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Li Chiao-Ping's Knotcracker Knocks Sox Off



"Faux Pas" photo by John Maniaci

by Susan Kepecs

*Knotcracker*, a new full length, two-act anti-ballet from Madison's premier second-wave postmodern choreographer and UW Dance prof Li Chiao-Ping (in Overture's Promenade Hall last weekend, Dec. 3-5) was no *Nutcracker* knockoff. Li's holiday gift to the city was seriously original, and often hilarious – not an adjective anyone would apply to the nineteenth century holiday classic.

Though Li's made funny dances before, much of her oeuvre is decidedly intellectual instead. *Knotcracker* had broad audience appeal, in a very non-slick, un-commercial, from-the-heart way. Personally I like edgy performances, but an occasional work that packs popular punch can only be good for postmodern dance in general, and for Li's company in particular.

*Knotcracker* mixed Li's current professional company with community

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dancers, including seniors and the physically differently abled, most of whom have been working with Li for years. The professional troupe isn't the strongest Li's had, since about half the dancers are new this season. But the choreography fit them fine, and the community group has never looked better. I was dismayed to find no notes about these brave non-pros in the program's dancers' biographies section.

For *Knotcracker*, Li took a cubist approach to a loose tale in which the protagonist, Little Miss Steps – a bit of a misfit in big red sneakers – is determined to dance. We see her at the beginning and end of the program as a little girl (Kenna Titus), though the main story revolves around a young adult (company member Liz Sexe) who ultimately triumphs over the trials and tribulations of the bunhead, Pilates-toned, conformist dance world.

Seventeen short dances revealed clever facets of both the heroine's story and the artificial chunks into which this thing we call dance is divided. The story's non-linear arrangement was highlighted with a fragmented score mixing classical composers – Mozart, Prokofiev, Strauss – with klezmer, Indipop and contemporary electronica by local musicians Patrick Reinholz, Matan Rubenstein and Ben Willis.

Yes, there were several *Nutcracker* references. The most overt one opened the show. Li, as Mother Ginger, a staple character in *Nutcracker*'s Act II, rolled in regally on a high platform and released horde of small children – young Little Miss Steps' companions – from beneath her gigantic skirts. Slightly subtler was “Tangle,” a sideways glance at the parents' cotillion from *Nut*'s Act I. The playful pairs piece for community and company performers, set to an infectious sound track by local klezmer band Yid Vicious, injected a soupçon of Chanukah into the lopsided sectarian season.

*Knotcracker*, in fact, knocked the art of ballet jokes out of the park. My favorite piece, “Faux Pas,” was a tongue in cheek, anti-classical pas de six reminiscent of “Go,” Li's brilliant 1995 *Swan Lake* in combat boots. In “Faux Pas,” dancers in clunky laceup pointe shoes and wildly deconstructed tutus danced a mix of Li's unmistakable movement vocabulary and turned-in, knock kneed, flexed foot pique turns and penchee arabesques. Of course, “Faux Pas” was part of the story, so when Little Miss Steps tried to join the ballerinas they hissed at her and stomped offstage.

Divertissements are little dances – diversions, or amusements – that interrupt the narratives of traditional story ballets. In *Nutcracker*, the divertissements are balletic folkdances – Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Arabian – that break up Act II. The *Knotcracker* program listed three divertissements, and the very idea of deconstructing this formal but inconsequential element of classical ballet tickled my funnybone. No. 1, “Knot in Kansas,” was a high energy, shake-fisted boogie featuring Michael Ziemet, one of Li's long-time community dancers. In “Lumen Beings” dancers moved in the dark with flashlights in understated homage to certain works by multimedia dance theater maven and UW alum Tim Glenn or his late mentor, Alwin Nikolais. No. 3, “Seeing I to I,” performed by the company in black tutus and bright bodices, was built of quintessential Li-isms. But a fourth piece, “A World, A Part” – a looney-bin bit of fun in which Li's community dancers spoke in tongues to Matan Rubenstein's electronic score – fit the divertissement mold, too.

Ballet wasn't the only target for Li's sharp-eyed wit. In “eRacers” she set her sights on the Pilates craze, moving the storyline forward with a dance in which Little Miss Steps was rejected by a sorority of firm-up fanatics dressed identically in black pants and sunglasses, flaunting their pink and blue – eraser colored – Pilates mats.

Dances to utter absurdity – “A World, A Part,” and “Aqueducks,” in which “swimmers” in flapper-style bathing suits made Miss Steps smile by spouting real water as they mimed the crawl – filled the space between “eRacers” and the story's four-installment denouement. In the first of these, “Stamps of Approval” – a party of line and circle dances, full of spins, jumps and hand jives – Little Miss Steps finally cracked the knot, claiming her spot in the midst of the action. In “Miss Steps Misses

Steps No More,” she soloed happily. “Playground – Reprise Surprise Oh Mys” featured community dancers’ bodies as playground equipment for the cast’s little kids plus a charming two-piece Chinese dragon, courtesy of the Zhong Yi Jung Fu Association, in a tender duet with young Little Miss Steps. In “Esperanto Stomp,” the finale, everyone from community elders to little kids let loose, with both Little Miss Steps smack in the center.

This long spate of relentless joy is, in fact, my only gripe. I’d have broken it up, giving Little Miss Steps one last hurdle before the finale – a dangerous, clunky, anti-Sugarplummy pas de deux.

Posted by Susan Kepecs at 4:06 PM [0 Comments](#)

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