

## **Tulsa Ballet's Ma Cong leaving to devote himself to choreography**

**Tulsa Ballet dancer to give up performing, focus on choreography**

**Tulsa World**

**By James D. Watts, Jr.**

**3/10/2013**

**Read full story [here](#)**

"Retirement" is not a word Ma Cong likes to use.

"It's so final," said Cong, principal dancer with Tulsa Ballet. "To me, retirement means the end of something - that you are done and are leaving some part of your life behind."

But that is, in effect, what Cong is planning to do, once the curtain goes down on the final performance of Tulsa Ballet's upcoming "Balanchine and Beyond" production. Cong will dance in two of the three ballets that make up this program - George Balanchine's "The Four Temperaments" and James Kudelka's "There, Below."

And those will likely be his final performances as a principal dancer with Tulsa Ballet. Cong is the third of the company's veteran dancers - following principal dancer Alfonso Martin and senior soloist Alexandra Bergman - who will be retiring as performers at the end of this season.

"It is definitely the end of an era for the ballet," said Marcello Angelini, the company's artistic director. "Tulsa Ballet has a storied history, built by people who have dedicated their lives to the organization. Ma Cong definitely belongs in this group."

Since joining the company in 1999, Cong has been one of Tulsa Ballet's most popular dancers. His athleticism, expressiveness and remarkably fluid grace has been showcased in ballets ranging from the highly dramatic, such as his performance as Escamillo in Amedeo Amodio's "Carmen," to the whimsical, playing Puck in Christopher Wheeldon's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," from the dark abstractions of Nacho Duato to the rousing Russian variation in "The Nutcracker."

Cong, however, will not be leaving the company completely. He is still Tulsa Ballet's resident choreographer, and his latest creation will have its world premiere in May as part of "Creations in Studio K."

"That is why I don't want to say I am retiring," Cong said. "I have too much passion for dance to leave it behind. It has been a major part of my life since I first went on stage when I was 3 years old. I can't imagine leaving dance behind and becoming a scientist or something completely different."

It is Cong's burgeoning career as a choreographer that led in large part to his decision to cease performing.

Tulsa Ballet artistic director Marcello Angelini recalled the first moment he realized that Ma Cong the dancer might become Ma Cong the choreographer.

"I happened to be in the library for a meeting, and there was Ma in the studio next door, playing music very loudly and improvising," he said. "I started making a habit of sitting in the library during lunch break, with the lights down so he couldn't see me, and observe his choreographic process.

"It became apparent that the guy had 'the stuff,'" Angelini said. "And that led to his first commission for the company."

Since creating his first original work - a piece that was premiered in 2003 by students of the Tulsa Ballet Center for Dance Education - Cong has choreographed dances for such companies as Richmond Ballet, Smuin Ballet in San Francisco, Houston Ballet and Ballet Met in Colorado, as well as creating 10 ballets for Tulsa Ballet, including "Tethered Pulse" and a much-acclaimed version of "Carmina Burana."

The Joffrey Ballet in Chicago will premiere one of his ballets this Sunday, and later this year, the Queensland Ballet in Australia will perform Cong's "Ershter Vals" - a work that the Richmond Ballet last year performed at the Royal Opera House in London.

"I am getting more and more requests and commissions for choreography," Cong said, "that it has really overtaken my dancing. I realized that all the energy that I was putting into performing, I could be channeling into my choreography."

He recalled a conversation with Li Cunxin, the subject of the recent film "Mao's Last Dancer," and now the artistic director of the Queensland Ballet.

"He said to me, 'If you do not close one door, another new, greater door may never open,'" Cong said. "So that is what I am doing. I am opening a new door."

Cong gave his first performance at age 3, but it wasn't until he was 10 that he began formal dance studies, learning classical Chinese folk dancing at the Beijing Dance Academy.

He was 17 when a teacher suggested he consider studying ballet. Soon, he was a principal dancer with the National Ballet of China, which specialized in classical ballet. Angelini said a fellow dancer encouraged him to consider hiring Cong for Tulsa Ballet.

"His ability to command the stage and the attention of the audience was immediately apparent," Angelini said. "Within a few years, he became an audience favorite and one of the most recognizable faces of the company."

Tulsa Ballet was also Cong's introduction to America.

"I knew some simple words - chair, table, hat - but not how to put them together into sentences," he said. "I remember trying to mail a letter to my sister in China and that it took me what seems like hours to tell the lady at the post office that I wanted a stamp." Cong's English has improved during his 14 years in Oklahoma, though he said it is a little disconcerting to be told by his family, when he visits them, that he is "too American - the gestures I make, or that I say 'thank you' a lot."

As for his immediate future, Cong already has commissions for new works or restagings of his existing ballets for companies in Sacramento, Calif.; Louisville, Ky.; and Singapore set for 2014.

"For much of my life," he said, "my goal was to develop myself to the highest level of dancing. And I've been very fortunate that Tulsa Ballet has provided me the opportunity to perform ballets by most of the world's great choreographers. I feel I've done everything I've wanted to do.

"Now, it's on to new possibilities," Cong said. "That is what I look for when I am creating a dance - those times when you are working with the dancers and together you discover the perfect way to move from one combination of steps to the next. Out of all the possibilities, together you have found the right one. To me, those are the most beautiful moments you can have in dance."



Tulsa Ballet dancer Ma Cong, who will dance his last performances with the company this weekend, will be channeling his energies into choreography. MICHAEL WYKE/Tulsa World