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Dance festival featuring various ages and abilities a wonderful show

By KARYN SAEMANN | Special to 77 Square | features@madison.com Jun 21, 2010



LEAH L. JONES

Li Chiao-Ping, shown here in 2005, trained professional and non-professional dancers for the "Summer Dance Festival" held over the weekend.

In its Summer Dance Festival, presented over the weekend at UW-Madison's Lathrop Hall, Li Chiao-Ping Dance strove to feature people of various ages and abilities "dancing through life."

The concert's seven works, three of which were premieres, did just that. On stage were children through senior citizens and professional dancers moving alongside community members who had little or no previous dance training.

The mix of professional and non-professional performers attended classes last week at company founder Li Chiao-Ping's farm in Oregon.

The ultimate effect was a wonderful canvas of people who love dance enough to make it their life vocation, those who never took that professional step but enjoy movement and youngsters still deciding which of those two paths to follow.

“Praxis,” one of three premieres choreographed by Li, offered the program’s broadest mix of ages and training. Sometimes creating group sculptures, more often paired off in duos and mirroring their partners’ movements, performers effused joy. It didn’t matter how well they moved, just that they did. Many of the community members on stage looked familiar, having participated in past Li Chiao-Ping dance concerts.

The spectrum of ages was further showcased in “Bounce Back,” which featured many seniors, and “Go,” a work created in 1995 and performed by the company many times in the past. This time, “Go” was performed by teens who attended last week’s farm workshop. Given their experience level, they did an admirable job with the dynamically athletic choreography.

Humor was abundant in guest artist Cynthia Adams’ “The Hunt,” a 2007 work with background audio that spoke of her quest to buy a house in the San Francisco area, and had her moving in and around a cardboard box.

In “Through Muck and Mud,” the roots of jazz music were celebrated through dance, a wonderful concept. The art-told-through-art idea was further enriched by deep red background and costume hues, historical audio that highlighted the ethnic diversity of pioneering jazz artists and a smooth style of movement that fit well with the tinny piano and other sounds of the early to mid-20th Century music. There was nice synergy between the dancers in this work, particularly early on when they were paired off.

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At times moving along quickly, but more often slowly rolling, “realTime,” choreographed by company member Liz Sexe, was backed by a jazzy beat and video background that shifted from swaying field grasses to rain-splattered asphalt. There was a gentle simplicity with a lot of upper body rolling that meshed well with the video.

Finally, in “Over, Under, Escape,” former company member Collette Stewart serenely shrugged and rolled to a whimsical waltz that felt almost like carousel music, with a beat that sometimes sped up and sometimes quieted. The overall feel was athletic yet mellow, the latter bolstered by Stewart’s costume choice of a loose-fitting blouse and knee-length pants.

Throughout the program it was evident that company members, many of whom recently joined Li Chiao-Ping Dance, continue to grow more comfortable with each other. That has steadily improved since last year, with their talents really beginning to shine as initial shakiness becomes a thing of the past.

“Summer Dance Festival” was a great concept, ultimately well-articulated, showing that a love of movement is prerequisite enough to be called a dancer. Training and time ups your skills, but the essence is inside.



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