



THE Space BETWEEN Two Worlds

Aly Rose '95 builds bridges
through dance. BY PAIGE FERRARI '04



In the spring of 1999, Aly Rose '95 stood before a panel of Beijing Dance Academy admission officers and shocked them with a little something she called...jazz.

Her audition song was Peggy Lee's signature, "Fever." And her choreography? Well, it wasn't quite the traditional Chinese folk and classical dance moves the panel was accustomed to seeing. It was sassy, strong, sexy. "It resembled cabaret," she recalls. "Their faces were frozen the entire time."

When she finished her routine, the room was silent. Clearly, the panel didn't know what to make of the bombastic, red-headed American—the first to vie for admittance to the school's newly created master's program—with her borrowed leotard and distinctly Western shimmy.

"They don't even know how to score you," a friend told Rose afterward as she stood, sweat-soaked, waiting to hear feedback. "Because you don't fit into a category."

Rose was carving out a category for herself. With only one month before classes started, Rose earned a concession-laden acceptance to the school: she could dance, but there would be no special treatment. She must fall in line with the other students. She must do things the Chinese way.

So she did—though it required late nights studying videotapes of routines that came easily to the school's many classically trained Chinese dancers, winnowing herself down from 130 to 105 pounds, and even enduring the jeers of fellow students who suspected that she was a spy. In 2002, Rose became the Academy's first and, to date, only Western graduate.

That's when the school asked her to stay on as a teacher.

To help develop the Musical Dance Department teaching tap and jazz.

Specifically, Peggy Lee's "Fever."

It had only been three years since her audition had so dumbfounded the panel. But in the same amount of time that Rose had struggled to transform herself to the Chinese way, China itself had changed. Suddenly, the distinguished Beijing Dance Academy could do sexy.

"What happens in seven years in America is possible in seven months in China," Rose says. It's the country's dynamic nature, the sheer possibility for bold and unlikely ideas to surge from infancy to adulthood, and the accelerated give-and-take between the new China and the rest of the world that has long held Rose in its thrall.

It's also arguably what informs and emboldens her current work, which—like Rose's audition routine—defies easy categorization. As a choreographer and director, she's been responsible for orchestrating some of the world's most ambitious musicals and revolutionary mass movement spectacles.

I remember being attracted in a very literal sense to China," she recalls. "I told Professor Rosenbaum I wanted to go to China, and I vowed to learn Chinese. He encouraged me to go, to see it for myself, to get beyond any illusions I had, and to really experience the country first-hand."

In particular, Rose's aerial art—some of which was on display at the 2006 Dashanzi International Art Festival and the 2008 Beijing Olympics opening ceremonies—plays with the tension between East and West by literally sending dancers into the sky, often en masse. Dangling from riggings many feet above the ground, Rose's dancers are forced to extract grace and beauty from that unclassifiable, sometimes awkward, point between heaven and earth which, to Rose, can represent the tricky, hard-to-navigate areas of what she calls our new "elasticized global culture."

After almost 12 years living in China, Rose came to know

Rehearsals for Dance Drama PHOENIX, which closed the Beijing Dashanzi International Dance Festival in 2006, and Human Architecture ONE, set for performance on the Brooklyn Bridge in 2010.



those cultural intersections quite well. Her first exploration was as a student at CMC when, between dance classes at neighboring Scripps and Pomona, Rose discovered a passion for China in Associate Professor of East Asian History Arthur Rosenbaum's "New China" course.

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In the summer of 1994, Rose took his advice. During her first visit to a rural village in the Hubei Province, she lived with no running water or electricity and spent her days working in the fields. Nearby villagers would sometimes come by to gawk at this strange foreigner who, at that time, could barely manage more than "Nihao."

Though the work was hard and conditions were unpleasant, Rose's heart was won in the quieter moments of her stay. She recalls singing songs with her host family and spending evenings watching the men play Mah Jongg by candlelight. "I was in love," Rose recalls, "with someplace so different."

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Years later, back in America and toying with the idea of pursuing Ph.D. programs in psychology or going to medical school, Rose still felt China's pull, though leaving her life at home for an unknown future in the east seemed extraordinary impractical.

It wasn't, she recalls, until a discussion she had with her mother, then hospitalized and undergoing chemotherapy, that she realized how strong her desire to return to China really was.



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“I remember my mother asking, ‘Are you passionate about anything?’ I thought, ‘I’m passionate about dance.’ Then she said, ‘Where do you want to go? What do you want to do?’ I said, ‘I really want to return to China.’ So my mother said, ‘Go to China. Live your life.’ And it felt right.”

Soon after, Rose sold nearly all her belongings and moved to Hua Xi, Guizhou, where poverty and rough terrain have coined the saying: It’s impossible to find an inhabitant who “has three coins in his pocket, can go for three days without rain, and can go for three kilometers without touching a mountain.”

Two years later, she was standing in front of the Beijing Dance Academy panel giving her adopted culture a little lesson in Western-style cabaret.

“I had always been thinking about China, about the immense potential there,” Rose, who lived in China until 2007, says. “If you learn Chinese, do things the Chinese way, and are willing to cooperate, willing to compromise on very deep levels, you can do anything. Build anything. Create anything.”

Today, in addition to her work as an instructor teaching Chinese dance and a course on the history of performance

in China after 1949 to students at NYU’s Tisch School for the Arts, Rose is continuing to push the boundaries of what is possible and to create bold ways of exploring the space between her two worlds.

Her latest project, ONE, slated to go public in spring 2010, promises to be the most ambitious and spectacular yet. Part dance show, part art installment, ONE includes 100 dancers suspended under the Brooklyn Bridge, 60 feet over the Hudson river, for a total of 30 minutes.

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It’s also a piece that hints at other interplays—the tension between man-made structures and the natural world, the gap between large-scale spectacle and the many micro acts of control and precision needed to bring it to fruition.

In short, it’s a project at peace with paradox. Not unlike Aly Rose herself: Chinese dancer, Western woman, CMC-made artist. A figure with her feet in two very different worlds, ready to send her dancers spinning through the sky.