

Li Chiao-Ping Dance Company Presents Weight of Things Meaningful Movements



By Jonathan Gramling

Li Chiao-Ping, a UW-Madison professor of dance and the principal artist and choreographer of the Li Chiao-Ping Dance Company, loves to bring different elements of movement and disciplines together to create ever evolving art forms.

"I went through a pathway of loving martial arts to studying ballet and doing gymnastics and then studying it in college and after college," Chiao-Ping said. "I have melded all of those things into one. That's what I most love about what I do. I have the honor and the opportunity to spend my time bringing together and integrating a lot of different disciplines and ideas and play it out in this sort of creative playground."

On November 17-19, Chiao-Ping will be bringing different elements, from the textile art of Meeta Mastani to the video projections of Douglas Rosenberg to the live accompaniment by flutist Laura Falzon, in her fall production *Weight of Things* that deals with issues that weigh on the environment as well as our souls.

Li Chiao-Ping has been on the UW-Madison dance faculty since 1993 while also performing locally at the Overture Center as well as nationally and internationally.

Chiao-Ping enjoys bringing together mixtures of art, movement and people to create performances with each of them being unique.

"I make large works," Chiao-Ping said. "I make small works. I make long works. I make short works.

Some works I can make very quickly. Some works take a very long time to make. I guess, if anything, I've learned over the number of years that I have been choreographing to be okay with a very fluid and mysterious process. I can't always control the outcome and all I can do is put the pieces together and try to sit back and really observe what is happening and be open to be able to recognize when there is something that is special or wonderful about it, but then also be far back enough away from it to look at it objectively and say, 'I don't want that in this particular work. I don't need that. I can edit that out.' That's one thing that I have learned over time, to trust that."

Chiao-Ping laughed when she said that it's hard to be a dancer because while Chiao-Ping imagines the dance movements in her mind, it isn't until they are realistically portrayed by the dancer that the movement's relevance to the overall dance piece is discovered — or not.

"It's probably like being a composer, musical composer and writing the music, maybe hearing it in your head and so I am sort of seeing it and imagining it in my head, but since I can't play all of the parts exactly at the same time, I have to kind of throw it out there with what I think from experience will happen and then it's always kind of surprising when it does work out well," Chiao-Ping observed. "There are lots of times in rehearsal when I say, 'Okay, you are going to do this phrase and it goes like this and like this' and then this other dancer is going to do this phrase, which I have just created. And I didn't create them at the same time. I didn't create them necessarily in mind that they would go together simultaneously. But then we try it and it's kind of this great luck that they match up in this wondrous way. It's kind of like seeing a diamond sparkle."

Weight of Things, both the main dance piece and the accompanying performances, are a collaboration of Chiao-Ping and her students.

"The dancers are a big part of what is happening in the work," Chiao-Ping said. "We had dialogues along the way during the summer as we were working. I had been doing some writing. And so, from that kind of prompt, they would contribute some thoughts about weight, for instance, or having too much. There were a couple of different directions that I had them go in that they wrote about. It was kind of interesting to know what they thought about things that mattered, about consumption, about waste, about when they felt that something was enough versus something not being enough or being almost too much, kind of the Goldilocks notion. The dancers are a big part of where it goes. In fact, the solo that I created for Liz Sexe is very much a collaboration between the two of us. Again, I had her do some writing. I would create some movement phrases and let her also make some variations on a theme. Maybe I would do some improvisation in the choreographic process and then we would try to set it a little bit more after the experimentation. By sitting back, what I saw from her as the performer, what I felt worked and what didn't quite read as well, so we were just kind of sculpting it and changing it along the way. And even after she had just performed it in her show called *TWO*, I'm continuing to change it a bit."

Chiao-Ping is a perfectionist whose work does continuously evolve over time.

"Dance pieces don't evolve for everyone," Chiao-Ping said. "It's kind of like a creative question that you are problem-solving. And each time that I sit back and I watch it, I think about what is strong about it, but also what could be stronger about it. In having an audience view it or even testing out whether it is the lighting or the costumes or the volume of the music or her volume because Liz Sexe is speaking in the piece, it's all information and it's just a balance on how that information kind of interplays to create this sort of total product, this total experience. I'm just trying to craft that experience a little bit."

Chiao-Ping began collaborating with Mastani before Mastani arrived in Madison from her native India.

"What Meeta and I are doing is exploring the cloth that her students are making through her method that she is teaching them," Chiao-Ping said. "I've met Meeta a few times in person, but also prior to that on Skype just to get to know each other. And I got to know her a little bit through

her work, the video that demonstrates from start to finish everything about creating these handcrafted works of art. I was interested in the tactile part of it and its connection to the earth. It's really so earthy. It is so rooted in the person, this human person and their labor to create this functional and beautiful material. It's going to function. It is cloth and it covers and it drapes and functions in that way. But it is also going to be a meaningful component of the dance."

While Li Chiao-Ping's work is beautiful onto itself, it is also an expression of values and the human spirit.

"Li Chiao-Ping Dance is also hosting/organizing the participation of On Display," Chiao-Ping said. "It's a world-wide event to celebrate the International Day of Persons with Disabilities. On December 3rd, it's part of Heidi Latsky's On Display Global. It's a structure improvisation of hers. It's a movement installation. We are trying to gather individuals of all races and all abilities from the Madison area to come together to do a body positive celebration of people."

It is art with a purpose.

More information about Weight of Things can be found in this issue's Happenings section.

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