

# WHEN THE LEGENDARY TALE MEETS CLASSICAL SPIRIT

*THE  
BUTTERFLY LOVERS*

Article / Li Qiao, Li Tianyi

Pictures / Chinese Classic Dance Department,

Beijing Dance Academy & Gao Tian,  
Zhao Zhihong

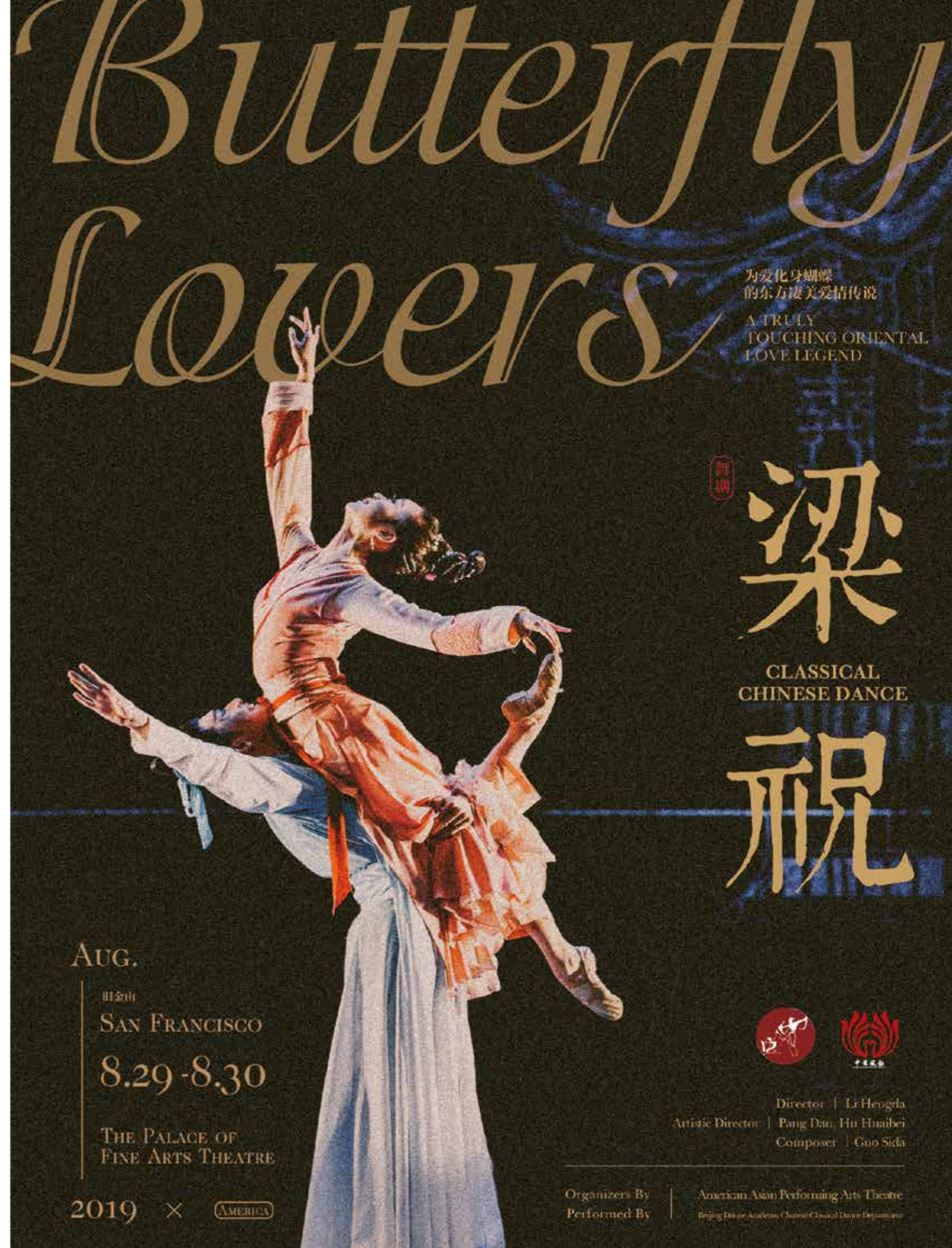
In 2019, the Department of Chinese classical dance of Beijing Dance Academy went to Las Vegas, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Seattle to participate in the "Trans Pacific China Art Festival" and the "Third Huaxing Art Festival" to perform *The Butterfly Lovers*, which is a Chinese classical dance drama. (the poster of *The Butterfly Lovers*) *The Butterfly Lovers* is a beautiful but sad legendary story, telling us that the lovers would rather die for love, and they fight for the purity of love in the price of their life. It is said that the pair of butterflies are still hovering in the world.

It is the brief introduction of the dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers*. But we'd rather call it a summary or a comment than a brief introduction. Because it tells the feelings of people nowadays who read the story. It is in fact the perspectives that the whole dance drama wants to express. It is telling the story by using the modern structure and the special expression of dance. The story is originated from Chinese dynasty of "Xijin" with a history of 1800 years. There are many versions. At the start of introduction of art forms of drama and opera, people never stop trying to make it more artistic. We can see that the story is told in all kinds of arts. As for the dance drama, Shanghai Ballet and Liaoning Ballet all made dance dramas in the theme of the love story *The Butterfly Lovers*.

### Simplifying the plot in order to leave more space for dance

This year, a new edited dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* made by School of Classic Dance of Beijing Dance Academy will be shown to the audience. It is the school's duty and mission of making the dance drama with the quality and taste of Chinese classics. The story is in Zhu's , perspectives focusing on her inner feelings, enhancing the mood of the figures and creating the atmosphere of the drama. The dance drama is using atmosphere as a way of performance instead of using the traditional way of storytelling. This method is more like a poem rather than a novel in literature art.

From the sensory aspect, there are two words to describe the dance drama, complete and neat. It is very impressive that the four chapters, "encounter", "leaving", "reunion" and "eternity" are combined together from the beginning to the end. The prelude applying the common memory



1 > The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers*  
- Act One - *Moon Shadow*. Zhu Yingtai is  
going to live in the same room with Liang  
Shanbo. Zhu is tangled with a trace of  
shyness

2 > The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers*  
- Ending - *Turn into Butterflies*

device in dance dramas, is not using the perspective of a third party, but is using the figure Zhu's thoughts at the moment when she sits in the bridal. The moment she wears the bride's dress, her thoughts is full of the missing of Liang. This contrast between reality and imagination easily brings the audience into the love story.

In the next four chapters, rather than be limited by the script, the dance drama uses some creative imagination with the development of the plots surrounding Liang and Zhu's love. For instance, the drama does not mention a key figure "Ma Wencai". He is more like a token. When the relationship of the two persons goes into difficult time. People will associate with this figure because everybody is so familiar with this story. That is also the reason why the creators simplify the storytelling. They use much less explanation of the plots in order to leave more space for the dance.

There are impressive moments of dance in every chapter. For example, the dance "moonlight" in the first chapter, is using the woman's group dance to reflect Zhu's inner world. When the night comes, holding the pillow, Zhu is worried. Because she is going to stay in a same room with a boy she loves. She is anxious and shy at the same time. The fairies in the moonlight is symbolizing her female entity talking to her male camouflage. The group dance "autumn leaves" in the second chapter, is showing the anxiousness when the two are about to leave each other. It is very poetic to use the rolled up autumn leaves to reflect the plot "eighteenth

seeing off" in the script. The dance "bride dress" is full of the feeling of confinement. A large piece of red silk almost covers the whole stage like a sky net capturing Zhu inside. She is constantly fighting and struggling against it but in vain. This is a dance with lots of formalities, but there is also a lot of content inside. It precisely and completely shows the cruelty of the reality and struggle of the figure's inner world.

**It is a continuation of the spirit of Chinese traditional culture to create surrounding the artistic concept. It is an attempt to climb on the shoulder of the giants.**

All these dance moments are mostly in the form of pure dance rather than using the method of silent drama. It is really performed by dances rather than using the performing techniques. The creators also express their thoughts that the dance drama is to emphasize the inner world of the figures and the artistic concepts of the story. Therefore, the structure and the form of performance of this drama are not conventional but modern. The famous director Zhang Jigang gives a positive feedback after watching the dance drama. He says that it is a classic dance. This is a great positive comment to all the creators. But I have a question in my mind. What is his basis of his comments? Is this judgement standard a convincing and representative one?

As we know, the Chinese classic dance introduced and created after the founding of PRC, is only with a history of more than 60 years old. At





> The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* - Act One - *Chanting in the Academy*.  
Students from all over the country gather here. They are full of enthusiasm and  
wantonly display their talents and passion



1-3 > The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* - Act One



the very beginning, holding the spirit of compatibility, it combines some moves from Chinese opera and Chinese martial arts. It also extracts the training method of western ballet. Until now, it is still developing and absorbing new concepts and it evolves and progresses under constant rethinking and paradoxical relations. Although called as classic dance, this kind of dance is only to pursuit the meaning of classics, rather than only refer to the traditional dance. Mr. Jiang Dong, a famous dance theorist in China, summarizes the 60 years' development of classic dance with one sentence, "growth in exploration, further exploration after growth". In a word, the development of Chinese classic dance is still in progress, so that we can create a real classic dance for our future generations. It is not only a reconstruction and renaissance of Chinese traditional dance, but also is a creativity in this new era.

With the development of Chinese economy, the aesthetics of Chinese classic dance is likely to become more diversified. For a developing and growing new subject, it means there will be a lot taken-and-abandoned. What shall we take from the traditions and what can we add and develop in the new subject? The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* reminds us that whether it can represent our pursuit of Chinese aesthetics in the classic dance.

Educationally speaking, creating Chinese classic dance is hoping our children will inherit the Chinese spirit. In the reality that the real Chinese classic dance has been long lost in history, we have to create it on the ground of Chinese traditional culture and Chinese aesthetics

> The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* - Act Two - *Autumn leaves*. The dancers turned the sadness of parting into autumn leaves. Bursts of autumn wind blew, and the autumn leaves were rolled up and put down again and again. The fallen leaves seemed to tell the sadness of parting, arousing ripples in the heart of Zhu Yingtai again and again. The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* tries to enter Zhu's inner world, personify things such as moonlight, autumn leaves and wedding clothes and externalize Zhu's inner feelings, which has real and profound meaning



1 > The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers*  
- Act Four - *Yingtai's Wedding*. In a trance,  
Zhu Yingtai felt Liang Shanbo everywhere  
2 > The dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers*  
- Act Three - *Wedding Clothes*

of thousands years' history. Our creation is found, explored and inspired from the historical materials, literary works, paintings and all the other art forms and sports that are using human physique as the carrier. From the founding of PRC, many passionate dance ancestors gave ineffaceable contribution in Chinese classic dance creation and development. The diversity in minds and methods splits the style of Chinese classic dance into many schools such as "Shen Yun" "Han Tang" "Dun Huang", "Kun Wu" and so on. No matter whichever school it is, all these schools are trying to be closer to the real history. In the longtime searching, trimming, categorizing, summarizing, imitating and detail focusing, the junction and connection of motions is created through the destructure of the logic of moves, in order to achieve the similarity in form and spirit. It is the same with the Chinese classic dance that it is drawing materials from history and literature arts, using culture as a core spirit, using thoughts and emotions and personality as a basis of development. By using those methods, it gives us sublime heroism or optimistic pursuit of life.

For this meaning, the dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* created from the story of Chinese classic love story and developed in the artistic concept, is a continuation of spirit of Chinese traditional culture. It is an attempt to climb on the shoulder of giants. It is useless to argue whether it is a classic dance or not. To create is to explore and discover, and is to be trying and trying. We'll keep the goal in mind that we will create the dance that specially belongs to our country.

*The Butterfly Lovers* has finished its tour so far in nationwide in China under the funding of National Arts Foundation. It also expands its

influence to America, gaining applause and praises. With the contribution of Chinese dance to Chinese culture confidence, we believe that the spirit of Chinese classics will continuously shine.

#### Appendix

In 2016, the School of Classic Dance of Beijing Dance Academy gave the students a better stage practice. In the effort of professor Pang Dan, the dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* was put into schedule and was very much supported by the president Guo Lei and the two chiefs from the Educational practice Center, Hu Huaibei and Ren Dongsheng. In July 2017, National Arts Foundation funded the dance drama *The Butterfly Lovers* which was at that time the first big dance drama project of Beijing Dance Academy.

This time, the School of Classic Dance invited the US-based artist Li Hengda to act as the chief director. 31 years ago, Li Hengda wrote and played a duo dance *The Butterfly Lovers* which shocked the dance field when he was then a student at Beijing Dance Academy. 31 years has passed, but the music and story of *The Butterfly Lovers* are still mesmerizing him. Now, his dream has come true that he comes back with this dance drama.

With the lead of professor Pang Dan, the young teachers from the School of Classic Dance work together acting as choreographers and take the most jobs of the dance drama. They think about it over and over again, compromise their differences. After nearly one year's work, the dance drama is finally completed and shown on the stage.

