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CHICAGO DANCING FESTIVAL AND 'AMERICAN MASTERS' CELEBRATED AT HARRIS

By Hedy Weiss

It was quite the feast. For close to three hours Monday night, an audience of 1,500 lucky dance lovers filled the Harris Theater for Music and Dance and gorged themselves on the first of the three free events that comprise this summer's second Chicago Dancing Festival.

Inaugurated last August, the festival -- designed to help certify this city as a major dance destination -- generated a response that far out-distanced even the most enthusiastic expectations of its creators. Sure, the fact that tickets were free proved to be a great audience magnet. But clearly this also was an audience with a passion for the art form itself, and with strong opinions about the many different companies and artistic visions on display.

That same sense of discerning fervor was evident at the Harris, and is bound to resurface at tonight's climactic outdoor performance at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. (True devotees also nabbed tickets to Tuesday night's lecture- demonstration at the Museum of Contemporary Art Theatre.)

The Harris program, an homage to "20th Century Masters" of American dance, was not meant to be a "Dancing With the Stars" sort of competition. Yet if there were a hands- down winner it was the Martha Graham Dance Company and its ferociously taut, hypnotic performance of "Cave of the Heart." This 1946 masterwork, inspired by the Greek myth of Medea and Jason, spins the tale of a marriage that runs amok in an unforgettable way.

Graham, the pioneering force who devised much of the modern dance vocabulary, understood how powerfully movement can speak. She also was a master of theater. "Cave of the Heart" is not just a mind-bogglingly brilliant work of choreography and psychology, but also an almost mystically perfect artistic collaboration, with a magical set by sculptor Isamu Noguchi, music by Samuel Barber and costumes by Graham. And it was danced with such white-hot intensity that the audience hardly breathed throughout -- with Miki Orihara (in the role Graham created for herself) impossibly serpentine and demented as Medea, the scorned wife; Tadej Brdnik full of macho blindness as the unfaithful Jason; Jennifer DePalo, all compliance and innocence as the young bride-to-be, and Katherine Crockett as the all-knowing but impotent Chorus.

To think that Graham's company almost perished in the 1990s as a result of legal wrangling and debt -- and to see it reborn so strongly now -- is reason for celebration. The Harris Theater should invite the troupe back for an engagement of its own.

Choreographer Paul Taylor spent his early career dancing in Graham's company. The Joffrey Ballet has made Taylor's 1976 masterwork "Cloven Kingdom" very much its

own, and after performing it with great luster and vivacity at the Ravinia Festival on Saturday, they made it the giddy, high-speed finale on Monday.

Opening the Harris program was the New York-based Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in the Chicago premiere of Lubovitch's buoyant, playful "Concerto Six Twenty-Two," set to the Mozart work bearing that catalog number. Lubovitch, a co-founder of the festival (along with Chicago-based dancer Jay Franke, a member of his company), bridges the worlds of ballet and modern dance, with bits of folk dance in the mix as well. And this fluid, richly musical, very step-filled work -- with its circular patterning, multiple variations and a male love duet centerpiece (for Frank and Griff Braun) -- was danced with breezy abandon and exuberance by the gifted ensemble of 13, all dressed in bright white. Among the dancers were former Hubbard Street member Charlaine Mei Katsuyoshi and the irresistible Jonathan E. Alsberry.

The Jose Limon Dance Company performed "The Moor's Pavane: Variations on a Theme from 'Othello,'" a dance-drama that was debuted in 1949 by Limon's troupe, but has since found its way into the repertoire of many ballet companies. An elegant distillation of the Shakespeare play, it spins the tragic tale of two couples -- Othello and Desdemona, and Iago and Emilia -- and their calamitous intertwining. Of course this can be seen as a universal story, but race is a crucial aspect of "Othello," and to mix up the traditional casting (as was done in this performance) was simply to confuse things.

Also on the program were two works by George Balanchine. Though he was Russian-bred, Balanchine, who arrived in the United States in the 1930s, is credited with putting an American spin on classical ballet. The Suzanne Farrell Ballet (she was Balanchine's longtime muse) presented "Tzigane" ("Gypsy"), while two soloists from Oregon Ballet Theatre danced the "Rubies" pas de deux from "Jewels." The performances were adequate, but amid all the modern dance, they seemed distinctly out of place.