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Booking Dance Festival Beijing

Here in Beijing during the Olympics when all the world is watching Michael Phelps take medal after medal at The Cube, and witnessing Usain Bolt break world records in track at The Birds' Nest, I am on the other side of the city at the Nine Theatres, watching an artistic sport all of its own—dance.

Three Beijing dance companies—Beijing Modern Dance Company, the National Ballet of China, and Tao Studio—share the stage with my fellow Americans: Salt Lake City's Odyssey Dance Theatre and Colorado-based Kim Robards Dance in Booking Dance Festival Beijing.

"Our festival addresses the question of 'What is modern dance?' to Chinese audiences," says festival producer Jodi Kaplan. Co-producer Alison M. Friedman, a scholar in Chinese modern dance, explains that every region of China has government-run song and dance folk companies, and every wing of the army has an art troupe that performs under them. At one point, apparently, the government supported 8,500 dance companies, yet there are only about five major modern dance companies in all of China.

Lately though, modern dance in China is booming, and more and more U.S. companies are heading east. Major companies like Paul Taylor and Alvin Ailey are frequent guests to the country. The Martha Graham Dance Company performed for the first time in Beijing at the National Center for the Performing Arts in November. Though China came to modern dance recently, modern dance came to China long ago. Denishawn toured China in 1925–26, and Isadora Duncan's students toured in 1926.

Smaller U.S. companies are now getting the opportunity to perform in China, too—like those involved in this festival as well as Margaret Jenkins Dance Company, Jennifer Muller/The Works, and Long Beach Ballet. Perhaps this is having a posi-



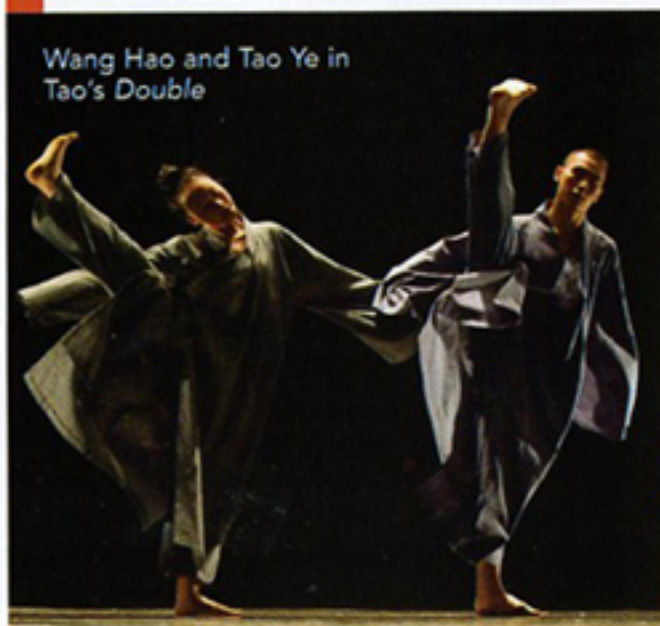
Cao Shuci, Fei Bo, Yi Jie, and Li Xing
in Fei's *Kunqu Vision*

tive effect on the small Chinese companies, too. Friedman says she has witnessed an increase with start-up companies in recent years.

The festival, which ran August 14–16 at the Nine Theatres, also held a free performance offsite at a Coca Cola sponsored Shimao Tianjie Olympic Plaza where the two American companies danced on an elevated two-leveled stage. The crowd screamed and applauded as if they were at a rock concert. And at a special matinee performance, a group of 20 children of migrant workers sat in a theater for the first time in their lives and saw what they have never seen before—modern dance.

Kim Robards, whose company performed her classic American modern dance style at the festival, says, "We're entering our 22nd year and it's interesting to think that our company has a longer history than modern dance in China. To know that we're here during their adolescent stage—they're already very mature and far beyond Americans in their ability to focus."

Odyssey Dance Theatre is an eclectic modern/jazz/hip hop troupe directed by former Ballet West principal Deryll Yeager. He brought seven dancers from his company, including his daughter Veronica and Thayne Jaspersen, a top contestant from last season's SYTYCD. The five companies in the festival took class together. "No matter what our governments are up to," Yeager says, "as people, we all share a common humanity. Dance is a visceral experience. You don't have to speak the language. Everyone understands the language of movement." BMDC choreographer Gao, who led one of the classes, says, "Bodies don't have geographic boundaries. I think that is the beauty of this festival. We can transcend limits of the country." —E.M.



Wang Hao and Tao Ye in
Tao's *Double*

For more photos and video clips from the festival go to www.dancemagazine.com.