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Li Chiao-Ping Dance treads lightly on life's tribulations

By KARYN SAEMANN | Special to 77 Square | features@madison.com Mar 6, 2010



JOHN MANIACI

Emily Miller, a Li Chiao-Ping Dance company dancer, performed in "eVOLUTION" on Friday, March 6, 2010 in the Overture Center.

Life can be funny.

It can also be tedious, exasperating, pressure-filled, whirling too fast and just generally difficult until the most mundane acts, like getting out of bed, feel overwhelming.

Sometimes all that gets us through is a sense of humor.

In "evolution," presented Friday night at the Overture Center's Promenade Hall, Li Chiao-Ping Dance trod lightly on the subject of life's tribulations, offering a large, appreciative audience plenty to smile, even laugh, about.

Four of the two-hour program's six works were premieres -- "Press," "(Baby)Toddler on Board," "Rust/Rise/Rest," and "d-evol.ve."

It was, in general, a really good night.

Li's troupe of nine dancers, including herself and guest Cynthia Adams, were much more in tune each other than in last October's "Pagoda" concert at the Wisconsin Union Theater.

The dancers, many of whom were new to the company last fall, clearly have spent a lot of time together in the ensuing months. It showed in their comfort level, with lots of smoothly executed lifts and a general ease in which they moved around each other. Technically, the newer company members also simply looked stronger than last fall, with a good, clean athleticism, great endurance in pieces that stretched long and were complex and some excellent solo moments.

"Pagoda," of course, was challenging because the choreography demanded that dancers move in a taxing, slow-motion manner. But given Friday night's performance, one has to believe that "Pagoda," too, would have been better had it been done now.

Choreographically, Friday night was often about quirkiness.

"Fin de Siecle" began with Li dancing solo in a strange outer space-influenced get-up that included a tight-fitting cap and a half tutu over a red and black bodysuit.

Her movements, backed by old black and white "Flash Gordon" movie footage and weird chanting that ebbed and flowed along with the movie plot's crescendos and decrescendos, felt puppet (or perhaps harlequin) like. It was certainly different from the more fluid way audiences are used to seeing Li move. It was fun to an artist step out of her typical mold.

In the second part of that piece five dancers clad in similar costumes, and moving in a similarly puppet-like way, joined in.

Humor abounded all night but particularly in "(Baby)Toddler on Board," an ode to parenting toddlers. Choreographed by Li and Adams, it made reference to Dr. Seuss and children's toys and parodied the signets' arm-crossed dance from "Swan Lake," comparing parenting insecurities with trying to perform difficult choreography that leaves you feeling woefully incapable.

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The title of "Galapagos Olympiad," taken from the Pacific chain of islands, seemed to suggest that individuals are only tentatively connected to each other as they race through life, perhaps like horses that share a track but are each in their own lane and who wear blinders that obscure others from view. Or like socks drying on a line, each constrained by their own clothespin.

"Rust/Rise/Rest," a solo choreographed by Li and danced by the beautifully agile Ella Rosewood, celebrated life at its most basic -- getting out of bed, facing the day and collapsing back in at night. Rosewood moved on and around a large feather bed.

In "Press," choreographed by Lionel Popkin, dancers scooted along while embracing, lifted each other up on their backs, squashed their faces and laid on top of each other, in general showing how we react to touch.

Finally, in "d-evol.ve," company members shared the stage with guests from the Madison Senior Center. Participants held balloons, blew soap bubbles, swam in an imaginary sea and moved to a score that ranged from old video game sounds like the famous, often parodied, signal of Pacman's demise to songs like Queen's "We are the Champions," that speaks of life's mistakes, to the Beatles' "Revolution," which croons that everything is "gonna be alright."

Just do a cartwheel or two, take time to blow some soap bubbles and you'll be fine.

Overall, "evolution," was a great night of movement with a resonating, concrete theme that even audience members with minimal dance background could wrap their heads around, connect with, and come away feeling enlightened over.

Li Chiao-Ping Dance will repeat "evolution," Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m.



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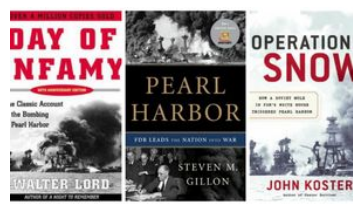


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