

## Two premieres in Li Chiao Ping's eastern-themed "Pagoda"

by SUSAN KEPECS  
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I saw Li Chiao Ping's *Pagoda*, a repertory evening with two premieres, at the Wisconsin Union Theater Saturday night. Li conceived the program as a structure to house eight of her eastern-themed works -- six repertory repeats and two premieres. Li's idiom is rangy -- lyrical dances, postmodern dances, punk ballet and biting performance psychodramas, plus stunning interpretive solos she choreographs on herself. There've often been Asian elements in her choreography, but putting eight Chinese-style pieces on a single bill spotlighted her roots in a new way. That result itself was the concert's highlight.

Li's quintessential moves -- rollovers with extended legs, shoulder stands, arm-carved turns -- were revealed as direct descendants of Lotus flower dances and Qigong moving meditations, flaunting flexed ankles or wrists, bent elbows, bent knees, relaxed wrists with down-facing palms, palms curling upward. Li's company this season has three soloists -- Robin Baartman, Valerie Barnes and Emily Miller -- and a variable corps, which lent some unevenness to the show.

Li's lone solo on this program, "Sen" (1995), lit in tones of jasmine tea, played her postmodern, post-accident strength against eastern motifs. Wearing loose, flowered pants and her trademark look of worried concentration, Li leapt and ran to frequent collaborator Stephen Vitello's electronic soundtrack. She walked bent-kneed on relevé, arms waving like wheat; one hand was soft, the other, clawed.

Li's a consummate performer, but the standout Saturday night was "Satori" (1999).

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Baartman, Miller and Liz Sexe, in autumnal jades, cinnabars and black, danced in and out of unison to Riley Lee's delicate Buddhist meditation music. The backdrop was cobalt-lit, the stage lights golden. Li-isms were laced with lotus-like embellishments. The opulent eastern aesthetic was extraordinary, though a whiff of sandalwood incense would intensify the experience.

I also liked "Tao," a premiere performed by Li, Barnes and Miller. Piles of white gauze hovered upstage like low-lying clouds. This work, visually rich and more playful than "Satori," was equally eastern in style. The dancers chased each other; rolled on their backs, all four limbs in the air; made a pyramid of their fists.

I was less taken with "Pagoda," the other premiere. Its Asian look was lush. The corps wore yellow skirts and cuffless socks. They flung scraps of bright red paper against the backdrop, lit dark green. The choreography, in Li's eastern mode, was slow and sustained. But a bent-at-the-waist, dangling arm walk, slightly awkward, became repetitive. And the Krishna Das score slipped incongruously into western tones, over which Langston Hughes read his WWII "Victory Prayer." Suddenly the red scraps made sense, but the antiwar theme -- which Li's worked with before, with punchier results -- hit like a non-sequitur. Eventually we'll see this piece again. Next time, it'll probably look better.



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