

Media Release – Red Span Dance Company



When internationally acknowledged choreographer Feng Feng Weng became a citizen of Australia in 2006 her first impulse was to form a dance company. She teamed up with producer/composer Gus Macmillan, and Red Span Dance Company was born. The vision of the company was to develop a collaborative environment for dancers and artists of Chinese and Australian backgrounds to work together with the aim of spanning the divide between traditional Chinese and modern western art-forms, blending Feng Feng's extensive Chinese folk and modern dance training with contemporary Western influences, to be set in a 21st Century context. Redspan Dance Company's work has quickly developed an original character and style of its own, expressing a complex and subtle aesthetic which reveals an intimacy, elegance, simplicity and abstract grace. It represents a unique and personal expression of an emerging Chinese culture as it engages with the rest of the world, as told through its recent diaspora.

In 2006, Red Span Dance Company received the inaugural **Full Tilt** funding initiative by the Victorian Arts Centre. The *Full Tilt* program provided Red Span Dance Company with the resources to develop the work *Xing* with a brief showing in the Blackbox Theatre of the Victorian Arts Centre. In 2007 Feng Feng worked in Beijing as part of the lead up to the 2008 Olympic Games. She returns to Australia to tour her works *Xing* and *The Treasure* as part of Multicultural Arts Victoria's Kultour program performing at Dancehouse on September 6th & 7th 2008 and the Casula Powerhouse on September 11th, 12th & 13th. Following this tour Feng Feng will be mainly based in Melbourne, developing a new work "Flower Knot" as part of Terrain08, pursuing further funding opportunities through the Australia Council, Arts Victoria and Asialink for more creative collaborations.

The long term aim of the company is to not only create works that bridge the cultural gap but also combine the best dancers from China and the West, working together to develop responses to the cultural, historical, political and personal circumstances that divide and unite them.

Biography of Feng Feng Wang



Feng Feng Wang was born in Chengdu, China, and began full time dance training when she was accepted into the prestigious Shanghai Dance School at the age of 11. There she studied Classical Ballet, Chinese Folk Dance, and Chinese Traditional Dance for six years. Upon graduating she took up a tertiary placement at the Beijing Dance Academy, where she studied choreography for four years, receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance, and learning a variety of styles including Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and Trisha Brown. During this time she also studied dance for a period in New York and choreographed and performed *Rust Sleeve* at the Connecticut International Dance Festival. She then went on to work in the Chinese Central Ballet as a staff member, dancer, and assistant choreographer, and during this time choreographed *Blood* at the International Computer Music Festival in Beijing, and performed *Calling for Wilderness*, with the Beijing Modern Dance Company, China. In 2004 she came to Melbourne, Australia to study for her Masters Degree in Choreography at the Victorian College of the Arts. During this time she choreographed and performed many works including *White Fan*, *Phoenix Feathers* and *The Treasure*.

A description of the works:



White Fan – When Feng Feng was a teenager training at the Shanghai Dance Academy it was common to learn many classical and folk dances which contained very strict performance practices. Many of these are well known for their use of fans as part of the dance.

After Feng Feng had spent 6 months studying choreography at the VCA in Australia she decided to explore what would happen if she took this strict traditional fan dance form and instil the new techniques and styles she had been developing as part of her Masters Degree. Hence *White Fan* was created as a solo piece to rebuild the traditional form in a contemporary context.

The piece was part of a larger dance work which followed a story from the Tsung dynasty– A princess in Mongolia trying to release her emotions after she fell in love with a Mongolian Samurai soldier. She is forbidden from courting the warrior, but after watching him dance decides to disguise herself as a boy and join him on stage as part of the performance. The story embodies many asian characteristics - Chinese hide a lot of their emotions, repress their feelings for the greater good of society, but when they are released it is like the power of a volcano. The princess is a very shy and conservative person but she has lots of passion inside. As the *White Fan* begins she cradles the fan in her arms, protecting herself and her position in her culture until she finally decides to release her emotions.

The music of Tan Dun was chosen because it also uses traditional Chinese instruments in a modern style. The music gave FF much of the inspiration for the initial concept. The result is neither a traditional Chinese dance, nor contemporary a western piece, but something unique and spellbinding.



XING consists of five dancers, and explores the circulation between the five traditional Chinese “Taoism” elements of wood, fire, earth, water, and metal. The five elements, also called “Wu Xing” represent the processes that are fundamental to the cycles of nature. The term “xing” means the process of one thing acting upon another. In relation to the five elements, the cycle of processes as “Yin” and “Yang” can be represented as: wood feeding into fire; fire creating ashes which form earth; from within the earth, metal is heated, liquefies and produces water vapor; water generated from this vapor then nourishes the trees, or wood.

Each dancer embodies through the performance subtle detailed shifts - temporary moments of balance, harmonization of occurrence, growth, development, symmetry and change. The original music for the piece also reflects the interchangeable nature of these themes, with new sounds or instrumentation introduced as each performer’s journey commences, developing thematically in parallel to the structure as the performance plays out. The process of composing and developing the music was strongly inter-linked to the choreographer’s rehearsal processes and practices.



The Treasure. This work consists of two dancers and a live musician. It explores the behaviors of two people intimately and inextricably caught together and opens up and embodies ‘precious’ moments in their relating. Feng Feng says of the piece “I wanted to present the study in much the same way we might display a precious artifact in a gallery. In ‘The Treasure’ this conceptualization of the relationship between feminine and masculine blends with other levels of engagement within various

emotional states, such as comfort, play, exclusion, support, dissonance, compromise, passivity, initiative, care and mutuality. These states became the basis for developing the 'scores' for improvisations and identified and manipulated key forms of movement. From my understanding of Chinese philosophy, Yin and Yang have never been associated with specific moral or aesthetic values. What the Chinese consider beautiful or beneficial is neither Yin nor Yang but the dynamic balance between the two. Therefore my intention in portraying the human relationship is not as simple as white or black, lover or enemy. Mostly it stays in a dynamic state of balance between the two – neither pure Yin nor Yang, hot nor cold. It is contained in the many different "tastes" - sweet, salty, spicy, and acidic. I found that these subtle senses can be beautifully "drawn" by very fine "strokes" of body language." The original music was composed in tandem with the development of the piece.

Biographies of other participating artists:



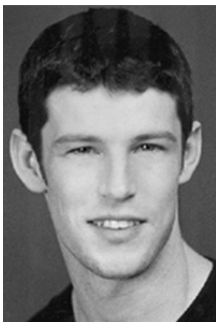
Gus Macmillan is the Company Producer and composer-in-residence for Redspan Dance and has, over the last 18 years, worked internationally as a composer, musician and sound designer. Based in Melbourne, he has recently returned from working in the United Kingdom as composer in residence for Theatre O, writing a score for *Delirium*, an adaptation of Dostoyevski's *Brother's Karamazov*, directed by Joseph Alford. Gus spent the 90's performing as a multi-instrumentalist with Blue Grassy Knoll, and conceived, co-wrote, and produced live scores to the silent films of Buster Keaton. These shows received five star reviews at the 1999 and 2000 Edinburgh Festival and toured to all five continents for the next 8 years under Gus's management. In 2007 BGK also wrote a score to the silent Chinese film *Labourer's Love* and toured it to Beijing and Shanghai. He completed a

Graduate Diploma in Sound Design at Victorian College of the Arts in 2004, and works with sound and music in a variety of other art forms including film, documentary, circus and puppetry. He has his own recording studio and continues to write, perform, and teach music. Gus also has an Honors Degree in English and a Masters Degree in Australian Studies.



Suhali Ahmad Kamil is from Malaysia and graduated with an Honours Degree in dance in 2006, at the VCA where she received the *De Gruchy Award* (Most Potential Dance, 2004), *Elfie Blake Award* (Most Achievement Award, 2005) and *Most Outstanding Dancer of the VCA Graduate 2005*. After gaining her BA Dance (Hons) in 2006, Suhaili returned to Malaysia to teach, choreograph and dance with Malaysia's young up-coming contemporary choreographers such as Bilqis Hijjas, Loh Shee Hoe, Umesh Shetty and Rathimalar Govindalarmajoo. She was the runner-up for a reality TV show 'So You Think You Can Dance' Season 1 in Malaysia in 2007. Suhaili currently teaches at the National Arts Academy of Malaysia (ASWARA), Skills Academy (Academy for the Autistic Children, KL) and Aurora School of Dance, KL. Suhaili returned to Melbourne to participate in the 'Sanggar

Choreographic Workshop' hosted by the National Arts Academy, Malaysia, as well as to perform as a member of Rogue for the Next Wave Festival and performed in the 30th Anniversary School of Dance in Neil Adam's 'Vapor Trail'.



Nick Sommerville graduated from the VCA in 2003 and received the Orloff Family Prize for Most Outstanding Talent. Since graduating Nick has performed *The Point Hotel* with Danceworks, and participated in Ballet lab's *Choreographic Symposium* as part of the Next Wave Festival in 2004. This year Nick developed *Duets for Lovers & Dreamers* with Naomi Steinborner and Sandra Long. He also performed in a regional tour with akaDance as part of the arts2go program developed by Regional Arts Victoria. In June 2007 year Nick went to Hong Kong to attend the Hong Kong Dance Festival. He is continuing to

develop a new work with Helen Herbertson and performed in *Chamisa 4* by Japanese choreographer Kota Yamazaki in Japan and the 2006 Melbourne Festival as part of the Australia / Japan Dance Exchange. Nick has a strong interest in improvised performance and has performed at Conundrum and in the Dancecard at Dancehouse.



Prior to his training at the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), **Tony Ng** studied fashion at RMIT and worked in the fashion industry locally and internationally. During his study at the VCA Tony worked with choreographers Helen Herbertson, Gideon Obarzanek, Becky Hilton, Brett Daffy, James Sutton and Simon Ellis. Since graduating from the VCA in 2004 Tony has worked with various independent artists in Melbourne and in 2005 was offered a scholarship to perform with the Ajkun Ballet Theatre in New York. *Xing* is the first project that Tony has both performed and collaborated with the costume design in the same work.



Danielle Carnavan began her dance training with Sue and Kevin Hayes at Utassy Ballet School. Since graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2005, she has worked and performed in various dance projects including: the 2007 Melbourne Fringe Festival, guest teacher at the 2007 Geelong *splash! Dance Festival*, 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games Closing Ceremony, Red Span Dance Company (2006), Jo Lloyd and Tim Harvey (2006), emerging choreographer Kate Stanley (2006), Lucy Farmer's dance

film *Bear Me: Me Bear*, and the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of Victoria in *The Merry Widow* (2004 & 2008). She is a founding member of ROGUE, a new dance collective, who last year performed in Lucy Guerins *Pieces For Small Spaces* and is currently preparing for their show in the 2008 Next Wave Festival. She also travelled to Malaysia with ROGUE to participate in the 2006 Sanggar Choreography Festival at Akademi Seni Kebanagsaan (ASK). Danielle also has a double degree in Primary Teaching and Science (Human Movement) and works as a relief teacher in primary schools. She teaches a range of dance styles at a number of local ballet and dance schools, as well as choreographing and directing productions.



Yi Zhang graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 2005 with a Bachelor of Dance. In her first year at VCA Yi received the Encouragement Award from the Friends of the VCA and was awarded most improved ballet dancer in her second year. Currently she is studying a Diploma of Classical Ballet Teaching, a postgraduate course at the VCA. During Yi's study at the VCA she worked with many different choreographers such as Tracie Mitchell, Brett Daffy, Rochelle Carmichael, Sandra Parker, Leigh Warren, Paulina Quinteros, Neil Adams and Becky Hilton. Before moving to Melbourne in 2002, Yi studied at the Shanghai Dancing School in China. After graduating she worked with the Shanghai Dance Company, performing and touring nationally and internationally from 1995 to 2002.