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Li Chiao Ping's Bright, Shiny Armature



Li, in "Tome" © Craig Schreiner

by Susan Kepecs

Li Chiao Ping Dance presented *Armature: in media res*, the final installment of the company's twenty-year retrospective, at Overture's Promenade Hall last weekend (Dec. 10-13 – I attended on Dec. 11). Li is a powerful performer and a major force in the world of second-wave postmodern choreographers. Her modus operandi is intellectual and kinetic, achingly personal and/or oddly abstract. Her idiosyncratic

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vocabulary melds a buff, angular, egalitarian aesthetic with a quasi-classical countercurrent. Autobiographical solos, dances devised over spoken-word works, and dada-esque ensemble un-ballets are her bailiwick.

Only one piece on this program, “Past Forward,” which I described after its 2006 premiere as a happy demon dance (for three), fell flat – the dancers were strong, but the work itself this time around struck me as simply a vehicle for Li’s movement style, lacking the meaty content that defines most of her oeuvre.

The rest of the bill was compelling, featuring dances old and new that I was delighted to see again, or to experience for the first time. “Aqueducks,” an absurd divertissement excerpted from Li’s 2010 holiday un-ballet, *The Knotcracker*, lacked the layers of intellectual nuances that prevailed elsewhere in this program, but it exemplified Li’s razor-sharp sense of humor – and in these dark times if you can make your audience laugh at a postmodern dance concert, you’re onto something.

“Cline,” choreographed this year, was built around the company’s six current core dancers plus Li, whose powerful presence bookended the corps performance. Like “Past Forward,” “Cline,” a minimalist piece, was essentially a vehicle for Li’s vocabulary. But its formal structure was engagingly complex, built like a Balanchine ensemble ballet with groups of dancers crossing in space while executing different but related moves, or moving in unison, or mirroring each other in pairs and trios. Sets of Li-isms – spin, fall, fling, run; rollover, shoulder stand, push-pull, carve through space – meshed seamlessly with artifice-less balletic references (little coupe jeté turns; a promenade in low arabesque; brief pas de deux with small, low lifts).

Li excerpted three substantive solos, strung together like pearls on a string of dancing soliloquys, from her autobiographical exposé *Yellow River*, originally an evening-length solo program that premiered in San Francisco in 1991 and which she performed herself. I’ve seen extracts from this work before, but never so many at once. Taken together, these dances deftly dissected the Chinese-American experience. East met west; superstition clashed with science. Li ran in place, center stage, spouting a string of old wives’ tales – a metaphysical net from which she tried to break free. The following solo, titled “I can feel the rings” – set to a remarkable field recording of Chinese Gypsy women recorded by Li’s father – was set on Toronto-based guest artist Susan Lee, whose grasp of its content was primordial; dancing as if driven by external forces, she exposed a veiled edge of violence shot through with pleas to invisible deities. From traditional China the story leapt to the modern West; the Mozart-driven “Exact and Precise,” danced by LCPD veteran Liz Sexe, was playful, with patterns that repeated but became more complex – dance as music made visible, as Balanchine liked to say. Finally, “Tome” featured Li, small but mighty, with a big old dictionary that served as a low pedestal on which she pivoted, or crouched, or balanced on one foot in penché, working leg in low arabesque – so hard! – while reciting mathematical constructs.

“Refrain,” choreographed in 1999 (though I’ve never seen it before), was bravely performed by Megan Thompson, who’s danced with LCPD on and off for years. She wore a deconstructed tutu of the sort Li often uses to signal her un-ballet genre – red tulle pinned in odd spots over a burgundy-toned leotard. A round spotlight like a full moon projected on the backdrop heightened this dramatic – ok, operatic – dance, set (what else?) to Wagner. Balletic components – cambrés, port de bras, second position pliés – were channeled through Li’s angular style. Thompson’s ironic facial expressions underscored the tongue-in-cheek intent of this piece.

“Gó” (1995), an un-ballet named for the ancient Chinese board game played with black and white stones, underwent slight modifications in the early 2000s and then disappeared from Li’s active repertory. The 2015 version, “Gó Redux,” was mostly its sassy old self – a double whammy that deconstructs ballet both avant-garde and nineteenth century classical. With dancers in black halter tops, little white tutus,

and combat boots, this witty work flaunts – in Li’s vocabulary – the rhythmic, tribal thrust of the 1913 Stravinsky / Nijinsky collaboration *Rite of Spring* (to which Li paid direct homage during its centennial year), plus some beloved clichés from the 1895 Tchaikovsky / Petipa *Swan Lake* including the famous dance of the four arms-crossed cygnets. “Gó” is dynamite dancemaking, eye-popping and filled with references that click. I was mystified, though, when “Gó Redux” ended with a trick seemingly lifted from the Hubbard Street Dance vocabulary – empty dresses traveling across the stage (here, on a clothesline). We’ve seen variations on this theme in Jiri Kylian’s signature piece, “Petite Mort,” and in other works staged by Hubbard in the early 2000s. Knowing Li, the reference probably was intentional, but it felt like an afterthought – a non-sequitur among the brighter puns in this piece.

The pièce de resistance in *Armature* was the world premiere of the title work, “in media res.” For sheer physiopsychological challenge it bore relation to Elizabeth Streb’s “Board” – a dance featuring a soloist, a mat, and game of chicken with a spinning two-by-four that I’ve seen Li perform twice. “In media res” is a strong, resonant piece, threaded with spoken words in nonsensical sequences that evoked its title or its actions. It featured a fearless Li at the peak of tensegrity, performing impossible feats with a small, plain work table; she lifted it on her shoulders like Charles Atlas, slid beneath it and hung off its edge, went from downward dog to headstand on its top,

promenaded there in low arabesque, slid backwards to hang off its edge, teetering on the small of her back, then fired up her core to spring up – a Pilates teaser – before leaping to her feet on the tabletop and jumping down, to vanish and re-emerge, mysteriously, framed in a string of lights.

Brava.



Li, "in media res" © Craig Schreiner

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