

The Next Act

Tulsa Ballet's principal dancer reflects on his time with the company and his rising fame as a choreographer.

Oklahoma Magazine

By Regan Henson

June 2013

Read full story [here](#)

"If there is anything else you could do and possibly be happy, then go do that instead."

The words of advice are spoken only slightly in jest by Scott Black, managing director of Tulsa Ballet. He is talking about the ultra-competitive nature of the art of ballet, and of the dedication required to become a world-class dancer. But he is also describing the love for the art form that allows one to ignore the sore muscles and creaky joints that follow hours spent in dance studios.

He is talking about Ma Cong.

"You don't often have dancers that come along and really grow with a company like Ma has," says Black. "The audience has seen something special in him from the moment he arrived. He captivates on stage."

It has been obvious to Tulsa audiences since he joined Tulsa Ballet in 1999 that Cong is happiest when on stage. It has been his one love since he was a child in China, performing for audiences 3,000 strong as a precocious 3-year-old.

"My mom knew when she was pregnant with me that I would be a dancer," Cong says. "I was moving and kicking a lot in the womb."

At age 10, Cong was one of only four students out of 4,000 candidates chosen to join the Beijing Dance Academy. He traveled nearly 2,000 miles alone from his home in Yu Xi, the first steps in a life spent following the ballet, steps that have taken him to the National Ballet of China and all around the globe before eventually landing in Tulsa.

"I was really lucky that Marcello found the tape of me," Cong says. He is referring to Marcello Angelini, the Tulsa Ballet's artistic director, who recruited Ma in 1999. "Lucky" is a word he uses often. It is quite obviously the wrong word, but he truly believes it to be the right one.

"He thinks he's one lucky guy, and in some ways maybe he is," says Jackie Kouri. "But he's earned everything he's ever received. I've never known anyone so humble and grateful, so brilliant in so many ways. He gives all the credit to everyone else."

Kouri, a longtime supporter of the Tulsa Ballet who chaired the company's integrated campaign that raised more than \$17 million, has closely followed Cong's career since he arrived in Tulsa. She has seen the things that drew the attention of Angelini when he offered Cong a contract without ever having seen him dance in person.

"I realized that he was spending his lunch break in one of the studios choreographing steps for himself."

"I hired Ma from a videotape," recalls Angelini. "When he arrived, it was clear that he had a lot of talent. He was charismatic, gifted with a very unique movement quality, eager to succeed and not afraid to do as much work as necessary to fulfill his dreams. Within a short time he was promoted to soloist and then to principal dancer."

Perhaps there was some luck involved, but not in the way Cong describes. The Tulsa Ballet has been lucky in almost every aspect regarding its relationship with Cong, from persuading him to join to his decision not to leave.

"It was hard for me at first," Cong says of moving to Tulsa. "I was completely shocked. It was a completely different vibe. There were no people walking. Everyone drove everywhere. I didn't speak any English, only a few words. After the first six months, I thought I might go home. It was hard, being young. But soon I began making new friends. There were so many generous, kind people who want to help you. I began to see the passion and energy of the city."

Fourteen years later, Cong's career as a dancer draws to a close. He retired from his position of principal dancer with the Tulsa Ballet in May to focus on his burgeoning career as a choreographer. It is a path he has been on since not long after arriving in Tulsa, when a bit of luck led to Angelini's commissioning his first work as a choreographer.

"I realized that he was spending his lunch break in one of the studios choreographing steps for himself," Angelini recalls. "I started 'spying' on him and became aware that he had a lot of potential as a choreographer, too. So, in 2004, I commissioned his first creation for the company. *Folia* was a great success, so I commissioned (from) him a second one. The great thing about Ma is that he grew with each new work he created for the company. Today he is a very successful choreographer, having created or staged works for a dozen American companies and already starting to receive international interest and commissions."

Cong's original works have been performed around the country and across the globe. It is this role that has allowed him to transition smoothly from the physical demands of being a full-time dancer while allowing him to remain firmly at work in the arts.

"I'm not young anymore," Cong says. "It gets harder to wake up to knee and back pain. I had to realize that it doesn't matter how much passion you have. Physically, I need a break.

"But I'm really lucky that Marcello discovered me," he continues. "It can be hard for an artistic director to find that creative source. But for me, the art is a mission. I want to inspire and educate, to make people feel that they are related to the art form. Art is food for the soul. Without art, you have no food."

Even as he says farewell to the stage as a performer, fans of ballet in Tulsa can expect to continue to see plenty of Cong in other roles, such as his recent turn as dance choreographer for Tulsa Opera's production of *Aida*. Or simply as a Tulsan, where he might be spied strolling along Riverside, enjoying nature and the sights of the city.

"I always love to see the active side of the city," he says, "People out running, the birds singing. People in Oklahoma are very generous, and I have a lot of appreciation for that. It is very easy to relate to people here. When you walk down the street, people say hi."

If you're lucky enough to run into Cong on the streets of Tulsa, make sure and say, "Hi."



Scott Miller