



by KATRINA TURCHIN
+
photography COOPER & O'HARA

A MOVING STORY

FROM THE CHINESE ARMY TO THE CANADIAN STAGE,
WEN WEI WANG'S DREAM COMES TO LIFE →

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en Wei Wang always wanted to dance professionally, but first he had to learn how

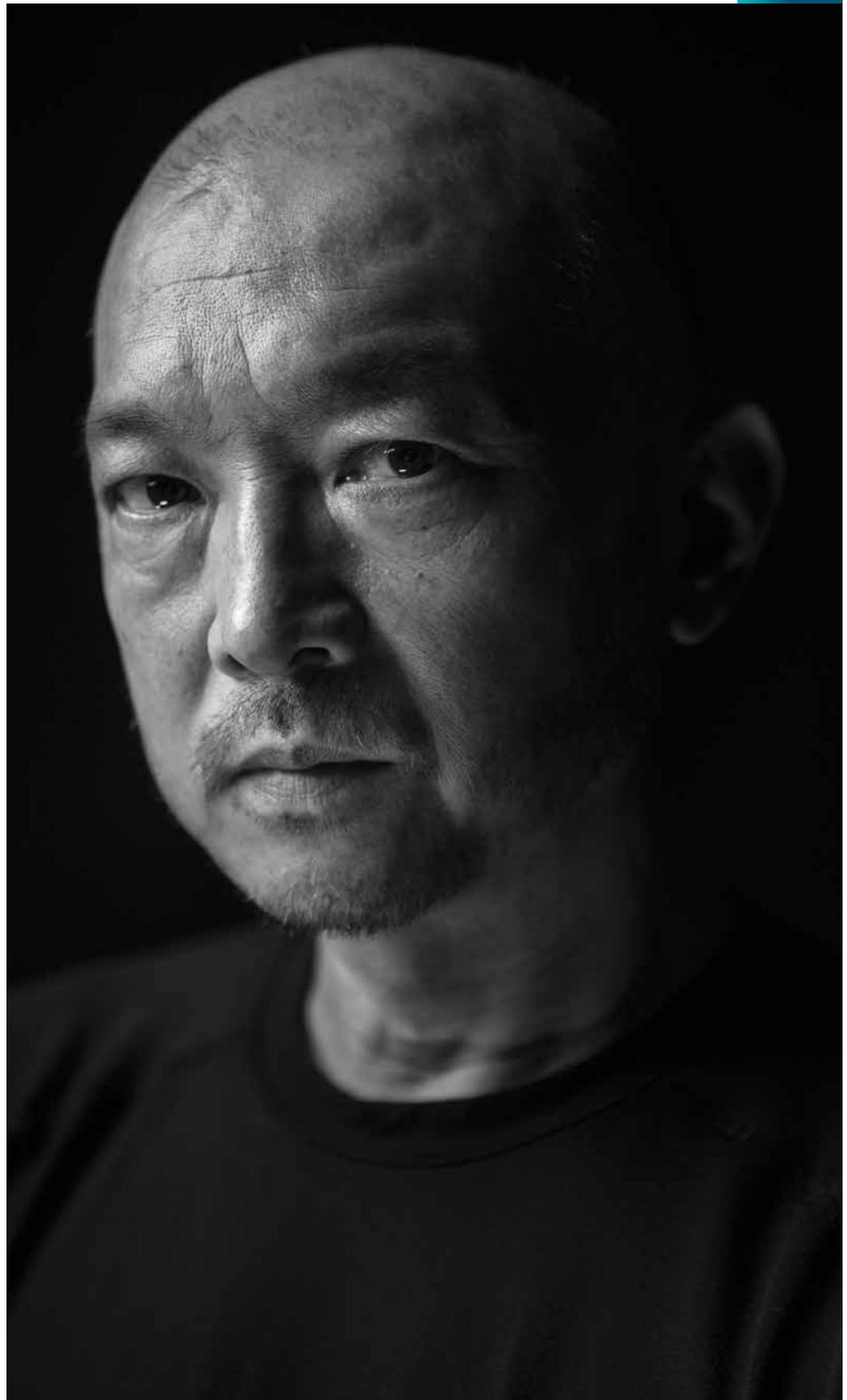
to shoot a gun.

Born and raised in China, Wang loved dance from the moment he saw his first ballet at six years old. Wang took dance lessons and danced for the Lanzhou Army Dance Company, and then the People's Liberation Army Academy of Art in Beijing. It was official policy for the army to have a presence in all aspects of Chinese society, including dance companies, and Wang underwent military training as part of his program. The army always comes first and pursuing other dreams comes second.

"I remember the first year when we got into the school, and we had a month where we went into the military training camps to learn how to shoot... because we're part of the army," says Wang. "It was different, but it's part of your life, your journey. And then we went back to our school to study [dance] training."

Wang and his family bowed to an oversized photo of Mao Zedong, the founding father of the People's Republic of China, every morning, and Wang studied Mao's *Little Red Book*, a collection of Mao's speeches and ideals, every night.

There was a lot of cultural unrest in China with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, but all Wang wanted to do was dance and serve his nation with dignity. It wasn't until Wang received an invite for Expo 86 in Vancouver that he realized there was a whole world of opportunities waiting for him. →





Wen Wei Wang



Diego Ramalho



Yoko Kanomata



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“We were so happy in China because we think we’re the best country with the best people,” says Wang, who believed that sentiment until he travelled out of the country for the first time in 1986. “I was like, ‘Oh my god, my life has been a lie for the last 20 years.’”

Leaving China proved to be more difficult than Wang thought. He dropped out of school because he’d be legally obligated to work in China for five years if he graduated. He also applied for a passport, which was a rare commodity in China, and a visa, for which he missed the deadline. Collecting the required paperwork took a year and a half, and Wang feared he would have to wait even longer to leave China, until he connected with the Canadian Ambassador who expedited Wang’s application. In the summer of 1991, Wang got on a plane for Vancouver.

Wang found his way to Ballet Edmonton in 2018 after dancing with Ballet BC for seven years and starting his own company, Wen Wei Dance, in 2003. At first, Wang wasn’t sure if he was right for the artistic director position at Ballet Edmonton, but he says success comes from never being comfortable in the work you’re doing, so he took the chance.

Sheri Somerville, executive director at Ballet Edmonton, knew as soon as she saw Wang’s work that he was the only person who could change the dynamic of the company.

“When I came on board [in 2015], I knew that we needed a leader in contemporary ballet who was well known, had a lot of relationships in that form, and I knew we needed to strengthen the organization,” says Somerville.

The announcement of Wang’s takeover followed the company’s name change from Citie Ballet to

a name that is recognizable and reminiscent of companies like Ballet BC. It was a defining moment for the oldest and only contemporary ballet company in the city, and the start of a new era.

“Toronto and Montreal have more contemporary dance [companies], and Edmonton has so many theatre companies,” says Wang. “But I believe Edmonton has lots of opportunities. It’s a large city and it needs to have its own company. That’s why I’m here.”

When Wang started, he had two main goals for the company: apply for grants, and employ dancers. He was shocked to discover that Ballet Edmonton wasn’t receiving any government funding, which allows companies to plan ahead and put them on the map nationally.

Next, he employed eight dancers who would usually be contract dancers, so they would have benefits and financial security. Nationally known companies like the National Ballet of Canada are known to hire dancers, however, small companies like Ballet Edmonton typically employ dancers under contract.

“That’s another big thing for a small company to be able to do,” says Wang. “When people come to Edmonton, they will feel at home and they’ll feel taken care of.”

Wang accomplished his main goals in two years, before the pandemic forced Ballet Edmonton to press pause on performances, rehearsals, and an international tour.

“For a particularly new company, it’s hard because you just started building, and then you have to drop it, and you just kind of hang there,” says Wang. “We’re still building, and I think that’s hurting us, but at the same

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time, we continued to work.”

Dancers were not able to be in the studio together due to restrictions, but that didn’t stop them from working.

Ballet Edmonton collaborated with organizations like Edmonton Opera and SkirtsAfire on a variety of virtual projects over the last year. Most recently, Ballet Edmonton and Brian Webb Dance Company presented *Persistence of Memory*, a film about the challenges and opportunities brought on by the pandemic.

While Ballet Edmonton won’t be announcing an official 2021/2022 season, there will still be performances to look forward to such as the annual *Be Merry* Christmas variety show and a performance in collaboration with the Art Gallery of Alberta in October. Patrons can take in the sights of the gallery while watching performances throughout the space.

“You don’t have to sit down for an hour – you can walk around the different rooms and we set up the performance,” says Wang. “It’s a different way to bring people in and you can watch dance, you can watch music, and then you can see the paintings. It is also quite unique and affordable.”

Going into his fourth year at Ballet Edmonton, Wang hopes to continue planning for the future and make up for lost time. He wants to bring in internationally known choreographers to work with the dancers, and plan for national and international tours, like the ones that were cancelled last year.

“We do have the room, the opportunity to create something incredible, but it takes time,” says Wang. “Everything takes time.” **ED**

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