



# Dancing *with* Her Mind

BY MICHAEL PENN MA'97

PHOTOS BY JEFF MILLER

There have been two periods in Li Chiao-Ping's life when she did not dance. At first, she didn't know how. Then, years later, she had to learn it all over again.

It would be easy enough to find on-stage moments to mark the slope of Li's career: the shows in New York and Toronto, the success of her Madison company, the rack of grants and awards she's won in her ten years on the UW-Madison dance faculty, the reams of critical praise she's received. They're the bullet points on the resume of a rising star — and promises of what may yet come from the forty-one-year-old choreographer and performer.

But in some ways, dancing hasn't defined Li as much as not dancing has. It's in the interruptions that you find the spark of her creativity and the soul of the dancer.

The first one began around the time she was four years old, a little ball of kinetic energy bounding around her parents' house in the heart of San Francisco. Her father worked in a laundry, and there wasn't much money for extravagances like dance lessons. But it was in her, this desire to get up and move. On Sundays, she perched in front of the television, watching old musicals that ran during the afternoons. Then she turned the house into a sound stage, mimicking the moves of Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire. In her mind, she leapt puddles and sang in the rain.

In China, her father was a teacher, an educated man who left his home in search of opportunities for his family. He had goals for his children, and they didn't include dancing. They would be mathematicians, doctors, nurses, professionals. And oh, did Li try not to dance. She majored in mathematics; she majored in

*When a foot injury threatened to end her career, dancer Li Chiao-Ping discovered the limits of the body — and the limitless reach of the human spirit.*



anthropology; she majored in psychology. But none stuck, none moved her, none consumed her the way that dance did.

The second time, she almost lost it all.

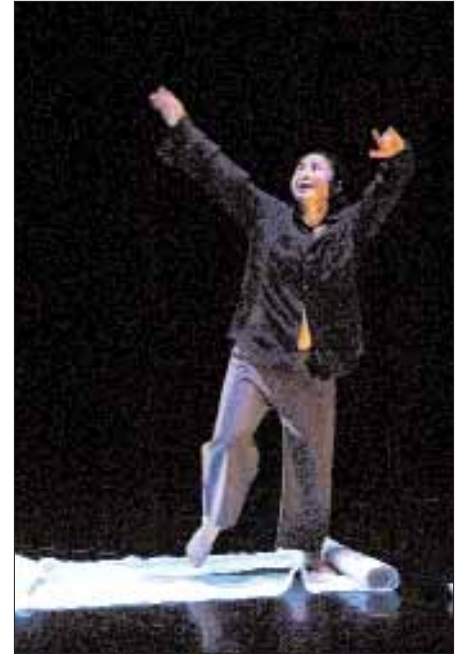
It was freezing outside, seven degrees and all steel gray. The spring semester was just beginning, and there was much to do. As her partner Douglas Rosenberg steered their Jeep Cherokee north toward campus, Li occupied herself with the mundane affairs of a Monday. She didn't see the ice. There was a spin, an oncoming truck, the crunch of metal, and, then, nothing.

Li awoke in the hospital, perforated by tubes and wires. Her left ankle had been crushed in the accident, severing most of the tendons and blood vessels

that ran between her leg and foot. Doctors discussed amputation. She could not contemplate that particular horror. Her foot — the pivot for a thousand pirouettes and leaps — was the foundation of her dance and of her life. It had to be spared.

Fate has a cruel sense of irony when it deals with artists. Beethoven went deaf. Monet lost all but the last shred of his sight. And when it nearly took Li's left foot on that day in January 1999, everything changed.

**Facing page: Li Chiao-Ping performs *Ba Ba*, a solo dance that explores her feelings about her father, a Chinese immigrant who worked for many years in a San Francisco laundry while nurturing an artistic side he rarely showed his children.**



***“I want [people] to embrace their creativity — to live in it and be proud of it.”***

She had made her name as an athletic performer. A gymnast in high school, she filled her dances with bounding leaps and acrobatic poses. “She has such powerful legs,” says Cynthia Adams, the artistic director of the San Francisco-based Fellow Travelers Performance Group. Adams recalls how unmistakable Li was when they first met, at an American Dance Festival workshop in the late 1980s. “The dancers were all in a line, doing leaps across the stage. She just shot out above everybody else,” she says.

But even after nine surgeries to rebuild and repair it, that foot seemed useless. Li had been in the hospital for several weeks before she was able to dangle it over the side of her bed. A nurse timed her. The goal was to see if she could hold it there for five minutes.

“She was told she would probably never walk again without a cane,” says Rosenberg, Li’s husband and frequent collaborator, a filmmaker who is also on the dance faculty. “It’s hard to watch her dance now and remember that.”

**M**onet was seventy-two when he was diagnosed with cataracts in both eyes. He told friends that he saw every-

thing “in a complete fog” and complained bitterly that he was ruined as a painter. He went on to complete the *Water Lilies* murals, among his most famous works. Beethoven, aging and ill, never heard a note of his Ninth.

Li was thirty-four at the time of the accident, and her career was flying. Hired by UW-Madison in 1994 to bolster a dance department that had fallen on hard times, she was garnering notice both as a performer and artistic director of her own company, Li Chiao-Ping Dance. She was coming off the *Men’s Project*, a series of well-received dances created for her by six leading male choreographers, with a television documentary directed by Rosenberg. After the accident, a Madison show and a tour were scrapped. But while many around UW-Madison privately whispered she might never dance again, Li had little doubt. The frequent visits from friends and admirers inspired her. She wanted to give something back, and what she had to give was dance.

In the hospital, Li underwent repeated tests to assess the blood flow in her newly constructed arteries. The doctors called it “venous flow”; if they heard the thrum of blood in the vessels,

that was good news. One day, Li and Rosenberg asked if they could record the sound. “I think the people at the hospital thought it was kind of weird, but they said okay,” says Rosenberg. That became the soundtrack to Li’s return to the stage, an April 2001 show entitled, appropriately enough, *Venous Flow: States of Grace*. Though deeply personal, including x-ray images of her shattered ankle as backdrop, the show strove to express Li’s appreciation of the community surrounding her — and began to articulate a new idea about her art.

“I had been working towards a virtuoso way of performing, a highly athletic and very technically skilled style of dancing,” she says. “For sure, my eyes got opened wide after the accident. Meeting people who helped me, I learned a great deal from their lives and experiences, and I saw the gift of that.”

Li’s work since the accident is striking for how little and how much it has changed. Though early on her body felt atrophied and foreign — “it was like I had suddenly turned seventy,” she says — she regained nearly all of her strength and athleticism. Only the ability to point her toes and some balance have not come

back to her. "It still gets numb if I'm on it for too long," she says.

What's changed is the emotional depth to her work. Before the accident, critics universally lauded Li's technical gifts, but some weren't as sold on her ability as a choreographer to dream up movements that resonated with audiences. One *New York Times* writer described a 1998 performance by her company as "more earnest than imaginative." There was the sense that her best work was yet to come, that age and experience would add dimension to her immense skill.

"I think early on, she could always fall back on her athleticism," says Adams. "As with any kind of artistry, you bring in your own experiences, and that's what she had to draw on." As terrifying as the accident was, it became a wellspring of new information and emotion for Li to explore. "She was forced to confront all kinds of issues you don't really think about when you're thirty-four," says Rosenberg. "It smacked her in the face."

Li says she began to "look outside herself," feeling movement less intuitively and seeing her work more objectively. Able to rely less on her body, she used more words and images to carry her meaning. Her choreography remains physically demanding, often putting dancers in precarious-looking positions that seem to flout the whole idea of gravity. But Li's new works have gone further in exploring emotions such as pain, loss, regret, and redemption. The physicality serves the expression. The bodies dance, but so do the minds.

**O**n a Friday afternoon a few months ago, Li was standing at the center of a circle of sock-footed senior citizens, working on a segment for her latest show. They had been rehearsing their routine for days, but it still wasn't quite right.

"Here, let's try this," she said, lightly springing onto the stage. She raised her arms above her head, assuming the first of four positions she had invented for the

dance. "Remember these?" she said, demonstrating each pose. "These are the landmarks, but the journey between them is your own."

The show, a ninety-minute compilation of works called *Laughing Bodies, Dancing Minds*, debuted in Madison in March. A multigenerational, operatic affair, it counted among its cast ten senior citizens from one of Li's community dance workshops and fourteen elementary school students, who at times danced alongside professionals such as Heidi Latsky, a former principal dancer for the Bill T. Jones Company in New York.

Some choreographers make a habit of incorporating amateur dancers to give their pieces a communal feel, but since her recovery, Li has done it more extensively and daringly than most. She began leading eight-week workshops at two Madison senior centers, and several of the novice dancers have appeared in her shows. "It can be very tricky to bring community people into a show and stay clear about your intent," Latsky said

after one rehearsal. "But I think she does it, because she has a strong theme that ties it all together."

To knit that theme, Li had the dancers reflect on their different life stages, looking alternately forward and back on major decisions. For the seniors, she had choreographed a free-flowing routine formed around a few basic poses. Her idea was for them to come up with their own movements to get from one of those landmarks to the next, so that at times they'd all be doing the same thing but at others following their own creativity. "What I

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Since her accident, Li has often created dance pieces that mix professional and amateur dancers, including senior citizens and elementary school children. While their moves sometimes lack the technical perfection of Li's trained company dancers, she says the spirit of their creativity shines through.

## Dancing

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love about it compositionally,” she explains, “is that everyone ends up in the same place, but they take different paths to get there. For me, that becomes a metaphor for how we all try to get from point A to point B. The shortest way is a straight line, but not everyone always follows the straight line.”

For Li, there have been few straight lines in life. When she finally gave up on math and switched her major at the University of California-Santa Cruz to dance, her parents were so disappointed that, for a time, they stopped speaking to her. “They wanted me to have a successful career, a house with a white picket fence, a husband, children,” Li says. And although she and Rosenberg do have a four-year-old son and a house in the suburbs, her own road to those comforts was very different from her father’s, who toiled at the laundry long enough to

eventually co-own it with his brother. Over the years, Li says their curiosity in her dance has been chiefly commercial: Is she making a living? How many tickets did the show sell?

Yet for all that time, her father nurtured an artistic fantasy that he concealed from Li and her three siblings. Sequestered in the garage, he painted elaborate calligraphy and stashed piles of fine clothes, camera equipment, and musical instruments. Li knew very little about his endeavors until after his death this past fall, when she helped sort through his private collections.

“I felt he lived this rich life that was outside what I knew about him,” she says. “It felt like such a sacrifice that he didn’t let us in on who he was, completely.

“Maybe it’s transference, but I want so much for that not to happen to other people. I want them to embrace their creativity — to live in it and be proud of it,

not feel like they have to divorce themselves from it.”

Back on the Lathrop stage, the seniors watched as Li repeated the moves, this time adding turns, steps, and gestures as she twisted through the routine. The effect was mesmerizing. With a pirouette here and a subtle movement of her hand there, she bridged the physical and emotional distance between positions, giving them meaning and direction. Joy tumbled into sorrow into reflection and rebirth. It was classic Li, a tiny slice of that effortless brilliance that neither age nor trauma have taken from her.

Several among the audience sighed, their appreciation tinged with perhaps a hint of envy. “She makes it look so easy,” one groaned. They could do the landmarks, but no one got from point A to point B quite like Li. 📺

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