advisory Council, created in 1997 and composed of seven subcommittees, helps NJPAC identify and satisfy the cultural tastes of New Jersey's many diverse communities. In addition to Celebrate Dance, these groups are Faith-Based, Jazz, Corporate, Elders, Latino, and Pride (LGBTQ).

**Dance at NJPAC is made possible through the generosity of Bloomberg, The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the World Music Series sponsored by American Express, Discover Jersey Arts, and New Jersey State Council on the Arts.**

New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), located at 1 Center Street in downtown Newark, New Jersey, is among the largest performing arts centers in the United States and is the artistic, cultural, educational and civic center of New Jersey - where great performances and events enhance and transform lives every day. NJPAC brings diverse communities together, providing access to all and showcasing the state's and the world's best artists while acting as a leading catalyst in the revitalization of its home city. Through its extensive Arts Education programs, NJPAC is shaping the next generation of artists and arts enthusiasts. NJPAC has attracted more than 9 million visitors (including over 1.5 million children) since opening its doors in 1997, and nurtures meaningful and lasting relationships with each of its constituents. Visit [njpac.org](http://njpac.org) or call 1-888-GO-NJPAC for more information.

<http://www.newjerseystage.com/articles/getarticle.php?ID=5975>

## Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company welcomes Year of the Sheep at NJPAC

By: Robert Johnson | February 10, 2015



Photo: Joseph Wagner

An animal act always opens Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's Chinese New Year celebration at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. Two shaggy lion puppets with green top-knots on their heads are the stars of "Double Lions Welcoming Spring," and you have to feel a little sorry for the pair of acrobats whose job it is to tame them: While they knock themselves out flipping and spinning, it's hard for them to steal the spotlight from these not-so-fearsome beasts. All the lions have to do is bat their eyelashes or stretch out to nibble their toes, and they own the stage.

Watching these frolicsome characters is not only fun, but also brings good luck. So the audience at NJPAC, on Saturday, was doubly blessed.

This year Chen's company inaugurated the Year of the Sheep, and in addition to the lions and the golden-scaled dragon who are her regular visitors, the choreographer also hosted some special guests from the Beijing Dance Academy. "No Boundaries," a modern piece choreographed by committee, featured Zhung Tian as a black-clad hero whose fierce posturing kept him independent of a close-knit group. Though their comings and goings were fluid, one man had his head pushed down and the group's attachment felt confining, not supportive. When two dancers seized and lifted Tian, however, he shook himself free and the ensemble scattered.

Other special guests were the jocular Xing Ye Ma, an exponent of "Bamboo Rap" who improvised tongue-twisters on the spot while accompanying himself with bamboo clackers; and Yuequin Chen, an elegant musician who drew twanging melodies from the Chinese lute known as the Ruan. The Nai-Ni Chen Youth Program Dancers were also on hand, taking a larger role in this year's performance as youngsters of different ages multiplied the spiky attitudes of the "Peacock Dance," and whirled through "Why Are the Flowers So Red?," a circular dance from Xinjiang.

The folk material on these programs can be pure eye candy — banners rippling exuberantly and colored ribbons weaving through the air — or it can display intriguing particularities. In the harvest dance called "Gu Ze Yung Ge," the man, Guixhuan Zhuang, adopted a sturdy posture, half-seated with feet planted wide apart, his body swaying from side-to-side. His sprightly companion, Min Zhou, manipulated a fluttering fan. When folk dances like these are shown alongside Chen's contemporary works, viewers can observe how elements like the rhythm of a shuffling walk or hands poised delicately in opposition can become the building blocks of a new repertoire.

Saturday's program reprised Chen's "Peach Flower Landscape," with alluring women in diaphanous robes drifting to the sound of a bamboo flute; and the more aggressive "Whirlwind," a dance that balances images of struggle and contemplation.

## New Year celebrated with dance mix

By Niu Yue | January 26, 2015

### Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company blends beauty of East, West on stage

One of the top Chinese-American-owned dance groups in the US staged a celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year by combining Chinese traditional dances with Western styles.

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company performed its second Lunar New Year Celebration at the Brooklyn Center for Performing Arts on Sunday. Founded in 1988, the group, whose members are ethnically diverse ranging from China to Italy, aims to bridge the gap between Eastern and Western culture, something they did gracefully in this show.



The performance started with a salute to Chinese Lunar New Year with Double Lions Welcoming Spring, a version of the popular Lion Dance in China with interaction between the lion character and the other dancers.

Next was an excerpt from Peach Flower Landscape, a dance drama portraying a peaceful agricultural community living in perfect harmony, signifying the coming Year of the Sheep in the Chinese zodiac. The sheep signifies quietness, gentleness and peace in Chinese culture.

"It has a beautiful scene at sunset, and dancers wear gold, just like peace flowers in the golden sunlight," said Nai-Ni Chen, the dance company's founder and choreographer. "That's why I choose this program. It talks about a peaceful land without war."

The dance drama was also typical in Chen's combination of Western and Oriental culture. The choreography was based on a story written by Tao Yuanming, a Chinese poet from the 4th century. Dancers used techniques from taichi to control their breathing and movement.

"Look at how dancers' wrist joints make different gestures and movements. That's purely Chinese," said Chen. "Western dancers are not as mellow as Chinese, they wouldn't move smaller joints in the body."

"Unbelievable," said audience member Diane Sears, as the 100-minute show alternated between Chinese tradition and Western contemporary.

After Peach Flower Landscape came dances popular in north and northeastern China for the Gods' blessings for a good harvest and traditional street performances from central China.

Also included in the program was Whirlwind, whose Western-style choreography was inspired by the Silk Road — from Buddhist sculptures in northwestern China to the beauty of India and Central Asia.

About a dozen guest artists from China took part in the performance. Ma Xingye amazed non-Chinese-speaking viewers with his kuaiban or traditional Chinese rap accompanied by percussion from bamboo chips. He could utter around 450 syllables a minute and it needed no translation to be appreciated.

The show concluded with a dragon dance that drew cheers from the audience, more than half of whom were non-Asian.

Following its Sunday premier, the company will stage New Year's-themed school time performances on Monday at Brooklyn College and Wednesday and Thursday at Queens College this week. Another performance is scheduled for February 7 at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

The performance is part of the Happy Chinese New Year series sponsored by China's Ministry of Culture, a campaign to celebrate Chinese New Year all over the world, said Wu Zhao, a consul of the Consulate General of China in New York. In addition, China Central Academy of Fine Arts will display works of Chinese artists at Lincoln Center on Feb 17. China's star violinist Tian Jiaxin is expected to perform at Carnegie Hall on Feb 18, Lunar New Year's Eve, and the New York Philharmonic will team up with Chinese musicians for a concert on Feb 24.



## Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's 'Cross-Currents' show is electrifying

By: Robert Johnson  
September 25, 2014

Choreographer Nai-Ni Chen seems able to command the forces of nature. Like a shaman casting spells, she summons the delicate patter of raindrops, the crackle of flames and swirling gusts of wind, bringing the elements indoors and trapping them on stage.



Courtesy of Marisa Pierson

Her dancers are dedicated to her, and they held nothing back when the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company opened its 2014-2015 season, on Wednesday, in the Bradley Hall Theatre at Rutgers-Newark. This terrific program, titled "Cross-Currents" and presented by the Institute on Ethnicity, Culture, and the Modern Experience, featured a mix of contemporary pieces from Chen's repertoire, plus a Chinese folk dance solo and an excerpt from traditional Kunque Opera. The dances revealed Chen's skill at harnessing and directing the flow of energy. Using the body as a conduit, she makes the movement curl and snap, delivering jolts of excitement.

Even in a dainty piece like "Raindrops," where four women extend their palms to catch the rain, or hop and seem to splash, a feeling of strength held in reserve keeps sentimentality at a distance. "The Way of Five — Fire" is just as sinuous and elegant, but here the action bursts as five dancers wield silver-colored fans like curved blades, slicing and thrusting. Chen creates suspense, too, by contrasting the restraint of a female trio upstage with the abrupt, flashy moves of two men who spar in the foreground. The high-flying standout is Yoosik Kim.



Courtesy of Marisa Pierson

Min Zhou performs the "Peacock Dance," a souped-up version of an ancient ritual, in which the soloist pinches and splays her fingers to create a bird-like silhouette, while her arms wriggle and flutter as if preening. In "Double Spear Warrior," Kunque Opera specialist Yao Zhong Zhang twirls a pair of spears so they blur, and he hurls himself through the air, landing softly if improbably in high-platform shoes.

At the outset of "Whirlwind I," the dancers seem glued in place, tilting and swaying to suggest a tenacious, plodding journey. Individuals begin to drop out of this caravan, however, to form active partnerships like the duet in which Tyler Brown catches Nijawwon Matthews upside down in a lift, and later wraps herself around his powerful body. While the dancers' vocalizations have a lonely feel to them, "Whirlwind" is ultimately a dance about making connections.

## A Blending of Dance and Music

By Caroline Berg in New York (China Daily)

When Sabrina Jaafer told her friend from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York that she and the Nai- Ni Chen Dance Company were going to perform at the Publick Playhouse in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, her friend gushed.

"Oh, you're going to love it!" the friend told Jaafer. "They have the best audience."

After a stringed prelude by the Ahn Trio, which played live onstage throughout the 11-piece dance and music presentation, stirred the audience to hoots and applause, the dancers were confident this was going to be a good Temptation of the Muses - their last performance of the show this season.

"During the duet, I could hear the audience gasp when Daniel [Johnson] lifted me, and they always made a sound when I'd go into a handstand," Ekaterina Chernikhova said with a laugh in recalling the performance of Lullaby for My Favorite Insomniac.

The 75-minute program is a collaborative effort involving Taiwan choreographer Nai-Ni Chen, the Korean violin-cello-piano Ahn sisters' trio, original works by American composer Kenji Bunch and the improvisation of Chen's international dance troupe.

Chen drew inspiration for the movement and sound in Temptation of the Muses from the poem A Word for Freedom, by Afghan-born Latif Nazemi about a Persian poet. It begins, "Let's kiss water / the root of civilization / a word for freedom".

"I've used the idea of water as freedom to choreograph this piece, and with this idea you see more of an Asian touch with the sensibility of how I use the dancers," Chen said. "The quietness, the stillness and the subtleties in the movement - in this piece you can see more of that influence from my Asian cultural background."

Chen incorporates elements of her Asian heritage into her choreography whenever she deems it appropriate for her cross-cultural contemporary troupe. In addition to original works, the company also performs a range of traditional Chinese pieces, including Hubei Coin Stick Dance, Mongolian Chopstick Dance, and Love Song of Xishuangbanna.

Temptation is more American than Chinese in its style, with touches of jazz, classic rock and country in the score. However, careful study of the choreography reveals Asian undertones.

"It may not be entirely clear that this movement is from martial arts or that movement is from Peking Opera, but the influence is evident in the staging and the visual elements," Chen said.

"You can compare it to a Chinese painting with the contrasts between the yin and yang, and the empty white part, and the strokes of calligraphy."

Chen said she always takes these ideas into consideration when she choreographs a dance, regardless of the overall cultural style of the performance - East, West or otherwise.

Seven dancers and a lighting specialist traveled 3? hours from their home base in New Jersey in two vehicles with Chen to perform at the historic 500- seat theater in Cheverly, Maryland. Their partners onstage, the Ahn Trio, traveled from New York City and Montana.

Chen has her dancers congregate around the musicians onstage - sitting with them, watching them, flirting with them, crawling under a piano, standing on their chairs. The choreographer layers all of these elements in a way that unites the movement with the music.

"The dancers must be very aware of where they are and, at the same time, they can't show any resistance," Chen said. "We have to show how we are really blending together and not have any cautious feelings translated to the audience."

After the performance, all of the performers met with audience members at a reception in the lobby. The patrons eagerly discussed with Chen and the performers the choreography and feelings experienced throughout the diverse range of numbers.

"It's so great how you incorporated the musicians and connected all the elements in the choreography," one person told Chen, who has been running her company since 1988.

Chen said the trio was a little stiff as it played through the integrated movement at the beginning, but she has seen them open up over time and become more comfortable with the choreography.

"In terms of Nai-Ni's choreography, [Temptation] is not as physically demanding as something like Whirlwind, which is like a marathon," Chernikhova said of a dance by Chen that was inspired by her time traveling along the Silk Road in China. "Dancing to live music is the more challenging element in this work."

Nai-Ni Chen and the Ahn Trio have been performing and tweaking this show since its premiere in New York in 2010. Over a span of about 30 performances, dancers have come and gone.

Chen will be holding auditions on June 3 in preparation for another season. Her current troupe is made up of dancers from the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, Russia, Italy and Cuba.

Although Chen draws inspiration from a wide variety of sources, including poems, calligraphy, travel, current events and music, she said she often gets ideas just from improvising with her dancers in the studio.

"A sudden inspiration will come up and I'll remember something from my childhood and I'll put that memory somehow into my choreography," Chen said. "I think because of who I am, subconsciously [my Asian background] is going to come out in my work no matter what."

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(China Daily 04/24/2013 page11)

# Oberon's Grove

## Nai-Ni Chen's WHIRLWIND @ Peridance

April 08, 2013

Philip Gardner

Sunday, April 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013 matinee – At Peridance today, Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company presented the second of two performances of WHIRLWIND, a gorgeous dancework inspired by Nai-Ni's personal journey along the Silk Road. Delving into the ancient mysteries of the old Asiatic cultures, Nai-Ni Chen seeks to transport us out of the driven, jangling clamor of modern life and to ponder the simplicity and spiritual richness of another place and time. To accomplish this, Nai-Ni asks her dancers – steeped in contemporary modes of movement and expression – to find the bridge across centuries and cultures and bring us a vision of another place and time: half-a-world and hundreds of years away. Whirlwind, a desert phenomenon arising from the meeting of air currents flowing in opposite directions, here becomes a metaphor for the meeting of Asian and European cultures which took place along the legendary Silk Road.

Opening with the dancers standing in stillness, WHIRLWIND is from start to finish greatly enhanced by its lighting (Carrie Wood) and costuming (Anna-Alisa Belous)...and some richly-textured projections (Jayanthi Moorthy) in Part II. Composer Glen Velez has created a magical tapestry of sound, evoking the Eastern realms with music that is at once seductive and soulful: swaying rhythms, delicate dreamlike themes, mystic chanting, bursts of dynamic – almost primitive – energy. At times, the dancers are called upon to participate vocally, recalling for me an early rehearsal I attended where the composer was teaching them their rhythmic patterns. (The roster of dancers is quite different now from that day in 2011.)

In this musical and visual setting, it's the dancers who transform this history lesson/travel diary into an immediate and marvelous contemporary dance experience. There are eight dancers in the Company but such are the shifting patterns of this well-constructed work that we sometimes have the illusion of a much larger number of people moving in the space. The boys are bare-chested, the women in gossamer trousers in subdued earthtones. From the moment they break out of their initial solemn pose, these remarkable dancers bring passionate commitment to every move.

WHIRLWIND unfolds in two sections with a brief pause between. Sweeping us along in movement that veers from meditative to fiercely athletic, the dancers delve into the choreographic richness with great technical assurance and boundless individual charisma. Of the current troupe, only Ekaterina Chernikhova and Jung Hm Jo are familiar to me from the Company's previous performances though I know Greta Campo from her work with choreographer Danielle Schulz.

Ensemble passages flow freely into smaller movement modules; there are numerous solos (everyone has ample opportunity to shine), and there are some beautiful partnering passages, notable a spotlit duet for Ekaterina with Daniel Johnson set to a deep, earthy chant. Rituals are evoked, and there 's a male quartet expressing both brotherhood and hints of the combative. An *entrée* with the girls in high lifts makes a stunning impression – something to savour visually – but the music and dance surge ever onward.

Along with Ekaterina and Greta, Eun Kyung Hong and Sabrina Jaafar made beautiful impressions every moment they were onstage. The fluent power and grace of the four well-contrasted male dancers – Jung Hm Jo, James Johnson, Daniel Johnson and Yoo Sik Kim – continually thrilled us with their effortless athleticism and magnetic personalities. With great generosity of spirit, these eight dancers made the afternoon a thoroughly satisfying experience.

## Dance company conjures a 'Whirlwind' premier

By Caroline Berg in New York (China Daily)

Nai-Ni Chen went to China's Silk Road and got caught in a whirlwind. The mosaic of cultures and nature she observed on a summer of travel inspired her to choreograph a contemporary dance embodying the spirit of this ancient trade route.

"Whirlwind is the cultures, art, energies and people coming from different parts of the world and somehow met here on the Silk Road and intertwined," the Taiwan native choreographer and artistic director of Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company said. "I refer back to the whirlwind - this natural phenomenon in the desert - and use that as a starting point to move the language and set the structure for the dance."

Whirlwind is the product of two years of planning and collaboration. The two-part, hour-long dance incorporates eight men and women dancers from the United States, Italy, Russia and South Korea, as well as original music by percussionist Glen Velez and visual art by Jayanthi Moorthy of India.

During the New York premiere at Salvatore Capezio Theater at Peridance, with two performances over the weekend, partially unclad dancers in silk earth-toned costumes glistened with sweat from the fluctuating, and sometimes acrobatic, movements.

"I try to explore contrasts in terms of rhythm and dynamics," Chen said. "Like when you listen to music with one instrument on top of another or if you look at the many components in nature that overlap, you'll see layers of movement that overlap with the dancers."

The dance employs trance, rhythmic breathing and spiral motions to emulate the shape and energy of a desert whirlwind. It also adopts from traditional characters like Mongolian horsemen and flying eagles as well as the celebratory movements of the Uyghur people.

"There are a lot of folk elements in these dances," Chen said. "Folk dancing is very beautiful. It doesn't matter which culture the folk dancing is from, it represents the human spirit, it comes from the people. It's a great inspiration."

The greatest challenge Chen found in choreographing her work was representing all the experiences she had along the Silk Road, including the ancient caves and murals in Dunhuang, Muslim life in mosques, the nomadic Mongolian life and the natural world of mountains, grasses and desert.

"It's hard to start in the beginning and find the place to put your foot down," Chen said. "It took a lot of improvisation with the dancers to really find what I want to say."

Seven dancers begin the dance standing in two staggered lines as a group of travelers in a caravan, slowly leaning back and forth. Then, in a moment, they begin twirling and jumping like the desert wind.

"It's like watching an abstract painting," Chen said. "You can find your own story rather than the painter telling you exactly what the story is about."

Apart from Whirlwind, Chen has developed another modern work based on her Silk Road experience called Mirage, based on Uyghur dance and music.

The choreographer imagines this sensory overload and excess of material she possesses will lead to a Silk Road series.

"There's so much more to say," Chen said, who plans to visit the road again and explore Central Asia next. "It's going to take many more years to develop this idea."

Whirlwind was created in support from a Live Music for Dance grant from New Music USA, which is supported in part by the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

Before the first performance commenced Saturday night, Martin Wechsler, director of programming at Joyce Theater who attends an average of three to four dance performances a week, said he doubted Whirlwind would make it to the Joyce stage because the theater prefers to showcase New York premiers.

However, after the winded dancers took their bows, Wechsler admitted he might have to reconsider.

"That was very good," he said.

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(China Daily 04/12/2013 page11)

Dance Review by Karen Shapiro

WETPAINTJOURNAL.COM

## Year of the Serpent - Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company

February 18, 2013



Greta Campo and Daniel Johnson in Whirlwind. Photo by Joseph Wegner.

### ***Victoria Theater - New Jersey Center for the Performing Arts***

I'd been wanting to see the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company for years, but it wasn't until last weekend that I finally made the trek out to Newark to see the company celebrate the Chinese New Year with their production Year of the Serpent. The program was a wonderful mix of traditional Chinese dancing, music and opera combined with a new contemporary piece, Whirlwind, which received its world premiere this year. The dancers moved seamlessly between the

different dance styles. It was very generous and helpful of the company to have provided the audience with detailed descriptions of the history and inspiration for each dance, along with narratives about the peoples and customs of the different regions of China from where these dances come.

The performance opened with a piece called Double Lions Welcoming Spring which tells the story of trust built between young children and ferocious lions. The dance is intended as a prayer for peace and harmony in the coming year. Playful and often funny (such as when the lion forgets himself on stage and nibbles on his own foot, or throws in an extra cabriole before exiting the stage) the dance includes dazzling acrobatics and tumbling sequences. Each lion is played by two men who do an amazing job of making the beast's back ripple in feline fashion, or making it rear back on its hind legs. The Chinese folk costumes and the design of the lion are so beautifully done.

In Song of the Water Lily, dancer Ying Shi embodies the beauty and purity of a young girl. She carries a fan ornamented with a lovely billowing scarf which resembles a flower petal. The lighting and music create the atmosphere of a lily pond, down to the sound of water droplets and bird songs spliced in with the traditional folk music. There is a wide sweep of movement, from luscious slow and controlled extensions and port des bras, to a rapid success of turns executed while spotting the floor. The dance is at once ornate and colorful as it is earthy and primal.

Another traditional piece, arranged by Ms. Chen, was the rousing Coin Stick Dance. Bamboo sticks filled with coins create a host of different rattling sounds as they are tapped against shoulders, hips and floor, or twirled like batons. The dance was presented as an ensemble piece, but had lovely partnering sections in which pairs of dancers tapped their sticks together. The piece was marked by pretty formations and nice footwork sequences.

One of the highlights for me was seeing Ms. Chen's earthy modern piece, *Whirlwind*, inspired by her journey on the Silk Road. It opens with six dancers standing still on stage, very subtly swaying forward and backward on the breeze. In this section, and throughout the piece, Ms. Chen used groups moving in unison, save for one dancer. These formations seemed to embody the phenomenon of the whirlwind, which she described in the program as coming from different directions. In the



*Whirlwind*. Photo by Joseph Wagner.

opening section, the dancers' mostly remain in their spots, but they execute beautiful adagio movement with the upper body and the plie, creating the atmospheres of a coming storm. As the dance builds, influences of various cultures can be appear. The energy of the wind can be felt in contractions and sighing movement. I loved the section danced by the men, locked onto one another's arms in a circle and swaying together in a way that seemed ancient and ritualistic. Great original movement in this dance and beautiful artistic execution by the dancers.

Min Zhou shone in the traditional Peacock Dance from her charming staccato birdlike gestures, shuddering shoulders and expressive movement of the upper body, to her lovely transitions into slow and controlled adagio phrases. She held her arm above her head, her hand shaped like the head of a peacock, her floor length skirt draped to resemble its plumage.

The program closed with Chen's traditional piece, *Festival*, a spectacle of cartwheels, barrel turns, colorful ribbons, and flags, complete with a dragon dance in which the dragon takes a spin around the audience. The piece was great fun and a fitting close to a beautiful program.





## **BWW Reviews:**

### **Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is a NJPAC Sensation**

Monday, February 11, 2013; 10:10 PM; by Marina Kennedy

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company ushered in the Chinese New Year, “The Year of the Serpent,” with a thrilling display of artistry at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center on Saturday, February 9<sup>th</sup> and Sunday, February 10<sup>th</sup>. The audiences that attended the matinee performances in NJPAC’s Victoria Theater were enthralled by the grace, precision, and athleticism of the dancers. With their intriguing choreography of traditional and modern Chinese dance, elaborate costuming, and a variety of music, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company succeeded in delighting persons of all ages.

The program featured an excellent variety of pieces from the colorful and fascinating folk dance, Double Lions Welcoming Spring to Year of the Serpent Celebration, performed by a charming group of dancers from the Nai-Ni Chen Youth Dance Program. Whirlwind, a new dance choreographed by Nai-Ni Chen with music by Glen Velez, incorporated 8 dancers in a modern piece. Chen took inspiration from her journey on the “Silk Road” which begins in China, passes through Central Asia and crosses many deserts and mountains on route to Europe. The pacing of the piece was perfect and the dancers delivered it flawlessly.

The program ended with a celebratory piece, Festival, where blue flags symbolized the water waves to which people pray for a good harvest rain. The colorful silk ribbons skillfully used in the dance symbolized the prosperity of the village. The company fascinated the audience as they made their way through Victoria Hall with a colorful model of an elaborate serpent.

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company brings the dynamic freedom of American modern dance together with the elegant splendor of Asian art. The company has toured throughout the United States and abroad, gaining national and international recognition for their artistry. For additional information about the company, their programs, or dance classes, visit their website, [www.nainichen.org](http://www.nainichen.org) or call (800) 650-0246.

# The Star-Ledger

## On the Silk Road to Learning: Students in Elizabeth immersed in the cultures of far-away lands

By Peggy McGlone/The Star-Ledger

Sunday, June 03, 2012

ELIZABETH — A swarm of third-grade dancers finished the final number of the "Silk Road" performance at Dr. Orlando Edreira Academy School No. 26 by unfurling their balls of cloth and sending a rainbow of color into the air.

As the dancers swirled their streamers in a choreographed design, the kindergartners from the Elizabeth public school "oohed" their delight.

Using Chinese music and traditional Chinese dance, costumes and instruments, the students of this globally focused school have spent the spring traveling the Silk Road, learning about the cities, cultures and resources along the 4,000-mile trade route that linked Asia and Europe.



Steve Hockstein/For the Star-Ledger  
Children at Elizabeth's Dr. Orlando Edreira Academy School No. 26 perform their Silk Road project for an audience that included students at their sister school in China via and internet hookup last month.

The school-wide program is intended to foster connections with other cultures and emphasize similarities between people, rather than their differences, principal Howard Teitelbaum said.

"We want learning that traverses subject areas, and learning by touching, seeing, singing, playing, dancing," said Teitelbaum, who dressed in the gold embroidered robes of an emperor for the event last month. "When you think back to school, you don't remember that essay you wrote or that math lesson. But you remember things like this."



Steve Hockstein/For The Star-Ledger  
Min Zhou of the Nai Ni Chen Dance Co. performs a traditional Ribbon Dance for children at Elizabeth's Orlando Edreira Academy School 26.

The school's journey on the Silk Road — a partnership between the district and Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in Fort Lee — began in January and included all 10 grades from pre-kindergarten through grade eight.

It ended with a 75-minute student performance that also featured the traditional Min Zhou Ribbon Dance performed by a member of Nai-Ni's company and musician Jeff Werbock on sitar and a host of traditional drums and string instruments.

Also involved were students from its sister school, the East Street School in Dunhuang, China, one of the cities along the Silk Road. The

Elizabeth and Dunhuang students collaborated on the development of

# The Star-Ledger

the show, and several dozen students from that elementary school watched the performance via Skype. (Since Dunhuang is 12 hours ahead, the students had to return to their school at night to watch.)

When the internet connection to East Street was established, the Elizabeth students, who study Mandarin Chinese, yelled hello in Chinese. The Chinese students responded in English.

The five-month project was a risky undertaking because it included so many elements, its creators said. Nai-Ni Chen company members taught and rehearsed the dances, while band director Tom Siebenhuhner led the advanced band and the jazz ensemble in movements of "Dreams of the Past," a piece Nai-Ni Chen commissioned from Chinese composer Gao Dengxian.

"It was important that the whole school was involved, since that's pretty rare," said Nai-Ni Chen, artistic director of the contemporary dance company that has worked with the academy since it opened in 1998.

The original music was important, too, because it gave the students a real sense of Chinese culture.

"It was a real East-West mix," said Chen. "That was a true collaboration."

Each grade studied a stop along the route — beginning in Quanzhou and continuing through Xanadu (highlighted by a spirited performance of Kubla Khan), Kashgar, Baghdad, Antioch and Tyre. Students studied the cities, their culture, geography, natural resources and top exports, presenting skits in between the dance and music pieces.

Audience members learned that Antioch merchants "drive a hard bargain" and that Damascus was known for its beautiful purple dyes. They watched as traders from Quanzhou offered tea in return for silk, and Tyre traders bartered with cedar wood.

"The kids were really engaged," said second-grade teacher Julia Lehman. "It was really an experience in (having an) open mind. It was an exciting school project."

Seven-year-old Tameesan Miller, dressed in a green tunic costume, recited a poem in Chinese about his grade's city, Dunhuang. Afterward, he said he enjoyed working on the project.

"It was fun because we said a poem and the third-graders did a dance," he said.

Members of the band were enthusiastic about the music, a three-part composition filled with Eastern influences.

"You get to learn about different cultures through music," said Deiontay Hall, 13, a seventh-grade sax player.

"I loved the music and its different sound," said trumpet player Brandon Wreckler, 12, also in seventh grade. "It wasn't easy. It took weeks and weeks of practice but we pulled it together."



Steve Hockstein/For The Star-Ledger  
Middle-school science teacher Bill Clark portrays a Chinese Warrior.

## **Dance: "Temptation of the muses" - preview with choreographer Nai-Ni Chen**

March 7, 2012

By Eugene Chan, Queens Fine Arts Examiner

Founded in 1988, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is an organization where the influences of the East (such as martial arts movements) meets West (modern dance discipline). In preview of an upcoming performance of "Temptation of the muses" here is an interview with group founder and artistic director Nai-Ni Chen.

**Q1:** Brief explain the origins of how "Temptation of the muses" came about.

**A1** (Chen): In 2010, the initial idea was inspired by a poem called "A word for freedom" by Latif Nazemi, a Persian poet originally from Afghanistan. It was at a time when the company got a "Live music for dance" grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Next, based on past associations we decided to work the Ahn Trio (made up of 3 Korean-born sisters) who play throughout "Temptation of the muses." The Ahn trio knew of NY-based Japanese-American composer Kenji Bunch who would write a new piece called "Concrete stream."

**Q2:** Why the title "Concrete stream?"

**A2:** It was Bunch's reaction to Nazemi's treatment of water in "A word for freedom." Working off of Bunch's interpretation of the poem, for the dancers stream came to mean the flow of movement across the confines of a stage. The use of the word stone in the poem made Bunch think of concrete in an urban setting. So concrete stream took on another layer of meaning -- freedom within structure-- like the way a big city or a dance can be.

**Q3:** This will be the fifth time the group will be performing "Temptation of the muses" since its premier at Harlem School of the Arts Theater in December 2010. How has the work evolved since that debut?

**A3:** It has evolved in two specific ways. Since the staging involves having the instrumentalists not be stationary, pianist Lucia Ahn came to me and said I want to be involved with the movement on stage. It took awhile to figure out how to do that, but early on in the piece I have Lucia with the dancers doing a pedestrian walk.

"Yu Ryung" is a section that features Jazz composer Pat Metheny's music. My first reaction to the music's lyricism made me think about individuals in a city trying to enjoy a little piece of nature in the urban jungle. When I learned that "Yu Ryung" meant spirit or ghost in Korean, and that definition was the basis for Metheny's intent--it spurred me to make small changes to the dance.

**Q4:** In a composer's note you said that you gave the dancers a lot of freedom to express themselves while working on "Temptation of the muses." Have you always worked that way or is this practice a more recent development?

**A4:** It depends. When I have a clear vision of what a work is about, I take charge strongly. When I don't have a clear vision and I'm exploring an idea, the dancers are encouraged to contribute to the process.

As an example, say at one point during the process of creating a dance I have three sets of male/female dancers pair off. I throw two words at them like, "connect" and "disconnect," and then I ask them to improvise.

The pairs then explore those words. One pair might click and pop immediately, another pair might experiment and grind for quite awhile. Watching their processes gives me ideas to consider when creating a piece.

**Q5:** What qualities do you look for in a dancer who is looking to join the company?

**A5:** First I go beyond the personal background of a dancer, and consider how will they best fit into my concept. Of course a candidate must have strong, fundamental technique. Beyond that, I'm looking for a dancer who doesn't just move through a given space, but physically inhabits it. Simply by the way a dancer walks I can get a clue to their personality. I find it's hard for dancers to lie with their bodies.

Equally important is a candidate who shows open-mindedness to new styles and ideas. I've had some candidates who were technically exceptional, but set in their approach based on their training and therefore wouldn't be a good match. Also, a dancer who isn't shy about providing feedback can provide me with information that will inform my choreography. When starting on a work whose concept I'm unsure of, both of the aforementioned qualities can make my life easier.

**Q6:** Talk about the economic challenges the company has faced over the last three years.

This company has made it for 23 years, so we know how to survive during economic downtimes, but it has been rough. When times are good, my company has an atypical capacity to have 40 full-time total workweeks.

Right now it's just 20 full-time workweeks with some part-time opportunities.

That said, things are slowly improving as we are getting more performance requests and funding streams are starting to trickle in again. In my experience, economic climate for dance cannot get worse than it was during the low point of 2009 -10.

**Q7:** What is the technically or interpretatively most difficult section for the dancers in "Temptation of the muses?"

Technically, the finale called "Groove box" is hard because there are parts of this section that require the male dancer among many things, to sustain handstands of considerable duration while displaying total command over his entire body.

From an interpretive standpoint, a particularly difficult section is called "Lullaby." I have a certain idea of the meaning behind "Lullaby," but communicating that idea through physical movement is a challenge. I don't reveal too much in the program notes about this section though, because I want an audience member to come at this part from their own viewpoint.

**Q8:** Does audience feedback-- whether it's the person who pays for a ticket or someone in your creative circle-- matter enough to influence the development of a given piece?

**A8:** Andrew Chiang is executive director of the company and his opinion means most to me. He also happens to be my husband and is often the ensemble's toughest critic. He was a dance student in his younger days and has so many years in this business in an administrative role, including a stint with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

For me, I think that dance companies should regularly hold question and answer sessions with audience members as much as possible. This, to break through the third wall and get their feedback whether positive or negative.

I'm confident in my abilities, but not stubborn. If I hear useful criticism, I'll use it to grow as an artist.

## **Ahn Trio unites with Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company for performance**

Tuesday, February 7, 2012

By Sarah Maze

The sparkling Ahn Trio accompanies the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company for their Gainesville premiere onstage tonight in “Temptation of the Muses,” a concert of original music and dance.

The UF Performing Arts program begins at 7:30 tonight at the Phillips Center. Tickets range from \$25-\$40 and are available at the door.

Choreographer Nai-Ni Chen, along with violinist Angella Ahn, talked about what's in store, as well as how the collaboration came to be.

“We (the Ahn Trio and Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company) are both under the same management in America,” says Ahn. “So my sisters and I had seen the company perform and really liked it. Nai-Ni had heard us before, we all met at an event, and we thought we'd like to work together. Plus, I guess there is that Asian connection,” says Ahn, who was born in Seoul, Korea, while Chen is originally from Taiwan.

“Plus, going to school in New York City and being used to being surrounded by so many interesting and talented people who are all so different, my sisters and I just really love to collaborate often,” Ahn adds. “We've worked with singers of all styles, and we had even worked with another dance company before (Parsons Dance Company).”

“But ‘Temptation of the Muses' feels more organic, natural and comfortable for us”, she says.

In “Temptation,” choreographer Chen places the three strings players right onstage amid the dancing — so the musicians become immersed in the visual element of the piece along with the dancers.

“We move around during the performance, and the dancers interact with us,” Ahn says. Dancers slide through the piano and mimic the cellist's movements.

Chen says the it was important to her that the be musicians be part of the visual effect. “I did not want a collaborative effect where it was like, here is this one color over here, and another separate, over there,” she says. “The whole work is like an Impressionist painting, where all the colors mix together.”

Chen launched the collaboration with inspiration from a poem, “A Word for Freedom,” by Persian poet Latif Nazemi. “The poem talks about water, and water as a symbol of freedom,” she says. “In a lot of my work, I am very interested in nature, and in our human relationship with nature.

“I loved the idea of water, something that we all need that connects all people. And I also wanted to explore an idea that though water symbolizes freedom in both the poem and in ‘Temptation', that it can be contained.

“A large container of water is on the stage both at the beginning and close of the program,” she adds. “And the dancers work directly with water throughout the performance.”

“Temptation of the Muses” contains a commissioned musical score by composer Kenji Bunch, who was heralded by The New York Times as a “composer to watch.” Bunch, one of only three composers selected nationwide to inaugurate the Meet the Composer “Magnum Opus” Project, is also a favorite of The Ahn Trio.

“We perform Kenji's music more than any other composer,” Ahn says. “We love him, he's probably our favorite composer to work with.”

There are also musical selections by Pat Metheny, David Balakrishnan and Ronn Yedidia.

Chen named the piece “Temptation of the Muses” by taking the word “temptation” from Nazemi's poem, and combining it with “muses” after the effect that all of the collaborators had on each other. “‘Muses’ is all of us, all of the collaborators involved,” Chen says. “We have inspired each other working together, not just the Ahn Trio and myself, but the composers, the costume and lighting designers, everyone.”

And while “Temptation of the Muses” premiered in New York City in 2010, Gainesville audiences will see a work that has only been performed a handful of times. “It's a pretty new work,” Chen says. “We just started touring it last fall.”

Ahn says the piece has been performed less than 10 times. “I feel like the show keeps growing each time we perform it,” she says. “My sisters and I are so inspired by the music and definitely by the dancers; and I feel like we in turn hopefully inspire the dancers. And we think the audience also really takes in the inspiration as well.”

Since forming in 1988, The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has mounted more than 20 national tours, appearing in some of the nation's most prestigious concert halls.

Angella Ahn is the youngest of the Juilliard-educated Ahn Trio. Her sisters Maria (cello), and Lucia (piano) make up the energetic trio.

“I have always thought our personalities match our instruments,” Ahn laughs. “I'm the youngest, but I'm definitely the bossiest. My sisters would back that up completely; I'm kind of a Type A control freak. And Lucia, she's the middle child, knowing how to get along with everyone, which is just right for a pianist.”

“And while Maria is the oldest only by ten minutes, our parents definitely raised her as the oldest child, and that has always been her role. Which I think suits the cello.”

With six albums and 10 years of successful touring, they are favorites of UF Performing Arts, and reportedly the feeling is mutual.

“We love Gainesville, and we love the Phillips Center,” says Ahn. “It really is one of our favorite places to perform.”

February 19, 2011

Dance Review Commentary (As seen 2/12/11)  
Temecula CA – Old Town Community Theatre  
By Rob Appel

From their resident home at the Harlem School of the Arts in New York City (for more than 10 years), the 9-dancer Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company brought to us, one of the finest contemporary and modern dance companies to have appeared at the Temecula Old Town Community Theatre annual Dance Series. Representing the 'grace and splendor of Asian Art', it is indeed a pleasure to see a group of dancers, whose quality of dancer's technique is equaled by the superb choreography of Nai-Ni Chen! What a satisfying marriage!

Opening with a welcome greeting by Temecula Artists Advocate Lauri Torok, the Nai-Ni Chen dancers presented a varied program of seven (7) dance creations of choreographer nai-Ni Chen, to the excellent lighting designs of AC Hichcox (*Rain Drops, Incense and Bamboo Prayer*), Barry Steele (*Peacock Dance*), Susan Summers (*Way of Five-Fire*) and Carolyn Wong (*Love Song of Xishuanbanna and Mirage*). Lighting plays such a key role in the visual success of any dance – all the more so, with Nai-Ni Chen's casting of dancers representing a round-the-world cross-section of excellent dancers – Ekaterina Chernikhova (Russia), Jamison Goodnight (US), Jung Hm Jo (Korea), Saki Masuda (Japan), Riyo Mito (Japan), Francisco Silvino (Brazil), Wei Yao (China), Min Zhou (China) and Nai-Ni Chen (China), it was a banquet of super bodies and technique!

In *Rain Drops*, choreographer Nai-Ni Chen has her four female dancers, bare-footed, in the very flattering-to-the-figure, paneled Chinese dresses – moving effortlessly to the music of Henry Wolff (and others), while introducing the audience to the symmetric-design of Chinese umbrellas opening-closing-twirling...what peaceful patterns of serenity. The second work, titled just *Incense* shared two couples in "recalling the ritual of the incense offerings at a temple". An American female dancer (Jamison Goodnight), a Korean male dancer (Jung Hm Jo), a Japanese female dancer (Riyo Mito), and a Chinese male dancer (Wei Yao...together, in a quartet of blissful harmony of movement...very precise and restrained.

Even though each dance work presented, stood very much on its own elegance, there were a couple of stop-your-breath moments of such incredible beauty. One came with the solo piece *The Peacock Dance*, danced by the rather sensational Min Zhou (from China)...as she created a bird peacock...drinking water, walking, working, running and combing its feathers. (As noted) with over 55 ethnic groups in China, each with its unique traditions of dance and music, the Peacock is considered a sacred bird among the Dai people of the Yunnan Province. Min Zhou's captivating hands and head movements left no doubt to the story she told – fabulous!

This viewer's favorite though, was *The Way of Five – Fire* – in which, powerful and strong, Brazilian male dancer (Francisco Silvino) led the exploration focus into the element of fire. Both choreographed and costumed (in all red Kung-fu wardrobe) by Nai-Ni Chen, the five dancers related to the elements of wood, fire, water, metal and earth, with the extremely effective use of Chinese fans – opening and snapping-closed to the dramatic moments in the music of Tan Dun. This dance piece is very physical when needed, lyrical when called-upon, and virtually explosive in a dynamic finale to Act I.



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In the second act, three works were featured – the opening *Bamboo Prayer* with Nai-Ni Chen herself, dancing (with four female dancers)...making most effective use of long 10-foot, very flexible bamboo poles – reflecting mankind's nobility and virtue – symbolizing justice, strength and humiliiy. Nai-Ni Chen loves to use 'props' as extensions of her messages. In the succeeding duet by the tall and lanky Chinese male dancer Wei Yao, and the absolutely brilliant Min Zhou...*Love Song of Xishuanbanna* – is inspired by a tropical zone on the Yunnan Province of Southwest China, endowed with sufficient sunshine and rainfall, which is the cradle and paradise for wildlife, as well as the habitat for more than 5,000 tropical plants...this was the resource for this very stylized dance – a young couple admiring each other in this beautiful paradise. So performed these two fine dancers in another 'hightlight' of the evening's program.

The full ensemble of 9-dancers came together in the concert's finale, simply titled *Mirage* to the music of Glen Velez...and, though a bit too long (could have been edited down for easier focus and consumption)...nevertheless, the Nai-Ni Chen dancers worked hard and delivered a sterling evening of quality dance. Seems much a shame that more of the SD [San Diego] dance community do not take these unique opportunities to see this quality of contemporary and modern dance.

[www.theatrereviews.com](http://www.theatrereviews.com)

# The Star-Ledger

## Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's 'Dragons on the Wall' celebrates freedom, growth and change

Published: Tuesday, May 17, 2011, 10:40 AM

By Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger



NEW YORK — The dancers lie folded upon themselves and rounded like stones at the start of "Dragons on the Wall (Tianji)," a dance of rare intensity that the **Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company**, from Fort Lee, revived on Friday at Dance Theater Workshop.

Strewn across the floor and mostly isolated, they seem immovable and beyond reach.

Yet the great force that compressed these figures resides latent within them. In the background, the amplified sound of breathing suggests this scene is not a barren field, but an incubator. Each human knot is tense, awaiting the moment when a hidden spring will release it. When the dancers unlock their limbs and assemble in a circle on the floor, arms stretching toward a common center, the slow revolutions of this design suggest the inevitability of growth and change.

Despite the darkness of its scenes — almost the whole dance is cast in gloomy shadows — "Dragons" is an optimistic piece. The struggle that it portrays, as bodies attempt to escape confinement with sharp exhalations of breath, is a struggle that must be won. Pushed to the back of the stage and arrayed in a line,

individuals make their way forward cautiously yet determinedly, ignoring whatever it is that makes them cringe and dodge. Notably they do not need to work together to achieve their goal. The desire to cross this space works inside each one like a hidden motor, an inborn yearning for freedom.

Inspired by the poetry of Chinese dissident writer Bei Dao, by ancient legends and by the challenges that beset the world today, "Dragons" is an ambitious piece. It comes elaborately dressed with props, projections and hanging fabric, all of which looked more elegant in 2001, when this dance made its debut on a proscenium stage at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark.

At DTW, viewers peer down into a pit, and Chen Shen's scenery, which should dominate the space, is not as lofty or as magical in effect.

The dance remains filled with images of mysterious potency, however, reinforced by the aura of whispering, clanging sounds composed by Joan La Barbara, and by the dancers' own strangled cries. At one point, sheets of paper rain down from the sky. Fragile things, they are easily disposed of. Yet not before a woman rescues some. Her eyes widen, as she contemplates the significance of the precious sheaf of papers in her hands.

Duets seem wary and mistrustful, conducted just out of reach of watchmen who pass by carrying lanterns. Yet in the small space that remains to them, the partners seem to find a haven where they can rest undisturbed.

Long sheets of fabric unfurl, and dancers slide along them on their backs working their way upstream. Others gather on the shore, as if waiting to embark. Although much of the choreography has a stolid, sculptural quality, the impulse to move builds gradually gathering momentum until it finally explodes as calligraphic action-painting.

In the finale, all restrictions seem lifted. Dragging heavy tubs to the border of a canvas, the dancers fling water into the air, and smear the stage with gleaming jets of ink. Never has the act of writing seemed so all-consuming or so liberating. Significantly, only when Chen's characters can taste freedom do they form a genuine community.

February 10, 2011

## Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company celebrates nature

By HOLLY HERNDON - For *The Californian*



When Nai-Ni Chen watches the changing of the seasons from her home on the East Coast she sees not only one of Mother Nature's greatest visual spectacles but also gets inspiration she can use in her day job.

"Ever since I was a little child I was very observant of nature," Chen said during a recent phone interview. "I would watch the clouds in the sky and the seasons change and it was like, somehow, I was born with a lot of interest in these things and I use them in my choreography. I see the colors. I feel the rhythm and I see the imagery change so I use nature as a subject."

Born in Taiwan, Chen began her training at the young age of four, specializing in Chinese dance. As a teenager, she branched out into various other styles of the dance genre as well as martial arts and music study. She began her professional dance career just out of college and has been on stage ever since.

Artistic Director and Choreographer Chen started Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company in 1988 and, together with nine additional touring dancers, she has since won dozens of awards and critical acclaim for the unique style and vision she calls "cross cultural contemporary."

"I have a lot of training in traditional Chinese dance and the culture and philosophy but I've also been in this country for a long time so I'm trained as a modern dancer and choreographer so my work combines both cultures," she said. "My dancers also have very strong backgrounds and come from very different places like China, Korea, Brazil and the United States. It's a very international company and once they join the company they all bring their own specialties and their diverse unity which the others will learn. We are basically immersed into this unique style of unity."

Inland Empire residents can experience Chen's work this weekend as the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company comes to Old Town Temecula. The performance will include seven pieces from the company's vast repertoire.

"We will be doing a unique program that will include some of my jewels; my signature pieces that I have done over the past 20 years," Chen said. "Some are original choreography and there are a few folk dances as well. It should be a good mix."

The Temecula performance begins with an original work by Chen entitled "Raindrops."

"'Raindrops' is modern choreography and it is inspired by my childhood memories," she said. "I was born and brought up in a city North in Taiwan. It was a city by a seaport and it rained a lot. This dance is very joyful because it's a mixing of my childhood memories and how playful you can be during a rainy day as a child. It's just very lyrical and very sweet and very sentimental for me. It's a place that's very far away from me now but it's always in you."

A second piece, entitled "Incense," draws upon Chen's religious upbringing for inspiration.

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"I remember I would go to temple and see the incense burning and people use it as a way to communicate with their god," Chen said. "I go to this country and see many artists and many other religions using it. We are so vulnerable and want to communicate with a higher being and somehow we use incense as a way to give our prayers. So, it's a piece that's very spiritual and very physical."

An additional piece being performed this weekend is "Bamboo Prayer," which pays tribute to one very symbolic plant.

"This piece describes how, in Chinese tradition, bamboo means a lot," Chen said. "It means justice and it means humility. It grows straight up into the sky but is flexible and I relate that to women's spirits. I feel that females have a lot of strength and willpower but we're very flexible. So, in this dance I use five female dancers with long bamboo poles. It's kind of like a ritual ceremony where we celebrate women's lives."

In a fourth dance, entitled "Mirage," Chen's choreography, combined with original music from Grammy winning composer Glen Velez, the audience is transported into the desert as the dancers depict the caravan of the Uyghur people in the Xinjiang province of western China.

"I really wanted to show the spirit of this group of people as well as bring the mystery of the desert scene," Chen said. "So, I open the scene with only one dancer in this desert back drop and he is essentially moving very slowly toward the audience to take them into a dream world; slowly moving toward the climatic celebration."

With seven unique works combined with the diverse cultural backgrounds of herself and her dancers, Chen promises the performance of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has something for everyone.

"My work is very accessible and the choice of pieces are very colorful and can be appreciated by anybody," Chen said. "Certainly a beginner who's never been to dance before will have a great experience. I think they would take home a very special feeling, a certain spirit, which is common throughout the whole program."

Photo: Carol Rossegg *Bamboo Prayer*

# The Star-Ledger

February 09, 2011

## 'Year of the Rabbit' review: Dancing to bring luck, fortune to the New Year

By Robert Johnson/*The Star-Ledger*

Putting your left fist into your right hand, and then wishing your neighbor a Happy Chinese New Year, will bring good luck and happiness.

That's according to Andy Chiang, the executive director of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, which welcomed the Year of the Rabbit with a boisterous Chinese New Year celebration at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark on Saturday.

It worked! The happiness started immediately, as soon as Chiang concluded his introduction and the curtain rose on the "Lion Dance," an annual tradition featuring two men in a lion suit with a spectacular, wooden mask and the lion's acrobatic handler.

In a shower of good fortune, the program also offered a striking Kunque Opera solo; a song recital by guest artists; folk dance favorites; and samples from Chen's modern repertory displaying the sinuous and appealing physicality that is one of her trademarks.

The first duet of the evening showcased an odd couple. While the acrobat, Yao-Zhong Zhang, remained cheerfully deadpan, channeling his

energy into foot-slapping leaps, his furry companion, the lion, was more relaxed and expressive. Though tempted by the toy that the acrobat held out to him, this jovial beast was too tame to charge after it, flopping on the ground to bite at imaginary fleas and needing to be roused from a nap.

In "Duet on the River of Dreams," Saki Masuda made a lyrical partner for Francisco Silvino, the boatman poling along an eternal stream. While he remained weighted, offering her support and framing her with the pole, Masuda embarked on playful adventures, always returning, however, to her place beside him.

Min Zhou and Wei Yao were the young couple flirting in "The Love Song of Xishuangbanna," based on the traditional dances of the Dai people of Yunnan Province. Their oblique, twisting moves and finicky gestures, with the index finger bent, suggested the influence of neighboring countries in Southeast Asia.

Zhang returned in "The Double Spear Warrior," an episode from Kunque Opera, an ancient Chinese performing art. Preening and striking poses in a costume that extended the lines of his body,

with an extravagant, feathered headdress and platform shoes, Zhang was still able to twirl two batons and perform gymnastic feats.

Chen's contemporary ensemble pieces were the most ambitious works on the program, however, from the wary and intensely contained "Way of Five — Fire," in which the dancers sparred and brandished large fans as if they were weapons, to "Bamboo Prayer," a dance in which bamboo poles created an environment trembling with life and energy.

Varying the mood and style, guest musicians David M. Liao and Linda Xia offered a trio of classical songs, his baritone warm and caressing to her piano accompaniment.

The matinee concluded with the "Dragon Dance," actually a suite in which the title character, a serpentine puppet with gleaming, golden scales, made his appearance surrounded by dances in which the performers manipulated colorful ribbons, flags and kerchiefs. This kaleidoscopic ending placed the final, seal of good luck on the event, expressing everyone's hopes for a New Year just as bright.

# READING EAGLE

January 27, 2011

## Dance review:

### Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company brings studies of movement to Kutztown University

John Fidler

*Reading Eagle*

Dancers' eyes, arms and spirits reached upward, ever upward, as the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company brought its unique set pieces, tableaux and celebrations of movement to Kutztown University on Tuesday night. The performance in Schaeffer Auditorium was part of the Kutztown University Presents series.

The eight dancers, including Nai-Ni Chen herself, who danced a transporting solo tribute to her Chinese heritage in "Passage to the Silk River," swirled, pirouetted, pranced and seemed to make their bodies move in two directions at once through seven works, all choreographed by Chen.

These were studies in movement of all kinds.

In "Incense," four members of the troupe - Jamison Goodnight, Jung Hm Jo, Riyo Mito and Wei Yao - danced separately and together, their bodies arching and ramrod straight, sometimes touching without quite touching, arms akimbo and fluidly waving. Their white costumes became incense itself.

Moto and Francisco Silvino seemed to be floating in "Duet on the River of Dreams." Silvino wielded a rattan pole to push them across the water as she writhed around the oar, all

the while reaching upward.

He finally shared it with her, the oar becoming a pathway between two sensibilities. There were moments when their bodies paralleled the oar in peaceful symmetry.

The finale, "Mirage," evoked Matisse's "Dance," his seminal work from 1910. The entire company, Chen included, danced in this feral tribute to the Uyghur people of Xinjiang province in western China.

The piece opened with a triptych: two pairs of two dancers and a trio, each creating a different mood to the whistling, sighing electronic music by Glen Velez. The dancers stopped and started, seemingly simultaneously, creating the effect of a body moving in a strobe light - without the strobe - for a rhapsodic study in staccato and legato.

Chen's demanding choreography required movements that seemed to defy anatomy. Hips loosened, shoulders seemed to dislocate and waists defied the limits of torsion.

As stirring as the dancing were the music and the lighting, especially that of A.C. Hickox, whose lighting design added a poetically intimate atmosphere to the first three dances. Her



dramatic ending to "Raindrops," using a fading blue light that cloaked the four dancers, lent a sense of formal control over the piece, even as the music died away and the blue disappeared into darkness. It was a chilling moment.

The music joined the lighting as an integral part of the performance. Electronica, whispers, percussive elements, birds chirping and the sounds of the jungle swirled about the dancers as their own swirling arms created contours beyond mere torsos and backs.

Braiding harmony and dissonance, joy and melancholy, fluidity and angularity, Nai-Ni Chen brings a singular voice to the world of dance. We are fortunate to have seen her here.

Photo: Carol Rosegg  
(*Passage to the Silk River*)

# The Star-Ledger

DANCE REVIEW

December 4, 2010

## Musicians become part of the act in Nai-Ni Chen's newest dance

Robert Johnson STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, "Temptation of the Muses"

The Ahn sisters, a sparkling musical trio, joined the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company on Thursday for "Temptation of the Muses," an adventurous evening of music-making and dancing at the Harlem School of the Arts.

The program, which continues through tomorrow, features "Concrete Stream," a premiere with a commissioned score by Kenji Bunch, and the dancers and musicians perform alternately interpreting music by Bunch and by other contemporary composers.

Introducing the event, Andy Chiang, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's executive director, announced their intention to transform the black-box theater at the Harlem School of the Arts into a dance destination by performing there regularly. The troupe from Fort Lee has been in residence at HSA for 13 years, and with the added presence of musical celebrities, Thursday's show was a high-profile benefit for the school.

The Ahn sisters are no strangers to dance, having collaborated with choreographer David Parsons in 2004. This time, however, they were more than glamorous accompanists.

In "Concrete Stream," Chen posts them strategically onstage -- and she persuaded violinist Angella Ahn to remove her stiletto heels and wade barefoot into the action. At other points, dancers frame

cellist Maria Ahn by posing behind her.

Chen seems determined to make the most of this performance space and its surroundings.



"Concrete Stream" opens with a melody played on the cello, echoed plaintively from offstage. Dancer Riyo Mito dips her hands into an illuminated basin, making drops of water cascade brilliantly, as Francisco Silvano stands nearby in semi-darkness. The dance takes its theme from a poem by exiled Afghan poet Latif Nazemi, in which water becomes a symbol of freedom. Dancers touch one another without grasping or seeking to hold; and in a complex meshing of bodies, individuals roll off one another and pass through openings like water flowing through a sieve. A piece of fabric unfurls from beneath the piano and flows across the stage diagonally. Although "Concrete Stream" is a

work of poetic allusion, not strident slogans, knowing Chen it is easy to see these references and the contrast between darkness and light, amounting to a political allegory.

Other dances on the program feel more intimate. In "Lullabye," sharply etched tableaux and moments of isolation suggest an uneasy co-dependency among four people. Another piece titled "Lullabye for My Favorite Insomniac" presents tenderness without irony, however. In "Swing Shift," the dancers' mounting energy seems dangerous, as the piece progresses from hard, mechanical gestures to scenes in which dancers leap across rolling bodies.

The Ahn sisters are game collaborators, accustomed to negotiating among themselves, and they take visible pleasure in their repertoire, ranging from David Balakrishnan's fierce "Skylife" to the delicacy of Bunch's "Dies Irie," and on to Bunch's folksy "Backstep," with its queer-sounding rhythms for prepared piano.

Photo: Carol Rosegg

## San Antonio Express-News

Jan 31st, 2010

By Jasmina Wellinghoff

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company which appeared at the Carver Community Cultural Center Saturday night, is easily one of the most interesting dance groups we have seen in a long while.

Led by Taiwan-born Nai-Ni Chen, the New Jersey-based company cast a spell over the audience by weaving a tapestry of elegant dances set to unusual, goose-bump inducing musical scores. With a background in both Chinese traditional styles and modern dance, Chen blends the two genres in her choreography in a most auspicious manner. She also knows how to use props to add both visual and narrative dimensions to her work.

The evening opened with "Bamboo Prayer," featuring five white-clad women -- including Chen -- holding bamboo sticks at least twice their height. At first the women crouched while holding the poles pointing upward. Then the dance unfolded with dignified poise as they proceeded to create images of work and rituals with their bodies and their sticks. The latter were thrust out and bounced off the floor in unison, crossed in the air, arranged in patterns on the ground for the women to step in and out of, held between toes and pulled back and forth between pairs of dancers like stretchy cloth. Eventually, the dancers gathered in a circle, their poles held at an angle in front of them, crossing each other and thumping the floor.

The program notes said that that the bamboo used was rattan, which is known for its flexibility. Evidently, the choreographer was making a statement about the nature of women who may bend, work and suffer but do not break. Another strong group piece in Act I was "The Way of Five - Fire,"

which refers to fire as one of the five elements of creation according to ancient Chinese thinking. (The others are wood, water, metal and earth.) With dancers wearing red outfits, the piece built up gradually like fire would, from crisp sparks to wild flames. The props were fans held by both men and women but these fans were no dainty feminine accessories. Brandished like weapons and forcefully snapped shut and boldly redeployed, they conveyed aggression or might. The feeling of gathering force -- or maybe passion -- was underscored by the overall choreography, which included strong elements of martial arts. The audience loved it.

The most traditionally Chinese number was "Passage to the Silk River," a solo by Chen. She appeared on stage, a small figure in white, wearing "water sleeves," which are very long, loose silk sleeves that hang way down over the hands. With exquisite art movements, she brought them to life and made them dance with her, undulating like waves, twirling like whirlpools or trailing behind like quiet streams.

In Act II, however, the most memorable number was a very different piece, "Dancing with the Yak," set to a Tibetan folk song and choreographed by Shu Ze-Hong. Featuring striking folk costumes, the dance opened with two men (Chien-Hao Chang and Wei Yao) bent and arranged so that their bodies and costumes created a shape of a yak, while a young woman (Min Zhou) stood right behind them. The lights were low; it could have been early morning in the mountains. Then the guys

rearranged themselves, raising their opposite arms to look like horns, and she hopped on the back of the "yak." They cavorted together, the men often stepping about in imitation of the animal's gait, and all three dancing with long sleeves similar to the water sleeves, which is apparently a Tibetan tradition as well. At the end, they settled down sweetly together for the night.

Two other dances -- "Incense" in Act I and "Raindrops" in Act II -- were complex and appealing but both went on for too long without offering either narrative or aesthetic reasons for their length.

However, the finale "Mirage," though also longish, did accomplish its apparent mission of conveying a sense of journey through harsh, desert landscapes when people see dancing mirages on the far horizon. Here, there were elements of Indian dance in the head movements and the barefoot stamping of the ground. As the journey abruptly dissolved, the mesmerized audience might have felt that they, too, had seen a mirage, a gorgeous mirage of chiseled dancing bodies.

With the exception of the Tibetan piece and the Peking Opera-styled "Passage to the Silk River," the dances were set to original scores that can best be described as richly textured. Gongs, bells, whistles, howls, chanting, murky crowd noises, drumming of all shades, echoes, meditative sounds and more complemented rather than accompanied the dancing.

Besides the dancers already mentioned, the cast included Julie Judlova, Kerry Lee, Chu-Ying Ku, Chun-Yu Lin, Nijawwon Matthews and Jung Hm Jo.



## NEW YORK TIMES

By Tammy La Gorce

Published: January 29, 2010



**EXPRESSION THROUGH MOVEMENT** Members of the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company rehearsing at the Harlem School of the Arts for performances Feb. 13 and 14 in Newark. Photo: Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

THE dancer and choreographer Nai-Ni Chen tossed around terms like “movement vocabulary” at a recent rehearsal in Harlem for her company’s coming performances at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark. And it was easy getting her to talk about the importance of educating audiences through modern works as notable for their boldness as their beauty. But ultimately, Ms. Chen wants the performances of her troupe, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, founded in Fort Lee in 1988, to be accessible.

Ms. Chen, 50, said that incorporating both modern and traditional dance “opens the door for a lot of people.”

“It lets them get interested,” she said.

Her company will present Chinese New Year shows on Feb. 13 and 14 at the performing arts center, as it has done for many years. Earlier in the week it will offer performances for school groups.

“There is so much treasure to be found in traditional dance,” Ms. Chen said. “Even though my company is modern, it would be stupid of me not to make use of that treasure.”

So Ms. Chen’s audiences generally see a mélange of dances: some modern, some traditional and some hybrids. In the performances at the arts center, for example, the company will wear traditional Chinese costumes and perform the familiar ribbon and lion dances to music played on Chinese instruments. But at some point during the 100-minute program the dancers will change into less vibrant costumes for “Earth,” a modern collaboration between Ms. Chen and Gerald Chenoweth, a composer and

composition professor at the Mason Gross School for the Arts at Rutgers University.

“Earth” is part of a five-piece cycle Ms. Chen began working on three years ago. (She has already explored water, for which Mr. Chenoweth also composed music, and fire; next she plans to tackle metal and wood.)

“Earth” has special significance this year, she said, alluding to the Chinese calendar. “This is the Year of the Tiger, and tigers are a very strong, earthy animal.”

Mr. Chenoweth, of Princeton, created the music for “Earth” on his computer, a process that he said afforded certain advantages. “Nai-Ni’s choreography will expand in certain areas or contract in others — she’ll say, ‘I need 45 seconds here’ — and the editing is very easy,” he said.

The music, which will be played from a CD for the Newark shows but may later be expanded to include a live percussionist, is “almost entirely percussion, a lot of gongs and cymbals,” said Mr. Chenoweth, 66. “It doesn’t sound like traditional Chinese music, though I’ve used some of the instruments.”

In the group’s recent rehearsal at the Harlem School of the Arts, eight of the troupe’s 10 members practiced a traditional Chinese folk dance. Four women whirled sequined scarlet scarves and bright pink silk fans while their male counterparts leapt athletically around and between them.

“They need the practice for this one,” Ms. Chen explained, as recorded music played and a coach shouted cues. “A lot of them didn’t major in traditional dance in college.”

Neither did Ms. Chen. She started dancing as a 4-year-old in Taiwan, and later trained there in ballet and folk dance before attending a performance arts school whose curriculum included modern dance, jazz and Chinese martial arts. While enrolled there, she joined the Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan, spending three years with the company. In 1982, she enrolled at New York University.

“After I came to the States I was more focused on curating dance,” she said. “My major was not just performance. It was education and choreography.”

Ms. Chen said that after N.Y.U. she thought, “I love to perform, but would that satisfy me as an artist, just doing the work of Western culture?”

Eventually she concluded that “my thirst for expressing myself, both East and West, could only happen through creating my own company.”

Four of Ms. Chen’s dancers are based near her home in Fort Lee, where she lives with her

husband, Andy Chiang, the company’s executive director, and their daughter, Sylvia, 14. The rest live mainly in New York, and their backgrounds are varied. “One is from China, one is from Taiwan, one is from South Korea, one is from upstate New York,” Ms. Chen said.

What they share is respect for the many forms of expression through movement.

“This is my first season, and I knew nothing about Chinese before I started,” said Nijawwon Matthews, 23, of Fort Lee, who is black. “I’ve danced with a lot of companies, but this was a brand-new experience for me.

“One thing I’ve learned is that Chinese dance comes from a let-go place,” he said during a break in rehearsal. “You have to be incredibly detailed and athletic, but it also takes you to a place in your imagination. It’s made me humble. I’ve learned to be humble.”

The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company will perform at the Victoria Theater in the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, 1 Center Street, Newark, on Feb. 13 and 14 at 2 p.m. [njpac.org](http://njpac.org) or (888) 466-5722.



## Dance Review: Nai-Ni Chen's Company Rides Magnificently on Cloud Nine at Baruch PAC



Celebrating twenty years of Chinese traditional and contemporary dance magic, Nai-Ni Chen's company enchants and amazes this past Saturday at the Baruch Performing Arts Center. A former member of Cloud Gate and a native of Taiwan, Chen has the stunning ability to fuse her Chinese heritage with her experience as an American immigrant, a fusion that creates her unique voice in dance. Nai-Ni Chen's diligently composed art is vividly alive in her dancers' bodies. The two repertory works, *Calligraphy II* (1995) and *Bamboo Prayer* (1998), mesh well with the three premiers of *Crosscurrent*, *Q (Quest)* and the breathtaking *Mirage*. The dancers, who perform at forty venues a year, have crystal clear movement and are perfectly in tune with Nai-Ni's vision.

Her movement style is not only deeply visceral, but also possesses a rare combination of impressive dancer physicality, choreographic vision and universal chi (energy). The backbone of Nai-Ni's company is her impeccable artistry and storytelling genius. Her pieces softly grab you as they elevate Chinese culture and illustrate the beauty of the modern dance vernacular. This lucky audience continues to experience the ingenious art from start to finish as the talented company executes her mastery.

In *Calligraphy II* (1995), the stage is draped in black muslin strips with white Chinese calligraphy. The piece has been reworked several times according to sources, and the evolution has fruited fine results. The work opens with a single dancer tracing a choreographic sequence that is reminiscent of tai-chi. More dancers appear, and the same strength is seen in their bodies as they define space with clear intentions. The work builds slowly, as if teaching the audience the patience that is required to practice calligraphy. Eventually, one settles in and takes in the energy or "chi", which is evident in all the movements.

Nai-Ni appears on stage in this piece with long silk sleeves and performs a striking solo. She is a captivatingly beautiful to watch as she puts her stunning technique on display. Her performance breathes life into the Asian dance styles while showing her love of dancing them.

The ribbon dance is the highlight of *Calligraphy II* as color after color cuts through the space, flying through air and encircling the dancers' bodies. Ribbon dancers say, "to watch the end of the

ribbon, to see the clarity of the performer." There are no weak strokes on stage in Nai-Ni' Chen's company.

*Bamboo Prayer* (1998) is a seminal work about the resilience of women and the nobility of bamboo, each symbolic of the other. The long twelve foot poles stand erect in the beginning as the dancers just makes them quiver. Each section builds and is more beautiful than the last as the poles divide the space and compliment the bodies of the women. Each pole is bent, beaten and lain on top of the other. The dance highlights the versatility of bamboo and the subtle power of the female frame. If women are like the bamboo as Nai-Ni describes through movement, then more power to us!

Another standout work is the premiere of *Q for "Quest"*. Singling out one dancer is difficult as all the company members are worth the ticket. However, Noibis Licea from Cuba takes the audience to another level when he starts his solo. Blessed with full bodied flexibility and amazing focus, he captivates with every movement. The work expresses primal angst as he beats his bare chest. His lines are beautiful, especially in the movements that pitch sideways before flawlessly returning to center. It is unclear why, with a piece entitled 'quest', Nai-Ni keeps the dancer confined to such a small space. Yet, Noibis breaks through the limited space with his moments of intense passion before resolving the piece on a quieter note as he walks slowly in a circle around himself.

Chen's latest work, *Mirage*, takes a journey on the Silk Road through the eastern-most part of China's Xinjiang province. The piece is reminiscent of a time spent in Egypt where the road ahead constantly blurs, and the dusty heat creates dancing visions. The trace imagery of Indian dance styles is seen as the dancers beat their heels on the floor and snake their heads from side to side. The dancers, grouped together in three rows, move hypnotically closer and then further away. They sway and then join bodies in order to become multi-limbed spirits.

Nai-Ni uses the color of parched earth to introduce visions of sweltering heat. Clever invention shows itself in the layering of costumes, which includes a transition from velvet textured browns to overlaid skirts of deeper blue and watery purple. Nai-Ni returns to the stage to dance the dance that represents the curious state of not knowing if the vision is real, but not caring. Her watery presence marks the transition into fantasy.

Each section holds something up before your eyes that is joyous and mesmerizing. The driving score from Glen Valez has so many layers, and the dancers animate each one beautifully. The trios are hypnotic as each dancer moves together, but individually catches different highlights in the music. This gives their performance an improvisational and illusive rhythmic feel. I love this!

### iDANZ Critix Corner

Official Dance Review by Sasha Deveaux  
Performance: Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company  
Choreographer: Nai-Ni Chen  
Venue: Baruch Performing Arts Center  
Performance Date: March 14, 2009  
www.iDANZOnline.com

## [Review: Graceful and dynamic, Nai-Ni Chen troupe summons potent flow of Chinese energy](#)

Monday, April 21, 2008  
BY ROBERT JOHNSON  
Star-Ledger Staff



### DANCE

Although she spends most of her time now sculpting movements that other people will perform, choreographer Nai-Ni Chen remains a wonderful dancer. Whenever she returns to the stage, in a solo like "Passage to the Silk River," Chen's grace and agility elevate performances by her Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company to a higher plane.

Chen danced "Passage to the Silk River" again, on Friday, probably so her company could recover between two athletic, full-throttle dances. Yet once again Chen's unassuming presence, draped in a white robe with long sleeves that descended below her hands, immediately brought the evening into sharper focus. The troupe, which is based in Fort Lee, appeared at the Theater of Raritan Valley Community College, in North Branch.

Curiously in this quiet, inward-looking solo the gushing images that the performer creates with the traditional "water sleeves" of her costume seem to emerge from her reverie. Despite the fleeting definition of sharply cut shapes, the dance has a restless quality and it can surprise -- for example, in a passage where Chen drops suddenly for a roll on the ground that exposes her feet. While "Passage to the Silk River" seems to hold opposing tendencies in balance, Chen's gentle expression lends the work poetry. She seems as spontaneous and free as a cloud passing overhead.

The group numbers on this satisfying program of (mostly) contemporary dance evinced a broad, dynamic range, from the delicacy of "Raindrops," where hands extended to catch the spattering rain or mimicked the torrent's course along the ground, to the impassioned duel between Selena Chau and Noibis Licea that comes at the center of "The Way of Five -- Fire." Yet in all these pieces, the transfer of energy seems to complete a cycle.

Rooted in traditional Chinese philosophy, Chen's work has a holistic quality that relates to the guided flow of "chi" energy through the body and across the stage. In "Raindrops," the dancers relay a movement impulse across space without touching, as if exchanging an air kiss. In "Unfolding," the dancers' wrists connect as if to pass an electric current. The performers draw deep breaths and empty their lungs, yet their motion remains calm, effortless and sustained. This use of breath may remind some viewers of the way a swimmer turns his head to gulp a mouthful of air, without interrupting his body's efficient slice through the water.

Chen sometimes uses simple props, as well as bodies, to define the stage space. Qiao Zeng was a fisherman punting upstream in "The River of Dreams," where his pole became a line dividing up and downstage areas,

back and front. The pole also connects Zeng to the river spirit (Lindsey Parker) who is his constant companion; and it supports their intermingling.

In contrast, the batons that guest artist Lu Wen-Long deployed in his solo "The Legend of the Double Spear Warrior," were for virtuosic effect, making this spectacularly costumed but slightly off-balance excerpt from Kunque Opera resemble a kind of halftime show.

With its masked folkloric characters and towering giantess, the concluding "Festival" offered more than just a reduced version of the beloved Chinese New Year celebration that is a highlight of the New Jersey Performing Arts Center's dance season. Yet here, too, intensely hued ribbons dazzled as the dancers tossed the ribbons in vivid streams, and wrapped themselves in whorls of bright fabric.

Robert Johnson may be reached at [rjohnson@starledger.com](mailto:rjohnson@starledger.com).

# TIMES UNION Albany, NY

NAI-NI CHEN DANCE COMPANY,  
University at Albany's Performing Arts  
Center, 11/03/2007  
November 3, 2007 at 11:08 pm by Casey  
Seiler

## **Abstraction suits dance beauty of Nai-Ni Chen**

By TRESKA WEINSTEIN

Special to the Times Union

ALBANY - Like certain kinds of visual art or music, *Dragons on the Wall* (Tianji), performed by the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company Saturday evening at the



University at Albany's Performing Arts Center, demands a shift in the way we perceive.

Contemporary in nature yet steeped in an Eastern sensibility, the 70-minute piece asks us to put aside our Western notions of structure, timing and narrative, and surrender to a form of dance that is less entertainment than meditation in motion.

The New York City-based company (which presented a program of traditional Chinese dances at the Performing Arts Center Friday evening) comprises eight striking and diverse dancers, who embody the equally varied movement with a dramatic intensity that never lets up.

Chen's choreography for the piece, deeply influenced by the art of calligraphy and by martial arts, is an unpredictable progression of curving shapes.

The dancers trace formations on the floor, in the air, and under and over each others bodies, sometimes with frenetic energy leaping, diving and sliding sometimes in luxurious slow motion. In one section, they seem to be blown across the stage, rolling and twirling; in another, they huddle together, taking tiny steps; in another, they become birdlike creatures in a forest of hanging tapestries.

Joan La Barbara's sound score is a collage of percussion, poetry by Bei Dao spoken in both English and Chinese, whispering, droning and the rare melodic phrase; all this is layered at times with the voices of the dancers on stage, grunting, gasping, exclaiming wordlessly and at one point speaking simultaneously in a medley of languages.

The props and set design, including banners and backdrops inked with columns of calligraphy, paper lanterns, and long cloth ribbons waving like water, create an environment that is at once stark and graceful. Sheets of white paper fall like snow or leaves, and are later gathered and dropped over a reclining couple like a blessing. In one particularly captivating image, the dancers are enveloped by a vast piece of fabric, on which Chinese characters are projected in light. As they move beneath the rippling cloth, the symbols shimmer and shape-shift.

In the final section, the dancers dip their hands, arms, legs and even hair in ink and inscribe their expressions across a giant canvas, merging the art of making marks on paper with the art of moving on stage. The final product is suprisingly beautiful, an abstraction to which we can ascribe no particular meaning but that is nevertheless dripping with powerful emotion, wet and raw with new life.

Tresca Weinstein, a local freelance writer, is a regular contributor to the Times Union.

NAI-NI CHEN DANCE COMPANY

Where: University at Albany's Performing Arts Center, 1400 Washington Ave., Albany

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Length: 75 minutes, no intermission

Program: Dragons on the Wall (Tianji)

# The New York Times

Arts

May 9, 2005, Monday, Late Edition-Final, Section E, Column 3, Page 7

## DANCE REVIEW; Grand Gestures of Rise and Fall

By Jennifer Dunning

It is no surprise to learn that Nai-Ni Chen performed with the Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan early in her career. The pageantry and heroic movement in two pieces Ms. Chen presented Saturday night at the Gerald W. Lynch Theater at John Jay College are familiar attributes of that modern-dance company's repertory, as is the Expressionist tinge of Ms. Chen's work. But a little more sense of narrative or context -- and concision -- would have been welcome.

Ms. Chen's new "Landscape Over Zero," the first dance in a trilogy to be called "American Landscape," takes its title from a poem by Bei Dao and refers to the Chinese concept of zero as a representation of temperature and longitude. Zero, Ms. Chen writes in eloquent program notes, suggests the possibility of rebirth, like the life force beneath the snow that waits for spring.

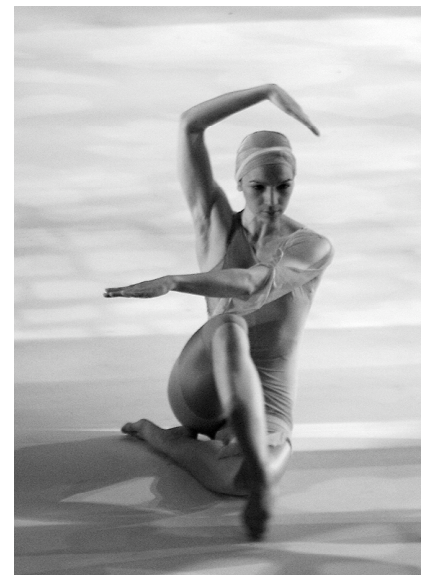
The dance's title may suggest 9/11 to New Yorkers, and there is another echo in a brief duet in which a clinging man and a woman rise and fall. But for the most part Ms. Chen sends her 13 white-clad dancers across the stage in processions that shift in size and tone. The choreographer's early training in Chinese traditional dance is evident in the flowing swathes of white material in Myung



Hee Cho's set and Ilona Somogyi's costumes, manipulated by the dancers and made luminous by Dan Meeker's lighting. Set to a vocal and instrumental score by Joan La Barbara that was performed live by the Ne(x)tworks Ensemble, the dance, like the music, had the effect of slow-moving ice and a primordial chill.

Ms. Chen's 2003 "Unbroken Thread," set to a juicily tumultuous score by Jason Kao Hwang, revolves around a formidable hanging rope sculpture by Ms. Cho. It is as complex a tangle as life itself. Dancers tumble from within it and go on to enact fraught suggestions of passing scenarios. Ms. Chen's dancers are personable, terrific

movers and stand out more clearly here, particularly Noibis Licea, Yoon Jeong Jin, Vernon Gooden and Michele Chung, as well as Brandon Tyler Theresa Miller in a stunning Adam-and-Eveish duet.





**Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company  
Gerald Lynch Theater at John Jay College  
New and Traditional  
Styles Meld in Poetic  
Choreography**



There's an ambitious sweep, a large vision, to Nai-Ni Chen's stagecraft. That tradition continues with *Landscape Over Zero*-its title taken from the final words of a Bei Dao poem. Dan Meeker's first dim, then cold, blue-drenched lighting locates us in a forbidding emotional clime. Vocal and orchestral music by Joan La Barbara and her Ne(x)tworks Ensemble evokes wind scouring a desolate land, the creaking of ice, and the awakening and eventually indomitable flow of Chen's 13 dancers. The performers emerge from and engage with Myung Hee Cho's set-filmy fabric serving as curtain, camouflage, shroud, caul, stylized clouds, and festive streamers swirling in a joyous ribbon dance of the return of life. Unfortunately, fabric can't be choreographed to avoid the image of a length of it attached like toilet paper to a dancer's foot. But where Chen and company sculpt fabric and stage space effectively, they create three-dimensional poetry.

-Eva Yaa Asantewaa