

## Joy and exuberance abound in Li Chiao-Ping Dance's "The Knotcracker"

by **KATIE REISER**  
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JOHN MANIACI

On the playground the kids exclude and bully Little Miss Steps.

Each holiday arts season brings the usual host of visitors, like the Sugar Plum Fairy, Amahl, Tiny Tim and Frosty. But Little Miss Steps, the lead character in *The Knotcracker* by **Li Chiao-Ping Dance**, ushers us into a realm both unusual and unexpected. Never at a loss for clever ideas (and puns, for that matter), UW dance professor Li gives us this quirky antidote to the sometimes too-sweet Christmas offerings. Its four-day run began Thursday in Overture Center's Promenade Hall.

The work, which premiered in 2010, follows Little Miss Steps on her journey to find acceptance -- first from others, then from herself. The show opens with the sight of Li riffing on the Mother Ginger character in *The Nutcracker*. She sways on top of her hoopskirt-covered stilts, chains jingling and streaming off her costume as little children tumble out from beneath her hem. On the playground the kids exclude and bully Little Miss Steps, who is first played by Kenna Titus, and later by grownup dancer Liz Sexe; both have a fresh-faced, wide-eyed appeal. Little Miss Steps doesn't look like the others, and despite her efforts to fit in, she doesn't act like them.

When Sexe takes over, Little Miss Steps encounters a series of vignettes featuring a variety of performers. She ultimately finds her way to happiness, promoting kindness and tolerance. Back at the playground, the things are now harmonious.

Li uses music wisely throughout. The intensity of Prokofiev's "Dance of the Knights,"

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from *Romeo and Juliet*, is matched by a gang of fierce dancers clad in menacing tutus, black pointe shoes and tulle neck ruffs. They rebuke Sexe. Later, a manic yoga class is held to Rimsky-Korsakov's "Flight of the Bumblebee"; a speed skater dances heroically to Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man"; and Sheila Chandra's percussive, mesmerizing "Speaking in Tongues II" has Sexe and Li moving precisely.

Later still, klezmer music by Yid Vicious is the score for my favorite divertissement. Sexe and Li are joined by the excellent Rachel Krinsky and Nicole Roerick, both donning hats that may have been in Julie Christie's *Doctor Zhivago* wardrobe. They repeat a beautiful movement phrase again and again. Their arms chop into their abdomens, and they fold over. They fling their arms upwards and settle shoulders back into place before gently circling their heads around. Then their arms scissor stiffly out to the side. The four are such exemplary practitioners of Li's brand of dance -- stopping on a dime, suspending different body parts and slicing through space with determination.

Li is an interesting study in contrasts -- some of her works are very serious and cerebral, but here she gets silly, even kitschy. In a dance called "Aqueducks" (remember what I said about those puns), a bikini-clad Sexe sits beneath a beach umbrella as three bathing beauties sport bathing caps, swim flippers and ruffled bathing trunks. They somehow manage to look graceful, even sexy, as they spew water like statues in a fountain and explore the effect of giant flippered feet on dance steps.

With Li, you get the sense that she views dance as a more democratic art than most choreographers. As is often the case with Li works, *The Knotcracker* includes members of the community. The cast includes children, martial artists, a Chinese dragon and an aerialist who all come together for a finale that is a hootenanny of dance and music. I didn't love everything I saw, and I sometimes wish Li would edit her own work with a keener eye, but joy and exuberance abound.



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