

Li Chiao-Ping delivers seven stunning solos in 'Women Dancing'

by SUSAN KEPECS
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Li Chiao-Ping performing Elizabeth Streb's "Board"

Li Chiao-Ping's "Women Dancing," at the Wisconsin Union Theater last Saturday night, consisted of seven solos made for the Madison-based artist by a who's who of postmodern choreographers. These are edgy works and Li's dancing looks peak. She moved. She put ballon in her sturdy style. "Women Dancing" was tough and smart. It beat the pants off the tired contemporary dance repertory shows from Chicago and New York this season.

Part of this concert's charm stemmed from Li's finesse as a soloist. The rest sprang from the surprises of choreographic sisterhood. Li shares many sensibilities with this close cohort. She wore their works like second skin, interpreting them with characteristic intensity and smidgeons of madness.

Two pure dances tapped the twin elements of Li's signature vocabulary -- a muscular, pedestrian-based flow and an obliquely classical countercurrent. Po-mo dance pioneer Molissa Fenley's physically demanding but dancey "Camber" upended the normal lines of human movement through heavy emphasis on the sagittal plane.

Bay Area dance luminary June Watanabe's old-school "Mendelssohn Piece" took the concert title literally. Li, totally self-possessed, simply danced in a brown dress. She ran in curves, sank into bent knees, rolled up into kicky jumps. The music stopped suddenly, bringing her to a halt. In place of her usual concentration face, she blinked at the audience over her shoulder as if to say "who, me?"

Former Bill T. Jones principal Heidi Latsky's "Processing" sets exposed-nerve urban anxiety to an electronic mashup of sparse but significant words and radio static. Soundtracks of this ilk are last-century leftovers, but Li raced into its auricular insanity with wild spidery gallops, hands flailing, flinging her hair.

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A second over-the-edge ode, "Equipose Elegy," by Cynthia Adams of the Bay Area-based Fellow Travelers Performance Group, exposed a funnier side of anxiety. Li, in stripey tights, balanced precariously in demi-releve, juggling ping pong balls to Itzhak Perlman's mournful violin accompaniment. The hollow orbs fell like popcorn, with increasing intensity. Mouth agape like Edvard Munch's screamer, Li scooped some up and flung them back.

Elizabeth Streb's X-treme choreography, which looks less like Li's than the rest, famously explodes the boundaries of dance. But "Board," a game of chicken with a spinning 2x4, proved that slam-action works lose their edge with familiarity. Li, setting the speed of this low-flying propeller with her hands and feet, dove over and under it, belly-flopping dangerously on the gray landing mat beneath. But the risk of getting smacked that lit "Board"'s fall '08 premiere was ameliorated this time by Li's consummate confidence.

Like "Board," Bebe Miller's "Watching, Watching" is a game. Unlike "Board," Miller's multimedia mirror-within-mirror piece has improved since its spring '08 premiere. Li danced downstage, watching a video loop of herself doing the same sequence. Behind her, the video projected on screen. Was it a simulcast? I watched for clues nearly imperceptible lags, out-of-synch steps. Sometimes just one of the bodies would freeze, but the setup tests your powers of perception. I wasn't completely convinced till the screen went dark and Li kept dancing.

Victoria Marks makes dances about politics and disability, themes Li often turns to herself. "A Dance Should Have Trees in It," their co-choreographed effort, met my gaping need for activist art. From upside-down shoulder stands and repetitive little steps that came to symbolize "soldier," "action hero" and "prayer," Li recited, danced and utterly inhabited a soldier's story of the Iraq invasion.



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