

CHEEKY CHICAGO  
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## **This week's feature | Chicago Dancing Festival**

### **Cheeky Interviews Co-Founder Jay Franke**

By Lauren Shapiro

Jay Franke walked out of his taxi to meet me at a Chicago coffeehouse to discuss dance; more specifically, to discuss the Chicago Dancing Festival, now in its fourth season in the city. I mentioned I had a few questions prepared for him, but that he should definitely add in whatever he wanted the public to know about him and the festival. His response? "Oh boy, then you're talking to the right guy."

Jay, 35, was not at a loss of words any time during our half hour meeting, and for good reason. Dance is and has always been his life. He was a dancer in Oklahoma at a very young age, and when he and his family realized that perhaps Oklahoma wasn't the best place to flourish as a dancer, they packed up and moved to Dallas.

"There weren't too many little boys dancing around in Oklahoma, to say the least," Jay says, as he laughs to himself.

He danced in Dallas throughout his teenage years, getting a much more technical and classic training. And then, at the age of 18, he was accepted to the Juilliard School of Dance. Jay acknowledges his four years there as the most focused of his career. After four years at the prestigious school, Jay got the offer of a lifetime: the chance to dance and tour with the great Twyla Tharp. He toured with Tharp for two years, and eventually moved to Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.

It was at Hubbard Street that Jay and Lar Lubovitch, Jay's co-founder of the Chicago Dancing Festival, had their fateful meeting. Lar is also a graduate of Juilliard and founder of his own dance company, the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company based in New York. Lar, now 67, came to Hubbard Street to choreograph years ago, and Jay felt an immediate connection with his movements.

"I love that dancers can be doing the same choreography, the same movements, and still move so differently from one another," Jay says in reference to dancing in general, and more specifically, to Lar's movements.

So Jay, knowing that sooner rather than later his body would need to take a permanent rest from dance, co-founded the Chicago Dancing Festival with Lar in Chicago just four years ago. The two share a love for dance and the great city, and they knew that it was something that Chicago was ready for.

Its first year, the festival was one Wednesday night in August, seven companies and – according to Jay – a total shot in the dark. He and Lar

had no idea what to expect. And to their great surprise, more than 8,000 people showed up to the evening. They were completely blown away.

“We were like, wow, the pressure’s on. We have to continue to do something great with this now.”

In the festival’s second year, they added lectures covering different dance topics. This summer, the lecture will be about architecture and dance. They constantly wanted to be adding and making changes to the festival, keeping the public anticipating what will come next.

When creating the festival, one of the most important things for both Jay and Lar was that everyone that wanted to could experience it. For free. They wanted everyone to feel like they were invited to this great party, and having the festival be free would help gain even more exposure for dance in the city – their main goal from the beginning.

Another big goal for the festival is to not only bring great dance companies to Chicago, but great dancers as well. They wanted the best of the best year after year, and they are determined to make this happen. Understanding that dance fanatics are not the only attendees, Jay and Lar wanted to create a great experience for every type of fan.

“If your first experience with dance is with bad choreography, that’s not a good thing,” he says. “We said to each other, we have to do this right. We have to bring in the superstars.”

And this year is expected to be the best year yet. Tickets for the festival sold out within two hours, but everyone is still invited to attend the final performance in the Pritzker Pavilion, something that Jay says is always one giant party celebrating the best of dance.

The festival is constantly changing and growing. Jay knows that it has grown immensely from its inception just four years ago. But he also knows that they have the capability to grow at a very slow pace with a very open format. And he makes it clear that he can never promise anything for the future, but he anticipates great things.

He and Lar have been fabulous co-founders over the years. And what reason does Jay give for this great relationship? Their drastic differences.

“I will not let my cell phone go more than five feet from me, and Lar doesn’t have a cell phone and we just made him get an email account,” he says.

Their differences, though, are what make the festival so successful. Lar is much more traditional, while Jay is much more modern. And what the two created appeals to the masses.

And the Cheekiest thing about their relationship?

“Neither one of us could put on this great festival without the other, no matter how different we seem. We need and rely on each other to bring different approaches and styles, which is why the festival is so successful.”

The festival takes place August 25 – 28 in association with the Museum of Contemporary Art and the City of Chicago – Millennium Park. For more information about the festival and its performances, please [click here](#).