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**Meta Title:**

Live review | Chicago Dancing Festival 2011: "Masters"

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**Excerpt:**

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**Abstract:**

Live review | Chicago Dancing Festival 2011: "Masters"

**Meta Description:**

It takes a pair to put yourself in the company of artists named Balanchine, Coralli, Forsythe, Graham, Kylián, Limón, Morris, Perrot, Robbins and Taylor.

One thing about the [Chicago Dancing Festival](#) [2] has always been a little bit awkward: Since its inception, at least one of its programs has included a work by its cofounder, choreographer [Lar Lubovitch](#) [3]. Now, I'm on the record as positive about most of his dances, but one must admit that it takes a pair to put yourself in the company of artists named Balanchine, Coralli, Forsythe, Graham, Kylián, Limón, Morris, Perrot, Robbins and Taylor. These bills have been called "Modern Masters" or, this year, simply "Masters."

Lubovitch's 2010 *The Legend of Ten*, to Brahms, closed his festival's first presentation at the [Auditorium Theatre](#) [4] on August 25. It's deeply gorgeous and held its own among Graham's *Embattled Garden* (1958, with décor by Isamu Noguchi) and Kylián's 1991 *Petite Mort*, set to Mozart. *Legend* stood head and shoulders above the Act II *pas de deux* from *Giselle* (1841), albeit mostly because its interpretation, by Victoria Jaiani and Temur Suluashvili of the Joffrey, was timid and lacked any demonstrated sense of [its history](#) [5].

River North Dance Chicago performed Charles Moulton's 1980 *Nine Person Precision Ball Passing* as it did on Tuesday at the Harris and will [again Saturday in Millennium Park](#) [6]. Its flawless execution of *Ball Passing* [earlier this week](#) [7] wasn't matched last night—two balls

were dropped, proving a program note stating that “mistakes’ are inevitable.” But the questions that were raised only made it more interesting: How long does it take the dancers to repair the broken mechanism? What choices are made, and by whom, in the process? Wabi-sabi [8], etc.

We also saw split-second, professional decision-making when a recording of the *Andante* from Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 21 cut out for a few seconds during a duet by Hubbard Street Dance Chicago’s Penny Saunders and Alejandro Cerrudo in the *Kylián*. (Audio was unstable throughout the performance, although this was the only major glitch and happened early.) Overall, the company danced *Petite* better than it has in a while, with sharper timing and bolder takes on the shapes throughout. The Auditorium’s gilt house and vast stage lent *Petite* even more regality than usual and demanded faster, farther travel; Kevin Shannon and Robyn Mineko Williams were especially fleet in the second duet. The women’s and men’s sections were crisp and firmly rethought, although this focus on precision cost the last two duets a touch of their romance.

Janet Eilber, director of the Martha Graham Dance Company, introduced *Embattled Garden* with a brief curtain speech. I wouldn’t normally condone such a thing, but Eilber’s remarks were to the point and probably did much of the packed house good in framing our view onto the 53-year-old quartet. “This is a contemporary look at temptation,” about love, betrayal and forgiveness, not a recreation of a Bible story, she said.

Stage right, a striped tree with four horizontal, reedlike branches stood, like a near-toothless comb, from which long-limbed Maurizio Nardi, as The Stranger, hung upside-down above Lilith, superbly embodied by Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch. Vertical reeds rose from a raked, two-part platform stage left, on which Mariya Dashkina Maddux, as Eve, sat combing her long hair. During the soap-operatic, highly stylized frenzy that followed, Tadej Brdnik cut a youthful, impulsively passionate figure as Adam.

*Embattled Garden*, to a brassy, tympanic score by Carlos Surinach, is a tough cookie. Six years ago, Jennifer Dunning wrote [9] for *The New York Times* that “it lacks the heroes, or even antiheroes, that make for good tragedy or even good storytelling.” I believe that it proposes that actions, and moments within relationships, are the real heroes and antiheroes. Each character has his or her moments of strength and of weakness; what endures about Graham’s vision of Eden is that it’s not the place-as-idea; it’s simply the site where four beings interact with one another and, in doing so, betray the complexities of their natures.

The first and fourth movements of Brahms’s *Quintet for Piano and Strings in F Minor* were the sites where figures interacted more harmoniously. *The Legend of Ten* began looking like a stripped-down meeting of Capulets, what with the black tights, calf-high boots and sheer blouses, by Naomi Luppescu and L. Isaac, worn by ten members of the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company.

Well, nine, at first, who realized Lubovitch’s trademark visual counterpoint and traffic-patternmaking, which followed the Brahms but not too slavishly. A back-of-the-hand-to-the-forehead, “woe is me” gesture appeared in various forms and the groundwork for much of the piece’s visual language was laid.

Jenna Fakhoury entered from downstage right and, although she was dressed just like the others, they responded to her presence as if she had just exited a flying saucer—for a while, after which Fakhoury became one of the gang, mostly through her connection with the

similarly lengthy Reid Bartelme.

At the top of the second part, "Dance Two," Bartelme and Fakhoury delivered a duet almost all of which was executed while kneeling or otherwise less-than-standing. The pair exited and the ensemble entered, from the opposite side of the stage, rhythmically tossing their left fists as if throwing dice, playing craps [10]. This duet and octet alternated, cross-fading their appearances, before appearing simultaneously in richer counterpoint.

All then rejoined for unison dancing and a folksy, rotating ring. The dancers' pumping fists at the end of their outstretched arms suggested demonstrations of might; when these fists opened into a sky-welcoming, celebratory gesture, it underscored the similarities in impetus between the two, at the same time that it echoed a Graham motif. Independent of the choreography, the company affirmed its status as one of the world's premier troupes; Jonathan E. Alsberry and Katarzyna Skarpetowska remain two of America's foremost dance artists.

The gossamer structures within Lar Lubovitch's open-ended images aren't like the cast-iron sculpture of Martha Graham's scenes, nor are they like Jiri Kylian's perfect syntheses of of concept and stagecraft. If Lubovitch insists upon calling himself a Master during his own festival, that's his business. Among dance makers today he's definitely more masterful than most.

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*The 2011 Chicago Dancing Festival continues all day today [11] at the Chicago Cultural Center and at 6pm tonight at the MCA Stage [12]; and tomorrow at the Pritzker Pavilion [6] in Millennium Park. Admission is free.*

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Laura Halm, Jesse Bechard and Jessica Tong, from left, of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago in *Petite Mort*

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