

AROUND TOWN

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Cloud Gate dancers prepare for their grueling roles with years of tai chi, qigong, calligraphy and meditation. PHOTOS COURTESY OF CLOUD GATE DANCE THEATRE

Cloud Gate is staging its entire 'Cursive' trilogy next month at the National Theater

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER

single chapter from Lin's meditation on calligraphy, energy and life.

"We are almost creating a miracle ... we have to sell 21,000 tickets; we've sold 13,000, 14,000 already," Lin said in a telephone interview on Monday. "We are very excited and very scared."

If that wasn't enough, the company is juggling six full-length productions and a non-stop schedule that will keep it going all-out right through next spring.

"On Sept. 20 we finish at the National Theater, at 8:30 the next morning we go to Bangkok. Then to Brisbane to perform *Moon Water*, then London, where we do *Wind Shadow*, then home for one week, then a six-city tour of China [with *Cursive*]. And all through this, they [the dancers] have to work on the new piece for next April and in January and February we are in North America," he said.

But, as Lin said, "let's get back to the ink."

While the company has performed the *Cursive* trilogy in Hong Kong and Berlin, this will be the first time it is doing it in Taiwan. What is now called *Cursive I* (行草)

premiered on Dec. 1, 2001. *Cursive II* (行草貳) opened on Aug. 30, 2003 and *Wild Cursive* (狂草) was unveiled on Nov. 19, 2005.

On the surface, all three are linked by ink, paper and Lin's trademark combination of tai chi- and martial arts-inspired modern dance, but the movements, music, sets and feel of each is very different.

Cursive I is very fast, with lots of martial arts kicks. The pace of *Cursive II* is more measured. *Wild Cursive* has many fast, almost violent moves, but then closes on a very slow note.

One thing all three do, however, is showcase Cloud Gate's spectacular dancers, whose bodies have been honed by years of not just dance classes, but tai chi, qigong, calligraphy and meditation. The tai chi gives them the grounding to be able to do Lin's low-to-the-floor movements, the meditation gives them stillness and breath control and the calligraphy teaches them to focus their energy for the explosive bursts that punctuate all three pieces.

"There are two points I want to make," Lin said. "First, each dance has a different emphasis, each one has a different 'program,' so it takes very sophisticated technique. We may not be able to do this [the trilogy] again in five years — it could take 10 years to get them [the younger dancers] into this condition. It's a killer, it takes a lot to do it right."

"Second, *Cursive*. Don't think it will be the *Cursive* you saw then [in 2001]. It's the same choreography but totally different nuances; it's richer and more powerful, much stronger," he said.

Lin said he has tinkered with the pieces — "I keep changing things here and there, but the spine is the same" — but didn't make substantial changes, even though in retrospect he feels *Cursive I* is a bit over the top.

"I always felt it was too much, like a Christmas fruitcake. At the time we didn't plan on a trilogy, so we packed a lot of stuff in it," he said.

The staging and score for each piece are also very different.

The score for *Cursive I* is by Qu Xiaosong (瞿小松), a contemporary Chinese composer based in Shanghai. For *Cursive II*, Lin made the surprising choice of American

avant-garde composer John Cage ("people say what a pleasant surprise, we never thought Cage could sound so nice"), whose work featured for decades in the dances of one of Lin's dance heroes, the late Merce Cunningham. *Wild Cursive* is about the essence of sound — there are waves, wind, temple bells, the chirping of cicadas and the percussive music of a dancer's exhalations and foot slaps.

The first show features black-clad dancers, a bare white floor and video and slide projections of the work of master calligraphers. For part two, the color scheme gradually shifts from white to the browns of ancient scrolls, using projections once again. *Wild Cursive* features 10m-long strips of specially made rice paper that are lowered and raised from the rafters, onto which an ink and water solution is carefully fed through meters of tubing to create a pattern that takes the length of the show to complete.

When asked if he has a favorite among the three pieces, Lin laughed.

"I used to think 'oh god.' In the end, I love the second piece the best. In terms of movement, it's not as complicated as *Wild Cursive*. It's not as spectacular as the first one in terms of theatrical production. It's so quiet, serene, uplifting ... And at the end you hear the audience [he gasps] — an intake of breath."

However, Lin doesn't want people reading too much into his works.

"The point is, a lot of people think simply that the trilogy expresses calligraphy. I say I'm a poor writer of calligraphy. I can't express calligraphy. It's dance, it's not about calligraphy. Calligraphy is just a springboard," he said.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, *Cursive*, a Trilogy
WHEN: *Cursive I* (行草), Sept. 2 to Sept. 5 at 7:45pm, Sept. 6 at 2:45pm; *Cursive II* (行草貳), Sept. 9 to Sept. 12 at 7:45pm, Sept. 13 at 2:45pm; *Wild Cursive* (狂草), Sept. 16 to Sept. 19 at 7:45pm, Sept. 20 at 2:45pm

WHERE: National Theater (國家戲劇院), 21-1 Zhongshan S Rd, Taipei City (台北市中山南路21-1號)

ADMISSION: NT\$400 to NT\$2,000, available through NTCH ticketing or online at www.artsticket.com.tw

The iconic Cloud Gate Dance Theatre returns to the National Theater in 11 days time with an ambitious project that is taxing its dancers, its technical staff and marketing crew to the max and has founder and artistic director Lin Hwai-min (林懷民) saying it will be a miracle if they pull the program off.

The company is taking over the theater for three full weeks, its longest season ever, to stage the *Cursive* trilogy, five performances each week devoted to a