



Using calligraphy as an inspiration for dance is not a new idea. When we met in Taipei earlier this year, Lin said he had wanted to use it ever since the 1970s when friends persuaded him to go and look at the ancient calligraphy in the city's National Palace Museum. But he wanted to do more than purely use it to convey meaning, make movement or as decor. He wanted to take the aesthetics and the essence of the art, to get to its heart and soul.

Drawing parallels between calligraphy and dance, Lin said, "Writers always say a good piece of calligraphy is just like flying dragon and dancing phoenix." He explained that in calligraphy the empty space is at least as important as that occupied by the ink, just as in dance stillness is not only as important as movement but can be far subtler. Both also require the artist to warm-up, be soft and supple, have rhythm and breathe correctly. He said, "A good calligrapher leaves his energy on the rice paper; a good dancer leaves it in the space," and explained how the famous calligrapher Wang Xi-zhi's teacher didn't teach him to write but instead took him to observe nature. The teacher used many metaphors, saying for example that vertical lines should have the weight and power of a rock dropping from a summit, while others should sometimes be as "delicate as the wings of cicada." The calligraphy books are really "all about movement and how you are going to do it from your *dan tien*, [Taiwanese for upper torso]" said Lin. So, while the *Cursive* trilogy is not a demonstration of calligraphy, they do share the same aesthetic.

Wild Cursive is the final part of the trilogy. Although each part stands alone, it is the climax of a five-year journey that ended in 2005 and could not have happened without what went before. In

The dance of *ink* on white paper

By David Mead

When Lin Hwai-min founded Cloud Gate Dance Theatre in 1973, no one, least of all Lin himself, expected it to become the foremost modern dance company in Asia, noted for its unique synthesis of Western modern dance with Taiwanese movement and themes, all with a contemporary perspective. This month, Cloud Gate returns to London's Sadler's Wells to dance *Wild Cursive*, the final part of the Cursive trilogy, three works based on Chinese calligraphy, which Lin describes as the "root of Chinese art"

Cursive, Lin asked the dancers to very much follow the shapes and lines of the characters. In *Cursive II*, Lin himself became the painter and the dancers' bodies pieces of calligraphy. *Wild Cursive* is based on wild calligraphy (where the characters are freed from set form) and on nature and spontaneity. Lin said, "When we think of calligraphy, we think of nature's calligraphy, of water tracings on walls where rainwater leaves its mark." Similarly in the dance, all the previous structure vanishes and the movement appears more like pure improvisation. Lin said that calligraphy, like dance and martial arts, has certain rules that must always be followed or parts of the body that you must always be aware of. "But in wild calligraphy you just break the rules and let it go."

The journey to *Cursive* began in the mid-1990s when Lin introduced meditation and *tai chi dao yin*, which emphasises deep and constantly spiralling movements accompanied by continuous and unhurried breathing, into the dancers' daily training. Then, throughout the making of the trilogy he arranged weekly calligraphy classes in the studio to help the dancers understand the subject and its links with

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calligraphy that appeared as the dance unfolded in front of them. In *Cursive II* these were replaced by similarly huge projections of fine cracks on the surface of Sung dynasty porcelain. But both were very literal and for *Wild Cursive* Lin wanted to continue the idea of spontaneity and to set the ink free. He knew that it could travel quite fast through good quality rice paper, so asked the same factory that makes paper to repair damaged calligraphies in the National Palace Museum collection to experiment, design and produce what he wanted.

The resulting huge rice paper banners are raised and lowered as the performance progresses. A visit backstage reveals a series of tubes that feed different solutions of ink and water to the top of each one. Lin explained that, while they can decide whether a picture should be dark or pale, the flow of the ink and thus the speed at which it travels, they can do nothing about the pattern itself. "The ink has its own breath, speed and energy, just like the dancers moving in front of it," he said. The banners can of course only be used once.

dance. What was important was not that they learned how to produce a good piece of art, but how much energy you use, what you see in it and how it echoes the circularity in *tai chi dao yin*.

Lin said that before he starts working with the dancers

he invariably has a clear vision of the movement style, the general direction of the work will take, and, importantly, the set. He never plans movement in detail. Instead he almost always begins with dancer improvisation, preferring to respond to what he sees. For *Wild Cursive* the dancers improvised for five to six weeks while he mostly just sat and watched, not caring what they did as long as it was done with power and from the inside. "Simply making shapes is forbidden," he joked. He sees his role as being to "sort out and edit the material, cutting things, making them faster or slower until it is more distorted. Then I might put two together as a duet or bring in more movement." He said, "It really is an evolution."

Five weeks of improvisation was nothing compared to the ten months it took Lin to get the set he wanted. For *Cursive* he used huge projections of

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They used to be given away as gifts and even sold on eBay, one for £15,000. Today they are recognised as art works in their own right. The company has its own collection while others are sold privately or used as fundraising gifts for people who donate substantial sums to the company.

Since *Wild Cursive* Lin has moved on again, including creating a solo for Sylvie Guillem in Akram Khan's *Sacred Monsters*. It was an experience he clearly enjoyed. It seems as if he saw something of himself and his own dancers in her. Although she struggled at times, Guillem refused to compromise on the movement, Lin describing her as a "warrior, an incredible animal, so determined, intelligent and self-demanding". Like all choreography, he said the solo was about

Above, Lee Ching-chun; top right, Huang Pei-Hua in *Wild Cursive*. All photographs by Lin Ching-yang.

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conquering things, finding values and paths, adding that sometimes, as with calligraphy and *Cursive*, it takes a long time and there are moments when you don't know where you are. "You have to find your way."

Later in 2006 he took Cloud Gate on another journey with *Wind Shadow*, a collaboration with the renowned visual artist Cai Guo-Qiang. He intended the work, mostly in black and white and with a strong message about the state of the world today, to be very contemporary and very modern with no Chinese connotations, but said, "when you look at it, I think it is calligraphy. How the space is being used, and the black and white especially, suggests that kind of association. The aesthetic is still there. It's in the blood. It can't be escaped". So is he ever worried that audiences will not move with him? No. "The truth is we are behind them. We do something and think it is new, but they are always ready for it." ■

Cloud Gate Dance Theatre at Taiwan's will be performing *Wild Cursive* at Sadler's Wells from June 19-22. See Calendar for booking details. Also look out for our July issue which will feature an article on the Cloud Gate School.

You can also purchase a copy of *Cursive II* on DVD from the Dancing Times Book and DVD service priced £24.99 plus p&p. See page 97 for details on how to order, or call 020 7250 3006 for a free catalogue.

