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## Working Out With Li Chiao-Ping

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John Maniaci, Courtesy Li

The modern choreographer/dancer builds extreme strength.

In the final moments of her piece *From Grace*, Li Chiao-Ping carries three dancers across the stage. At 52 years old, this Wisconsin-based dancer/choreographer is as strong as ever.

A believer in daily strength training, Li sets the bar high for both the dancers in her company, Li Chiao-Ping Dance, and her students at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Regular conditioning helps her develop power for the heavy lifting, quick falls and off-balance positions she uses in her work. About 20 years ago, she codified her exercises into a cross-training program for dancers, called “Extreme

Moves.”

The class begins seated on a physio ball, bouncing lightly to work on balance and alignment. Push-ups and downward-dog-like balances follow. The idea is to perform an adaptable range of progressions, from beginner movements (such as a push-up with hands on the floor and hips supported by the ball) to more advanced ones (with the body in plank position, with just the toes on the ball, for example). Li believes that working with an unstable base like the ball stresses the core and upper body, building strength more quickly.

The class then works on different kinds of inversions, such as handstands, headstands, cartwheels, shoulder stands, elbow stands, handstand forward rolls and backward rolls into handstands. (Li was a gymnast before she became a dancer.) Careful to contextualize the strengthening moves within the framework of dance, Li builds phrase-work, improvisation and choreography into the workout to remind dancers that the skills they are working on apply directly to their art.



Janson Heintz, Courtesy Li

**Everyday Tools**



"You can use almost anything—cans of soup, one-gallon jugs of water—for weights and resistance. A towel or bedsheet works great for strengthening the arch of the foot."

### Nutrition Strategies



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**Pre-performance soup:** "Having hot soup a couple hours before a show helps me feel grounded but not too full."

**Vegetarian compromise:** "Dinner is usually rice, tofu and vegetables like broccoli, kale, Brussels sprouts, green beans or asparagus. I am mostly vegetarian, but if I crave meat or fish, I eat it. The protein is especially important for strength training."

**Energy food:** "I fuel up with whole grains (pasta, rice, breads) for long-term energy. I also try to keep nuts, trail mix, granola-type bars or other snacks in my bag."

**Micronutrients:** "I sometimes add Emergen-C to my water or tea as an extra precaution. I also eat bananas and other potassium-rich foods."



**Hydration:** "When I'm performing a lot, I have a sports drink to restore electrolytes."

**More than fuel:** "My mother gave me a more mystical sense of food. When my foot was badly injured, she prepared frog legs for me so that I could jump again."

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