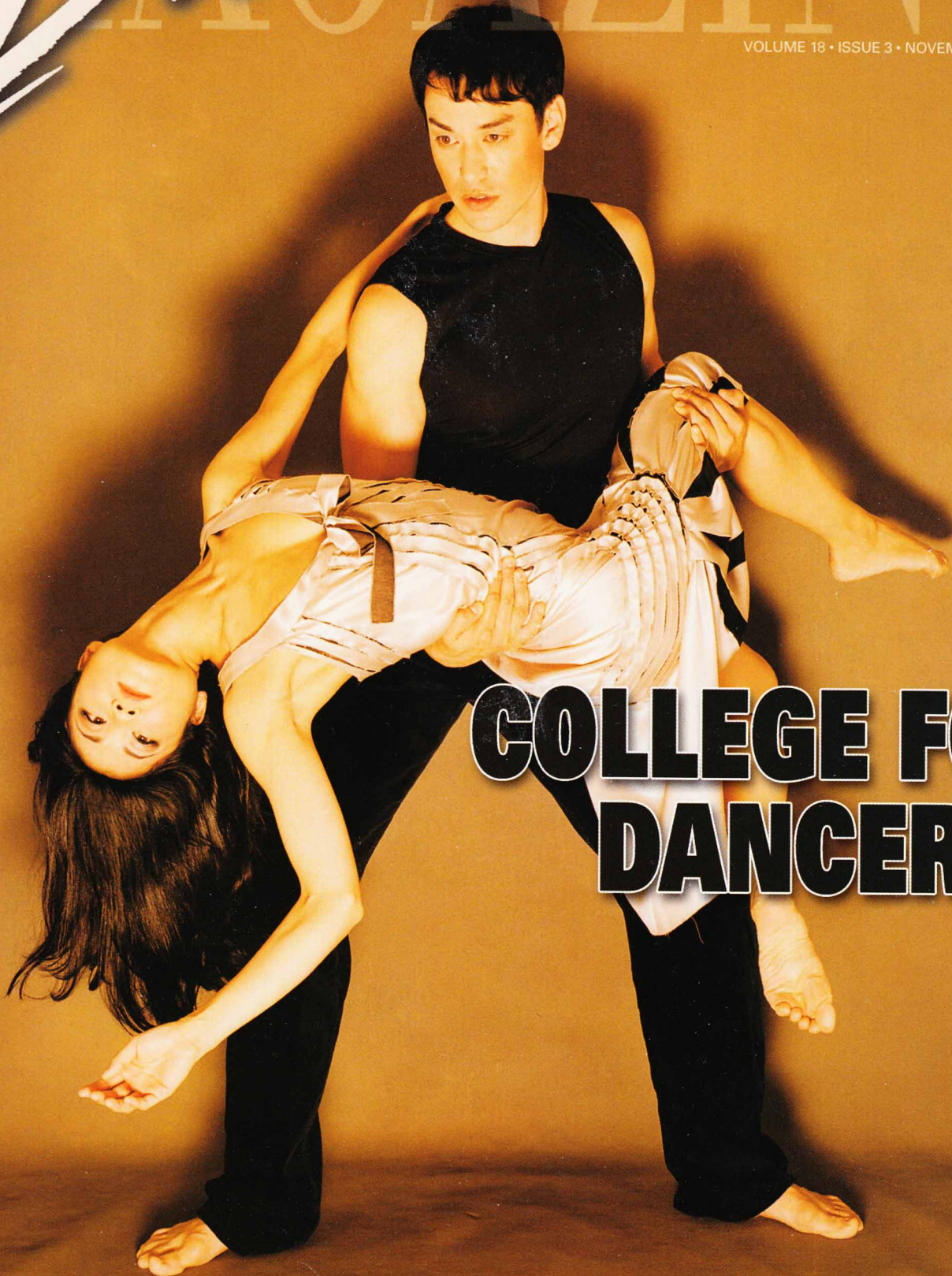


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a Phoenix Story

An American Rose in China

by Ling Tang*

Among many universal legends, the one about the phoenix bird is probably one of the most mysterious—it symbolizes power, sacrifice, resurrection; it dies for a nobler life. I have heard many phoenix stories. But Aly Rose, an American woman, a dancer, and a choreographer who has lived and worked in China during the past ten years told me a unique one when I interviewed her there in Summer 2006.

“Phoenix” is Rose’s new dance work. As the first modern dance production in Chinese history to use aerial dancing, it was performed successfully at Dashanzi International Arts Festival in May 2006 in Beijing, China. The choreography is based on traditional Chinese philosophy, which emphasizes the balance among natural elements: wood gives itself to fire, which turns to ash, which goes into the earth, which protects and later releases metal or minerals. Metal is melted down to form liquid or water, which in turn becomes rain, enabling wood to grow again.

Rose said, “The idea of ‘Phoenix’ had been in my thoughts for a long time. My life follows this philosophy: wherever I am and whatever I am doing, I always try to keep everything in my life in balance.”



Photo: Yangang Li

Aly Rose in her apartment with a traditional Miao minority women's dress from Guizhou, where she had lived for two and a half years.

Born in Boston, Rose grew up in Texas and then attended Claremont McKenna College in California. She graduated in 1996 with a B.A. in Psychology. Her first visit to China was in the summer of 1994; as a college junior she researched the peasant communities in Hubei Province. In a remote village without electricity or running water, Rose hoed, tilled, and washed the oxen in the muddy ponds with local peasants. She was deeply impressed by how pure, how protected, and how unsophisticated the people were.

Rose returned to China in 1997. She resided in the poorest province of China. Here in Guizhou she lived with Miao and Buyi minorities, as well as learned the Chinese language.

After Rose finished her two-and-a-half year language study at Guizhou University, she decided to stay in China. But what she would do was a question. Rose thought about dance—something she almost minored in in college. Rose discovered that the best place to study was Beijing Dance Academy

(BDA), which had just opened a masters program in Dance Studies and Choreography. Rose chose Choreography.

"My time at BDA was very difficult," Rose said seriously. As a foreign student, not only did she have to pay much more for the tuition than the Chinese, but also she was encouraged to be an unofficial student since the school never had westerners officially enrolled taking classes with Chinese people before. Rose insisted on taking classes just like everybody else. "I wanted to eat with everybody else, shower with everybody else, do my homework with everybody else, and jog at six o'clock in the morning with everyone else..."

Rose would never forget the day a girl pushed her aside in the middle of the class and said, "We don't need foreigners to study our Chinese dance." Rose felt as if she had gone back to middle school in America, but here in China she was a grown woman. Experiencing prejudice, she realized that if she was going to stay at BDA, she had to accept that her name would be "American girl" or "foreigner."

Because of her obvious different physical appearance, Rose was prevented in one of her Chinese folk dance classes from performing at the final show. The teacher feared the audience would look at her instead of the achievement of the whole class, which was unfair to other students who worked so hard to be selected to this fine Asian dance institution. Rose started to wish she looked more like her classmates. She thought if she were younger, thinner, if she had smaller shoulders and bigger head, she would be more accepted as a real student of Chinese folk dance. She videotaped her classmates doing the combinations and would then practice them at night in the dorm room—over and over again. "It is like writing the Chinese character, if you keep practicing, you'll get it right." For Rose, a few

folk dance combinations would take her three to four days to learn correctly.

"All I wanted there was to be treated fairly as a student. The opportunities students had from paying their tuition, I thought I should have those same opportunities. From the Chinese dance technique perspective, I realized I could not compare with my classmates who had danced their entire lives. However, in terms of choreography, I had other things to offer: I spent my whole life reading books, studying history, anthropology, sociology; I lived abroad in Europe and Mexico as well as the Chinese countryside. But for most of those kids, all they knew was movement and eight counts..."

Rose decided to concentrate more on learning new things to make herself happy at BDA. One professor she really respected was Wang Mei, an instructor responsible for founding in 1998 the first four year modern dance experimental class in BDA's history. Everyday for about two weeks, Rose waited outside Wang's class, until finally one day Wang permitted her to participate in the class. "That was really a turning point for me. I took class with other students everyday and eventually became part of their class for two and half years; I performed in the semester shows with those students, and I felt I was treated similarly to the Chinese students. From then on, people at BDA were more neutral toward me. They called me by my Chinese name, 'Hongmei,' instead of 'American girl!'"

During her intense army-like three years at BDA, Rose had expanded her horizons in choreography and also mastered the techniques of various kinds of Chinese classical and folk dances. Rose learned that in Chinese dance, there were obvious emphases on fluency and beauty, movements were set in certain ways, and uniformity was the goal in training a whole group. However, in



Photo: Yangang Li

"Phoenix" rehearsal for the Dashanzi International Arts Festival, Beijing, 2006

modern dance class, movements could be ugly, unpleasant, or unrelated—qualities that werethings not always had to be appreciated by the audience members.

In 2002, Rose took the first prize at the International Golden Lotus Cup Competition, the most authoritative national dance competition in China. Later that year, she became the first westerner in the history of China to graduate from BDA.

Suddenly, millions of people in China recognized Rose's name and knew that there was a beautiful "dancing rose" in Beijing. Some even went directly to Rose's apartment for autographs or waited for her classes to end. She felt, "That was awkward because of a complete lack of privacy, and I wasn't quite sure why I was signing autographs." But Chinese dance professionals were also much nicer to Rose; they asked whether she wanted to continue to do the Chinese dance or incorporate it into something else.

"The assumption was," Rose explained, "I would, of course, do something eventually with modern dance since I was a



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020: China National Song and Dance Operatic Troupe's "Nanjing 1937," performed in Beijing, 2005, tells the stories of Iris Chang, the best-selling American author of *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, and Minnie Vautrin (danced by Aly Rose), an American missionary who saved many lives during the massacre. Photos: Meicai Zhang & Ling Tang

'westerner.' I just felt it natural to incorporate all that I had learned at BDA as a choreographer, whether it was 'Chinese' or 'not Chinese.' My dance ambitions have little to do with the fact I have red hair! One of the main differences between an anthropologist and a choreographer is that an anthropologist writes down what he/she sees; choreographers, we create what we see."

Rose comes back to the U.S. every one-and-a-half years. People here are always curious about why she lived in a communist country for ten years and why she chose choreography to be her profession. Rose said, "People do not quite understand what I am doing, but they find comfort in saying that I am an idealist. I have persevered in order to make my dream come true. They think that is

admirable. A lot of westerners think people in China are not free, but most Chinese are proud to be Chinese and want to be acknowledged for doing things differently than the western world—that is the reality, that is the modern Chinese people."

After graduating from BDA, Rose taught tap and jazz at BDA, hosted an internationally broadcast TV show, "Center Stage" for Central China Television, choreographed "Lady in the Dark," the first Broadway musical on a Chinese stage, worked with Warner Brothers to produce China's world premiere of "Casablanca, the Dance," as well as portrayed a main character in "Nanjing1937" with the China National Song and Dance Operatic Troupe.

Asked about her favorite thing, Rose's says that her greatest passion is "Phoenix," which culminates a decade of life and experience for her in China: "It is a work that expresses many of my opinions about dance: you don't need professional dancers to do dance— young and old can be trained. The intention of the work needs to be clear, engage the audience, have something to say, and move others the way you have been moved."

Now living on the 24th floor of a Beijing apartment on the outskirts, Rose enjoys being a part of a city full of energy and vitality. But, "I also take refuge living away from the center so that I can relax and create. I am so thankful that I believe in God. And I am open to be inspired to create more..."

*Ling Tang is completing an Intercultural Performing Arts, Individual Studies Program, at the University of Maryland under the mentorship of Dr. Judith Lynne Hanna who assisted her with article. Tang interviewed Rose in Beijing in Summer 2006.

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