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## 'Knotcracker' dances away from traditional holiday fare

KARYN SAEMANN | Special to 77 Square Dec 5, 2010



JOHN MANIACI

Mariah Meyer LeFeber performs Li Chiao-Ping's Go in "The Knot Cracker."

For a few moments early in "The Knotcracker," Li Chiao-Ping Dance's new production premiering this weekend at the Overture Center's Promenade Hall, things felt holidayish.

In a take-off of "The Nutcracker" ballet, artistic director and company founder Li Chiao-Ping rolled out Mother Ginger style, high atop a gorgeous, green and gold brocade gown. As in the ballet, a gaggle of children ran out from under her skirts and proceeded to dance.

Then -- in a purposeful move Li discussed in a program note -- the content shifted course, with nary another glimpse of traditional December jollity.

It felt clarifying, actually, in a month so steeped in fa la la, to break away for the duration of Saturday night's 90-minute concert.

In 17 movements that were alternately poignant and laugh-out-loud funny, the show tackled the idea of how horribly we treat people who don't fit into neatly defined, mainstream boxes.

The story, which had hint of bite but wasn't excessively edgy, followed a young girl name Little Miss Steps and her adult counterpart. In a series of situations, she was rejected by other people. Sometimes they packed up their things and left when she arrived, and other times they aggressively advanced on her in a bully pack.

The dancers represented a wide range of ages, from children to seniors, with a range of abilities. That mix intentionally played into the theme of accepting differences.

The star of the evening was company member Liz Sexe as the adult Little Miss Steps, who has come far since a hesitant debut with Li Chiao-Ping Dance in 2009.

On Saturday night, Sexe was artistically strong and very confident as she fronted ensembles, soloed and, several times, dueted with Li. It was in the beautifully synched duets, as she and Li twisted, rolled and offered some great, fast footwork, that Sexe's growth of the past year really showed. Her wide-eyed, pigtailed stage presence also hit just the right note.

It was a breakout performance that makes Sexe, a Dane County native from Deerfield, a local artist to watch.

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Many things worked well Saturday night, in particular: a duet in which Sexe and Hildy Feen flipped and spun from long ribbons suspended from the ceiling; the athletic agility of dancer Mychelyn McConley; a hilarious synchronized swimming spoof during which flippered and bathing-capped dancers Rachel Krinsky, Emily Miller and Ella Rosewood, among other antics, spouted water from their mouths; and the Chinese dragon dance that capped off the show, performed by guest artists from the Zhong Yi Kung Fu Association.

There were also moments that didn't feel dead-on, including the program's third movement, "Faux Pas." It felt muddled; dancers were not always together, and the quality of execution was inconsistent. And the music was too soft; you almost had to strain to hear it.

The ensemble work, however, seemed to strengthen as the program progressed, with a good showing by the final movements.

Overall, it was a wonderfully conceived, well-danced night that refreshingly stepped beyond the season's too-familiar box.

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