



Leaping over their differences

An African-American dance troupe's tour of China provided both sides with the chance for cultural exchange, writes **Debra Levine**

Main picture: The Lula Washington Dance Theatre perform *Global Village*, choreographed by troupe founder and namesake Lula Washington herself, a dance which enthralled audiences during their tour of the mainland.

A alumni weekend was a wild ride at Henan's Sias University this year. But the wildness was not caused by drinking or carousing. It was the arrival of a dance company from Los Angeles that stirred the commotion. Lula Washington Dance Theatre's brand of African-derived jazz, hip hop and modern dance shocked and excited the audience.

Lula Washington Dance Theatre, whose eponymous founder is behind the choreography of the Na'vi in the 2009 Hollywood blockbuster *Avatar*, brought a diverse programme to China. This included a challenging new work, *Reign*, by hip hop choreographer Rennie Harris, a Guggenheim fellow and a specialist in bringing underground "house" dance onto the concert stage.

A moody, rambling, soulful work that's charged with tribal energy, the work hews to the African-American spiritual journey of transcendence and redemption.

Seeing the troupe – primarily African-Americans – perform *Reign*, Sias dance instructor Huo Zhujun says: "My heart is pounding. Yes, I love it. The movement is explosive, the rhythm infectious."

Shawn Chen, founder and chairman of what is said to be the mainland's first American-style university, recognises the motor-boozing, super-bad energy of *Reign* and says that he wants to see that



same drive and commitment in his students.

"*Reign* is a powerful dance," Chen says. "We didn't want to bring traditional stuff. We didn't want a demonstration of African national dance – that's what Chinese see all the time. We wanted to wake people up and show them there is more [for them] in life."

"The new generation is bored by what is happening in China. Before, they had nothing. They barely had food. Now food is abundant, but they have lost something. They need excitement, that there is something beyond food and spending money. I want to wake people up with powerful energy."

The 31-year-old company has been on the road since the last week of May, visiting 12 cities in Shanxi, Henan, Hubei and Zhejiang provinces. Their mainland tour will conclude after a performance in Hangzhou. Two works by Washington – *Global Village*, a festive and funky foray to music by Fela, and *Mask*, Washington's take on American racial stereotypes whose mask props resonate with Chinese opera – also fascinated the Chinese audience.

Erwin Washington, company co-founder, business manager and the choreographer's husband, says he isn't surprised by the ease with which his company has found a niche in China. "We work with the Chinese as creative equals ... Not



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DWAYNE BROWN,
DANCER





many companies are flexible in doing this. My dancers are loving this place and talk about coming back on their own.

"It's a cultural interaction residency. We teach choreography [to the Chinese] and we've learned their material. We're really seeing the culture. We see a clear respect for the arts and artists and how much they love their history."

He sees the mainland tour as natural progression for the dance company: "We have some deep community roots at home, so for us to engage with another community is fun. It's natural."

Some of the 13 dancers on the tour admit to some surprises. Dwayne Brown was initially intimidated about coming to China, he says: "I wasn't sure how they would greet a company like Lula's, as we are a black company. But I was pleasantly surprised by how warm and receptive they have been."

Pittsburgh-born Queala Clancy, a lanky, lyrical dancer who enjoyed a stint as a Las Vegas showgirl, says she thought nothing could top the experience of the company's 20-city tour of Russia last year. "But I am having a great, magical experience here. The culture, the language, the food and the energy we're getting from the audience are making this a wonderful journey. Friendships are being formed on this trip," she says.

"One Chinese guy, in rehearsal, gave me my prep, my cue, my 5-6-

7-8. I enjoyed his helping hand. He could have given me the brush-off, but he was so patient. He gave me a beautiful lucky charm which his mother had given to him. He wanted me to have it on the road. I feel a dancer's love for him."

Michael Battle, a strapping, talented mover from Detroit, who at 21 is one of the company's youngest members, says: "When I was a kid I saw a cereal commercial on TV, something about digging a hole to China. So I went to the backyard and dug a hole. I was six or seven. And here I am."

"In Russia it was hotel, bus, theatre, then repeat. Before I saw our itinerary, I didn't know we would have cultural exchange here. When I found out, I thought, 'I'm going to let my guard down. Let me learn the language.' I'm interacting with students here, and it's all because of dance. The body is bringing us together."

Chen invited Lula Washington Dance Theatre to his school after seeing them perform at the Broad Stage in Los Angeles, where he now lives. The US government, also impressed by the troupe's work, has offered a six-figure grant to the cultural exchange initiative. It has been a resounding success, according to all three parties.

Despite the mainland's developing economy, or perhaps because of it, the arts component of a liberal arts education matters a lot,

says Chen. "China is the world's copycat manufacturer. The Chinese – mind, body, and soul – don't have the creativity of the West."

"We need formal education to reconstruct the real mind of China. The most creative people are artists like Lula. She shows how human beings can express, and make something that normally the body cannot do," Chen says, connecting the dots between his school's mission and the visiting artists.

Washington, striking in her colourful, trademark head wrap, began her career as a dance-loving nurse. Now 61, she's Los Angeles' best-known African-American choreographer, community organiser and advocate for the arts. "Shawn is loveable," she says of Chen. "He gets out and does things, signals that 'it's okay to try this'." When I teased him about his dancing, he replied: 'Teach me'."

Keith Lommel, assistant cultural affairs officer with the US Embassy in Beijing, says the dancers are cultural envoys. "There are huge misconceptions about the US in China. The single best way to give people accurate impressions is by facilitating people-to-people meetings, interacting on a face-to-face basis, making friendships."

"This troupe took every opportunity to interact with Chinese culture, make friends, and learn [Putonghua]. We don't always see that," Lommel says.