

A Golden Dream Awakens in Seattle

By [Roxanne Ray](#)

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Four years ago, choreographer Hengda Li witnessed a dream, and has now worked with the China National Acrobatic Troupe (CNAT) to bring that dream to Seattle audiences.

Hengda Li and his performance company, American Asian Performing Arts Theatre (AAPAT), had previously worked with CNAT in 2009, and their show “Dare” led to further invitations from CNAT to collaborate.

“For the first time ever in my life, I had a chance to get up close and personal with some of the best acrobats in the world,” Li says.

Li got to know many of the performers personally, and learned that many of them emerged from poor families.

“They have endured years of grueling training and intense competitions to perfect their skills,” he says. “I came to realize that behind their success, there were many untold bitter and sweet stories.”

Then, earlier this year, CNAT received the prestigious Golden Clown Award at the Monte-Carlo International Circus Festival in Monaco. At that point, Li reports that he had a flash of inspiration.

“I wanted to share a unique and compelling story, an ordinary acrobat’s extraordinary journey to self-improvement, discovery and success,” he says. This month’s performance of “The Dream of the Golden Clown” is the story of that journey. In this show, Li strives to combine the best of CNAT’s acrobatics with the classical dance traditions in which he and AAPAT have specialized for many years.

“Having worked as a dancer, instructor, choreographer, director, and having been blessed with the opportunity to work with many talented artists including those from the CNAT, I feel an obligation to share what I’ve learned to make a difference,” he says.

“I want to add layers of inner emotions and outer artistic display to the show,” he adds. “It is my dream to revive traditional Chinese acrobatics and take it to the next level – an artistically vibrant future.”

Li feels that international exposure will help achieve this goal.

“In China, acrobatics have been a part of the culture for thousands of years,” he says. “Once referred to as Chinese variety art, acrobatic theme shows were originally performed at the imperial palace to entertain royalty and foreign guests.” But tradition has given way to more popular entertainment.

“Today acrobatic performances are staged on the streets, in temple fairs, and played in national theaters around the world,” he says. “Acrobatics has evolved from a simple exhibition of physical skills into a performing art with remarkable quality and refinement.”

Into this mix, Li hopes to add more complex elements, including a narrative complete with story and characters.

“People once firmly believed acrobatics to be simply a display of physical techniques and it felt almost impossible to reimagine a place where the art form could go once human skills reaches their maximum potential,” he says. “There is a new vitality in acrobatics now; it is capable of ‘speaking’ to audiences, evoking emotions and conveying characters — all without a word.”

But these new elements were unfamiliar to many of CNAT’s performers, and they and Li had to work together to exchange “vocabulary” and performance style. “For many acrobats, utilizing body language to display deep and true emotions while on stage and bringing a character to life is something new and unheard of,” he says. “On the other hand, as a former dancer and choreographer, I did not have much exposure to acrobatics before this project. We started with the

basics.” Approaching each other from two very different disciplines was heavily time-intensive.

“I would spend hours each day in the rehearsal room, giving demonstration and explaining characters’ emotional conflicts,” Li says. “Oftentimes, this process had to be repeated over and over again. I am thankful I had the opportunity to undergo the ordeal and learn something new.”

Reaching for these new artistic heights wasn’t easy behind the scenes either. “Dividing my time between teaching in the U.S. and directing in China turned out to be extremely difficult,” Li says. “Despite my best efforts to be attentive to all aspects, for those months I was in China, the Hengda Dance Academy had to invite guest faculty to manage the day-to-day operations and administration of the school.” Fundraising has also been a challenge.

“Members of AAPAT have been working actively to help finance the development of the project, which includes covering CNAT’s travel expenses and marketing expenses,” he says.

Each of these challenges led the project’s development to be delayed. “It took us about a month to finish the choreography portion,” Li says. “Music, stage design, costume, lighting and stage props crews took another six months to complete. It was not until March 23rd that ‘The Dream of the Golden Clown’ finally premiered in Beijing, six months after the extended deadline.”

Li credits all participants, as well as his family, for helping to bring the project to fruition.

“Thanks to their generous donation of time, money and talent, we finally had a chance to fulfill our dream – to rejuvenate traditional Chinese acrobatics and bring it onto the international stage.”

What should be expected at the show?

“You will be surprised after you witness this performance.”

China National Acrobatic Troupe performs “The Dream of the Golden Clown” on Sept. 20 and 21, at Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer Street in Seattle. More at www.mccawhall.com/events/detail/the-dream-of-the-golden-clown.