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Li Chiao-Ping again the master of dance

By KARYN SAEMANN | Special to 77 Square Oct 25, 2009

The naturalness extended beyond the tree branches that arched over the stage and the snow that fell on one solo dancer.

It was in the music and lighting and earth-toned costumes, the bare feet and, most importantly, the organic feel that permeated the movement in "Pagoda," Li Chiao-Ping Dance's 90-minute concert Saturday night at the Wisconsin Union Theater.

There was audio like submarines plodding through the ocean depths, sweeping wind, a hunter's horn, drumming, bird-like hand flutters, and movement that -- while still Li's rubber-band, no-hard-edges choreographic style -- was slowed down and drawn out.

Li appeared in one solo work and in the world premiere of "Tao," or "the way," and was joined by dancers Bethany Alwa, Robin Baartman, Valerie Barnes, Rachel Krinsky, Mariah Meyer LeFeber, Emily Miller and Liz Sexe. The night additionally featured the world premiere of "Pagoda" and six other works choreographed by Li between 1991 and 2006, all with "connections of eastern philosophy" that she called "landmarks" in her journey as a choreographer.

The success that the dancers had in presenting Li's chosen deliberate pace ebbed and flowed throughout the night. Their sometimes too-languid feel could be chalked up to the difficulty of moving to music that was often a long, mono ribbon without much acceleration or deceleration of the tempo or instrumental variations to shake things up and add interest. That became evident in 1995's "Untitled," about halfway through the program, which featured a bit quicker pace and seemed a bit easier to execute.





But what also was evident in Li's solo work, 1995's "Sen," was the skill required to infuse just enough energy into the end of every individual move, to make each transition from one move to the next distinct -- and still softening the edges so each step, appendage and body line wash languidly into the next.

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That's a hard thing to do, and of course Li was the evening's master. While making a valiant effort, her seven dancers sometimes fell short of the goal with movements that blurred into each other a bit too much, without enough moment-by-moment partitioning and sometimes droning on a bit more than it seemed they should have.

Emily Miller, in 1991's "Chi," a solo piece that kicked off the night, perhaps got closest to what Li was envisioning in the choreography, with palpable energy even with the pace slowed.

Others were almost there, but not quite.

Making it look natural doesn't necessarily come naturally. It's a learned skill, which Li has honed over her company's 20 years and which her dancers are still working on.



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