

Wall Street Journal

Stepping Gracefully Into Her Identity

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FEBRUARY 1, 2012

When Jin Xing was last in New York in the early 1990s, the Chinese dancer was a confused young man reckoning with his sexual identity while trying to forge a career on the stage.

Two decades later, Jin Xing has returned to New York a very different person—for starters, she's now a woman. Since undergoing a sex-change operation in Beijing in 1995, the 44-year-old performer and choreographer has rebuilt a reputation in the dance world, abandoning some of the male roles she once performed and building a new kind of celebrity in China partly around her altered identity.

Trained from age 9 in a Chinese military dance program—as a boy, Jin Xing studied classical Russian ballet to entertain troops while learning to wield a gun and detonate bombs—the performer rose to the rank of colonel before winning a national ballet competition and leaving for the U.S. at age 19 to study dance.



Zuma Press

Jin Xing has returned to the U.S. for the first time in two decades with a 10-work program of dance pieces.

After three gender-reassignment surgeries, including one that lasted 16 hours and nearly left her with permanent leg damage, she founded one of China's first independent modern-dance companies, Jin Xing Dance Theatre Shanghai, in 2000.

This week she is back in New York—for the first time as a woman—with "Shanghai Tango," a program of 10 works to be performed at the Joyce Theater through Sunday, followed by a national tour.

At a recent rehearsal, dressed in black leggings and mukluk slippers with a long ponytail and fingernails painted a light shade of coffee, she spoke with The Wall Street Journal about her unusual path back to New York.

What was going on in your life when you first came to the United States?

I said, "OK, I'm coming to the country so I can be myself." Maybe I'm gay. Discover myself. When I was 6 years old, I felt like I should be a girl, so then I said, "OK, I don't belong to the gay group. Maybe I need to change myself to become a woman?" From 19 years old, the day I come to America, I start looking for the information, how to become myself through operations. It takes me nine years thinking it over. I'm finally 28 years old and I take the step in China.

How did the operation change your dancing?

It's the same. Of course, it's different from the military. With the military, I'm dancing all military repertoires, other people's choreography, very masculine, dancing with weapons. Since I'm doing contemporary dance today, it doesn't matter if I'm a man or a woman.

Was it a impediment for you as a young dancer to believe you were in the wrong body?

When I'm doing my performance, I drop the gender issue. I'm just a person. When I was a man I had a woman's thinking in my heart but I'm carrying a male's body. Now I've become a woman, but I always carry on the stories of men. I'm really privileged because I've experienced both worlds. As an artist, it really helps. This is a gift.

How were you treated in China after your sex change?

This is always a taboo. This is always top talk in China. Of course they talk about my personal life—newspapers talk 70% about my sex change and maybe 30% about my modern dance. Now they're starting to change.

Are there any works in this program you can no longer perform because you're a woman?

The piece called "Island" is choreographed for two male dancers. Before the operation I was dancing that piece. After I became a woman, I cannot dance that piece anymore because it's two boys on stage with dance belts, almost nude.

Do you choreograph dances to reflect discrimination you've felt as a transsexual?

The experience naturally, automatically, goes into your work. You're looking at the world from a different perspective, combined with your personal experience, of course, with how society looks at you and all the misunderstandings and discrimination. You take it and bring it back through dance.

How do you feel to be dancing in New York again after so many years?

To have your own company, traveling internationally, speaking many languages, becoming a woman, it's all the fantasy I had when I was in the military. I was sitting in the military compound looking at the sky, fantasizing about my life. And everything came true.

You mentioned judging a TV dance competition in China. Are you the mean judge or the nice one?

I'm the bitchy one. I'm the Chinese Simon Cowell.

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