

BDA' S BALLET CREATIVE WORKSHOP ON A MISSION TO TURN TOP PROFESSIONALS

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Why are there is no top ballet choreographers in China?

People ask these questions all the time: “Why are there is no top ballet choreographers in China?”, “When can China have its own ballet?”--Tthere are, however, no answers to these questions yet, but they served as occasions opportunities for self-reflection, in which we asked ourselves: lis the rigidity of dancing techniques the sole aim in the teaching of ballet? What do are we trying to achieve:, an uninspiring training factory that produces identical products, or wings of courage that could will take students far in their pursuit of a dancing career? We have been in search of an answers.

Founding Principles

Ballet dances come in many

formats in an age of diversity where the arts straddling straddle different areas. One common issue facing ballet professionals is how to make it more classical and fashionable. Ballet companies have put enormous emphasis on the versatility of performers in recent years. Workshops, as a means to achieve versatility, are very common outside China. They consist of an array of activities with a varying duration of one day, one week, or even longer. The purpose is to break down the processes of training and rearrange them into different programs --- creative classes, lectures, master classes, free discussions --- with elements of different-styled stage design, music, dances and performance types. This helps dancers obtain different skills and styles, opening their career for to more possibilities.

The National Ballet of China is was among the first to start an annual Creative Ballet Workshop, since the yearin 2010. The Workshop aims to develop the potential of ballet dancers and train a new generation of directors. It has now been widely recognized as a successful program with recorded achievements.

The Department of Ballet at Beijing Dance Academy (BDA) started the Creative Ballet Workshop in 2011 and it is now in its eighth year. After considering approaches being applied to dance workshops at home and abroad, we chose a program structure that puts theory into practice, encouraging originals originality and creativity. We invited the world's top choreographers to produce a variety of dance works, while requiring students to become



> *Into Silence*, the 4th season of ballet Creative Workshop in 2015, choreographed by Duncan Ronis





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involved in the whole production process from music selection, stage design, costumes and, rehearsals, to side events like publicity.

Expanding Horizon

To train China's next generation of ballet professionals, it is imperative for them to have an in-depth understanding of the classical dance while making progress in this profession. We encourage them to think outside of the box and be innovative. We set a high standard for students, present an overview of the art landscape, and avoid self-imposed limitations, as a Chinese saying goes, "It's in vain to speak of ice with a summer bug, nor sea with a frog underneath a well".

That's why the Creative Ballet Workshop nurtures creativity and develop innovative thinking, principles that the Workshop has truthfully followed. We invite world-class choreographers and their original works to the Department of Ballet, bringing them closer to pupils who want to observe how these artists work on their projects. For example, we invited the much celebrated choreographer Jorma Elo with his two different-styled ballet dances -- *Over Glow* and *One/End/One*, both representing new and inspirational experiences for pupils who found much to learn in the group dance structure and choreography, in particular that of the duet dance. They have drawn on not only techniques and performing

skills, but also an understanding of the thoughts and ideas behind the creativity and production of the dances. I believe exposures like these will help lay the foundation of their future success.

Growing Creativity

The Creative Ballet Workshop champions creativity and development of comprehensive skills. The Workshop provides students with opportunities to perform on stage and to write their own works. A total of 35 programs including 9 nine from abroad and 26 originals have been played on stage since the Workshop opened. What was special about these originals was they were not the results of a

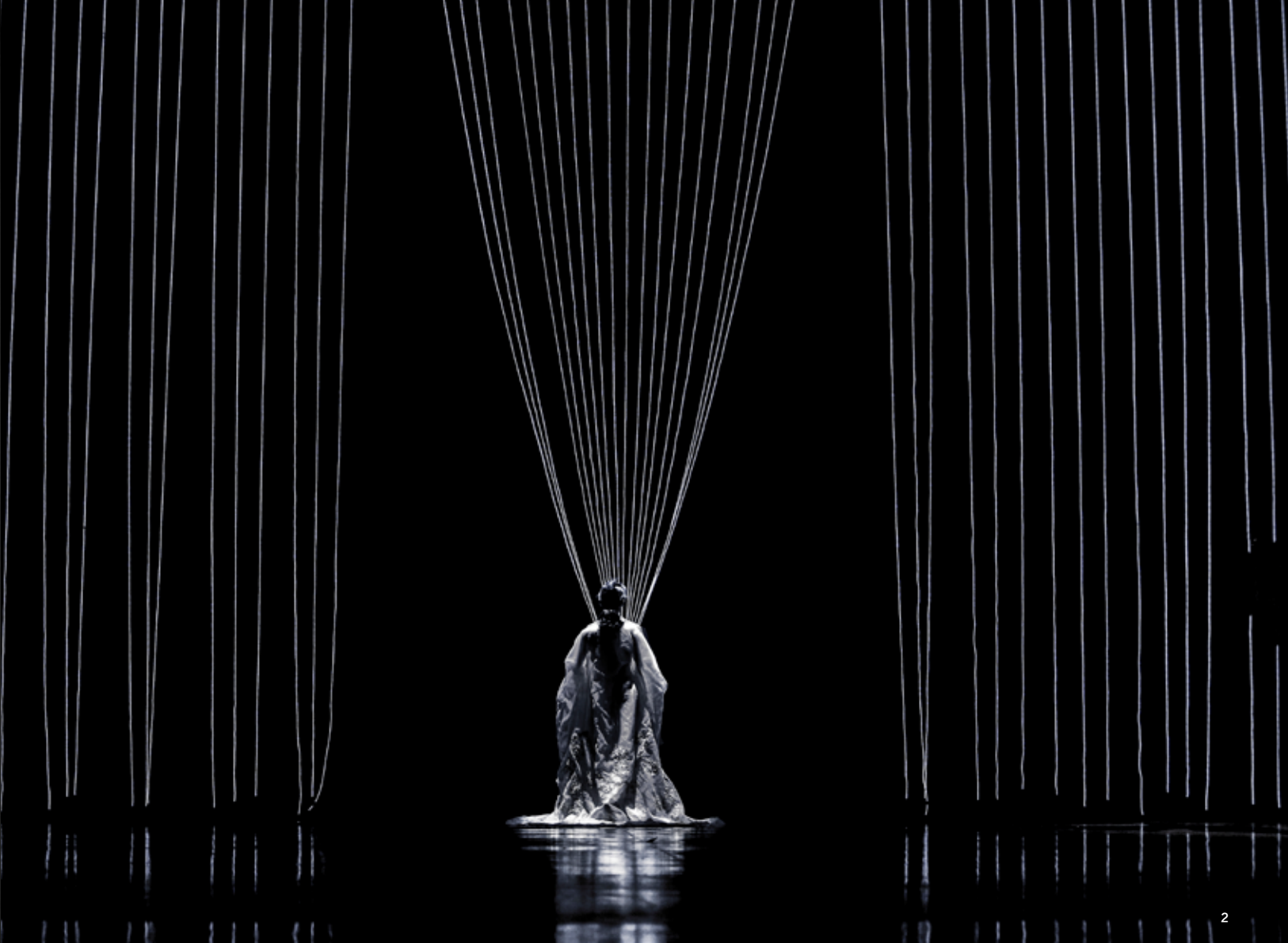
1 > *Yan Shi*, the 3rd season of ballet Creative Workshop in 2014, choreographed by Wang Sizheng
2 > *Brilliant (Liu Guang Yi Cai)*, the 5th season of ballet Creative Workshop in 2016, choreographed by Yuma Ero



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traditional teaching-learning lecture carried out by school departments at schools. Students had to be responsible for everything from stage design, music, logistics and, costumes, to schedules, promotion and moderators. For them it was an eye-opening experience that encouraged their use of imagination and creativity. The Workshop has become an adventure into in untapped potentials.

In fact, the Workshops have seen students making great progress in many aspects: --the

control of body, technique skills, expression of emotions, transition of passages, and understanding of music. --aTs they are therefore constantly faced with new challenges in the training process, especially in the original projects, but they are undaunted and continue their exploration.

Art education has a tendency of to overemphasizing overemphasize techniques while ignoring weak stage performing, which our workshop tries to avoid. We understand artistic sensitivities

is are of great value to creatives and that's why we encourage both the learning of techniques as well as developing ideas, intuition and innovation. Interaction with great artists is an effective way of turning out good performers, who will present better stage expression and understanding of roles. It is fair to say the way Workshop works offers excellent training for ballet dancers in China.

Straddling Different Styles

Our workshop introduced excellent

1-2> *Yan Shi*, the 3rd season of ballet Creative Workshop in 2014, choreographed by Wang Sizheng

ballet shows which were created by famous artists and were unique in styles. The Workshop is not just a learning center, but also a journey of aesthetic exposure to different styles of ballet dances from ethnic minority dances and, modern dances to mixtures of styles.

Nine ballet dances we brought into the Workshop were of a variety of distinctive styles, that is giving a good exposure and helping set a higher standard for pupils in their future explorations., ranging The styles ranged from expressionism,

an interpretation of classical music from a modern angle, and a Chinese-styled dance, to a combination of Western dance techniques with East Asian aesthetics.

Exploring Chinese-styled Ballet Dances

The Creative Ballet Workshop contributes to exploring the Chinese-styled ballet dance by bringing together different schools of ballet dances and through interaction with world-renowned ballet artists. As a highly-

recognized performing art, ballet dances could also help the world better understand China.

The Workshop enables students to draw inspiration from the world's top ballet artists, but also lays a solid foundation for their own creativity.

We have also seen a number of outstanding Chinese-styled ballets in the Workshop's 26 original projects including *Ode to Yellow River*, *Yanshi*, *Practice #17*, which are a part of an effort to integrate the classical dance genre with traditional

Chinese elements to further develop a Chinese-styled ballet.

Linking Dots

A great ballet dancer is armed with a high level of comprehensive skills in addition to the strict training all dancers receive to acquire a body memory that can only be attained by a huge amount of intensive and repetitive practice. In an effort to turn out highly-skilled dancers, the Creative Ballet Workshop encourages students to take part in every

step of the production process from choreography, music and, costumes to stage design. that This assists them to understand ballet from different perspectives other than the ones they had learned from academic studies. This is also part of the Workshop's evolving teaching plan to better adapt itself to the students' needs. In the Workshop students tend to do more thinking. Those practicing technical skills would consider a future performance scenario, while when doing performing originals students explore the possibility of Chinese elements in ballet dances with a better understanding of

their body and how to control it. For students, the Workshop is a rare opportunity for their development as ballet dancers, where academic know-hows are beingis put into practice with the guidance of top ballet practitioners ready to offer advice on things concerningall aspects of a ballet career. It is also a place students can mingle with those from different school years.

We have a public performance every year at the end of each workshop, which is like a final exam for the faculties and students

in the Department of Ballet. Not an easy task, but luckily we all have grown in the process.

The Creative Ballet Workshop is a part of the teaching plan at BDA in a its mission to train professional ballet dancers. In another effort to train excellent ballet performers, the Department of Ballet at Beijing Dance Academy started a joint program --- 2+2 Ballet Dance training -- -- with the National Ballet of China in the year 2002, in which students spend two years at school and another two at the National Ballet of China. The joint program generated excellent



1-2 > *Out of Bounds (Jie Wai)*, the 4th season of ballet Creative Workshop in 2014, choreographed by Duncan Ronis
3 > *Brilliant (Liu Guang Yi Cai)*, the 5th season of ballet Creative Workshop in 2016, choreographed by Yuma Ero

results. We have also hosted an annual English Speech Contest since 2013 in an effort to help students dealing with language barriers when communicating with the foreign ballet expertiseexperts. Another problem we encountered is that some students lack the strength in performingto perform contemporary ballet dances, to whichso we set up a strength training camp. The cooperation between the Department of Ballet and National Ballet of China is going well and the two sides partners have opened a new training course. As regardWith respect to performances in

national diplomatic and culturale exchange events, we have always attached great importance to them and make them part of the regular field training.

Developing Chinese Ballet

Ballet has a long tradition of incorporating local cultural elements in many countries, which in turn greatly enriched the classical performing arts. Russia is a case in point. In the same way, China is ready to produce its own national ballet dance to tell stories about Chinese culture, utilizing the long cultural heritage

of 56 ethnic groups with a variety of performing arts ranging from operas, martial arts, acrobatics and the likes. These are also the elements making that make the ballet dances more diverse and expressive in narratives as well as body languages. Chinese-styled ballet dances will be seen on the world stage, just like the European-originated game of table tennis has become a national sport in China.

The world's top ballet dancers at the Workshop marveled at the Chinese traditional folk dances every time they happened to see a show or rehearsal, of which they

made good use by borrowing the traditional elements into for their own choreography. This has brought quite a few surprises when we expected were expecting to see a classical ballet dance, but what we got is was one with Chinese style. The Creative Ballet Workshop is on its way to becominge a quitean important platform for Chinese-styled ballet dances such as these.

The Workshop is also key to the training of faculties. I'm looking forward to meeting with more excellent ballet experts in the future.