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Twists and Turns

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Do you find comfort in tradition this time of year. How many of us turn to stories, foods and songs during the holidays at least in part because we've done so in years past? Yet there's something satisfying—exhilarating, even—about infusing new life into customs.

Out of this idea came *The Knotcracker*, a new work by [Li Chiao-Ping Dance](#) that ran December 3–5 at Overture Center. Li considered making her own version of *The Nutcracker*, but what she created isn't a modern re-envisioning of the classic ballet. Rather, it draws upon the story to offer something entirely new.

In the program for *The Knotcracker*, Li states that the contemporary work was inspired partly by news stories of bullying in school. Her seventeen-movement production is a beautiful story about trying to fit in and ultimately learning to love who you are.

The show opens with a *Nutcracker* reference: A tall woman teeters onto the stage and half a dozen kids run out from underneath her skirt. That's where we meet our protagonist, Little Miss Steps, a red-shoed girl who tries to play with the other children but is excluded.

Little Miss Steps travels into different scenes, reminiscent of *The Nutcracker's* Clara. Yet this girl is no passive observer. She throws herself into each new world, attempting to dance with its inhabitants, such as a group of edgy Sugar Plum-like fairies in black tops and deconstructed tutus.

Your heart swells as Little Miss Steps is finally accepted by a few characters, such as a woman who performs with a large swath of fabric hanging from the ceiling. They cocoon themselves in the fabric and it feels like the girl is embraced both physically and emotionally.

The performance is stunning—fluid and athletic—as well as burst-out-laughing funny. There's great timing in a scene featuring three synchronized swimmers, clad in old-fashioned bathing suits and flippers, who squirt water from their mouths.

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And a fantastic satirical movement brings a mob of girls, all wearing white button-down shirts and black pants, running on stage with yoga mats. They create a frenzy of downward dogs and other poses carried out in rapid movements—set to “Flight of the Bumblebee,” no less.

As Little Miss Steps moves through the show, she grows in age, with the older version of the girl played deftly by company member Liz Sexe. The character finds a mentor of sorts in Li, and you can’t take your eyes off the two as they dance together. Near the end, the protagonist encounters a group of dancers and her movements begin to fit in with theirs. Soon, each young woman takes a turn dancing in the center of a circle, her strengths and personality coming out for the others to appreciate.

With this newfound confidence, Little Miss Steps is the only person brave enough to stand up to a beast, portrayed by a brilliant Chinese dragon. But soon she befriends him and other children begin gathering around to pet its giant head.

Overcoming setbacks, discovering oneself and using unique, personal gifts to improve life and connect—the story of the Knotcracker seems like a tradition more than worth keeping.

Find more information on Li Chiao-Ping Dance at lichiaopingdance.org.

Photo courtesy of Li Chiao-Ping Dance; find other images on the company’s [Facebook page](#).

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