

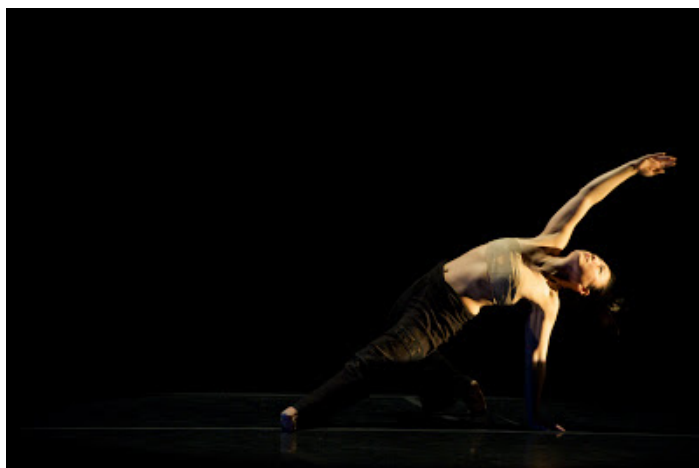
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Dance Review: Li's "Riot of Spring" is Many-Layered



Li in "L'Altra Notte."

Kat Cameron photo

by Susan Kepecs

Li Chiao Ping concerts are like my Hungarian grandmother's Dobos tortes, possessed of so many layers they left you wondering where to start. On one level, Li's "Riot of Spring" program last weekend (May 3-5, in Overture's Promenade Hall – I attended the May 4 evening performance) pitted her own dancing, in "L'Altra Notte," a work made for her in 1995 by experimental New York choreographer Sally Silvers, and "daughter," a filmed solo she made on herself, against the world premiere of the show's eponomously titled "Riot of Spring," a forty-five minute piece danced by others that comprised the second half of the evening. On performance score, Li won.

"L'Altra Notte" cemented what we already know about Li: she's a mature, powerful mover who reveals vulnerability with no hesitation and sustains difficult,

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demanding works with infinite grace.

The angular, postmodern vocabulary Silvers chose was similar to Li's own. Wearing dark pants and nothing but a flesh-toned, elastic, Ace-bandage-like breast binder, Li moved in a gold-toned spotlight on a dark stage. She lifted her arms, flapped her elbows; the angle of the spot made her look almost legless. The stage went dark; the spot moved, magically revealing Li farther upstage. She lay on her side, back to the audience, in shadow, moving only one illuminated hand, one illuminated foot. She stood, raising one arm, then the next, then dove forward and folded to her knees, flailing; she jumped, kicked, rolled and arched; she spidered her legs; she circled the stage in little Bournonville-like leaps, then kneeled and pushed up into a handstand, her profile to the audience. The spotlight went dark.

In terms of sheer impact "L'Altra Notte" was the night's knockout, though I also very much liked "daughter," based on Li's 2011 "RE:Joyce," a work for and about her mother. The original, live piece packed plenty of punch, but this short, complex for-camera version added a whole new layer, deepening the links between choreography and story by allowing Li to balance on a wooden raft atop a rippling sea as she narrated the epic tale of her mother's ocean journey from China to the US. Footage of her mother (also used in the live version) was intercut with the images of Li, feet wet, teetering precariously on the waves.

That nothing else on the program was as immediately striking as these two works is testimony to Li's own power. The opener, "Fin de Siècle," a solo Li made for herself in 1996 and has now set on Li Chiao Ping Dance soloist Lix Sexe, isn't one of Li's strongest works. But as an evocation of the turn of the last century made at the turn of the present one it was a good fit for a program that included the premiere of "Riot of Spring."

Sexe is a strong dancer in the Li mold – the angular poses, staccato moves, contorted positions (a bent-over walk, grabbing one ankle; a walk, one foot pointed, the other flexed), and the fall, rollover, handstand, rise, little leaps sequences Li is fond of, fit Sexe like a glove. Wearing a silver apron over a red and black striped top, a leather helmet reminiscent of the ones long-ago football players used, and an enduring look of spooked astonishment, Sexe carried off this choreography while crackly footage from Fritz Lang's 1927 *Metropolis* and the original 1930s *Flash Gordon* films (which Li identified during a post-performance talkback) played on the wall behind her. The films competed with the dance; I was torn about which to watch until I gave in to the two-toned flicker effect of letting my eyes go back and forth between live movement and the black and white Industrial Revolution apparitions on the screen.

Li's "Riot of Spring," the actual *raison d'être* for this concert, was made in the spirit of its near namesake, the 1913 Nijinsky / Stravinsky ballet that set off a row at its Paris premiere (see my previous post – a preview of this performance – for details if you don't know the story). Li's hallmark intellectual drive was crystal clear, though the sharp, droll sense of humor she usually wields was so veiled I thought it was all but absent. In the theater this felt like a serious, anxious piece, maybe because the modernist primitivism of the original ballet was serious, or because we're living in anxious times right now – or both. After all, when *Rite* premiered WWI was just a shot away; a century later the accelerating tensions in Syria are eerily similar.

"Riot" merits respect for its democratic approach – a current that's run through postmodern dance since its 1960s beginnings and one to which Li often subscribes, though there are some spectacularly technical works in her repertory that demand highly trained dancers, among them the hilarious deconstructed ballets "Gó" (1995) and "Chor de Engel" (1997), and the angular yet lyrical "Passiflora Gracilis," from her Bach Project (2003, I think). In "Riot," the big-hearted mix of dance department undergrads, community dancers (most of whom have been working with

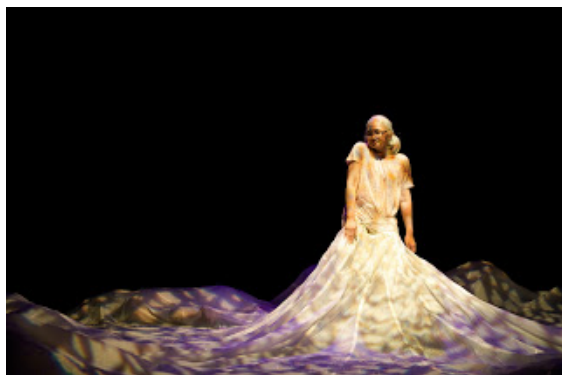
Li for years) and professional members of Li Chiao Ping Dance was a partial pitfall, putting extra weight on the choreography itself.

And choreographically, “Riot” had some fuzzy moments. Postmodern dance doesn’t have to be “dancerly” – its early incarnation was rooted in the antiestablishment notion that all movement is dance, if it’s cast in that context. That presumes that everyone is a dancer, if the dance involves, say, walking and running, but it doesn’t mean untrained bodies can aptly execute complex choreographic sequences. Parts of “Riot” were technically demanding, and the movement didn’t always fit the performer. The community dancers were spot-on, but some of the others – I assumed they were undergrads, but I wasn’t entirely sure who was in the company and who was a student – lacked the chops to carry off the combinations in clean strokes.

Sometimes, too, this big, motion-filled work got bogged down in its own complexity. In the original *Rite of Spring* (lost, but painstakingly reconstructed by the Joffrey in 1987) a young maiden is chosen to dance herself to death; in Li’s deconstructed narrative there were multiple “chosen ones” who sometimes shifted so quickly the thread was lost. Still, when they were “it,” guest soloist Christina Briggs Winslow and LCP Dance company members Rachel Krinsky, Kate Hewson, and one dancer whose name I don’t know (no photos accompanied the dancers’ bios in the program) turned in satisfyingly strong performances..

What really was arresting about “Riot,” though, was its impressionistic abstraction – both musically and choreographically – of the original ballet. The score itself, arranged by violinist Carol Carlson and cellist Maxfield Wollan-Fisher and performed live by both, plus percussionist Sean Kleve, was an absolute marvel. Pared so far down, the sound still was full; Stravinsky’s melodies, stripped to their cores, still intact.

The dance bore a looser, more fluctuating relation to *Rite of Spring*. The original, choreographed by a celebrated Russian ballet dancer for a Russian ballet company during the dawning years of modern dance, was shockingly closer to the modern idiom than the classical one; Nijinsky eschewed long lines and lofty steps in favor of turned-in legs, bent, contracted, angular postures, stomping jumps, and ample floorwork. That vocabulary, and his repeated use of linear and circular movement patterns, leant themselves well to Li’s own style.



Lynn Lum emerging from the parachute; Kat Cameron photo

The choreographic sequences in the two ballets weren’t matched; instead, Li’s piece reflected the original from odd – ok, Cubist – angles. The opening soloist in both *Rite* and “Riot” is a female elder (in “Riot,” Lynn Lum, from Li’s community group). The circular pattern chalked on the floor – the basis for the

tribal ring around the sacrificial virgin in the original – was mirrored in Li’s piece by a parachute, spread out under a dappled spotlight, itself an after-image of dappled sunlight shining on mountains in the Joffrey’s reconstructed set. In Li’s piece the circle came at the beginning, and from it, the female elder emerged; the sacrifice circle occurs at the end of Nijinsky’s ballet. In the middle of Li’s dance, a powder-spouting circle of community performers in hazmat beekeeper suits was a tongue in cheek reference – the only overt one I found in the whole piece – to the bearskin-clad men in the original’s sacrifice finale.

But “Riot”’s *Rite*-linked, brain-teaser puzzles turned out to be the big intellectual grin I first thought was missing in this piece. I simply overlooked this layer of the cake until I had time to ponder it. In that sense, “Riot” is brilliant. Like most premieres of complicated dance works, “Riot” needs work. I look forward to seeing it again, down the road apiece.

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