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A WILDLY DIVERGENT DISPLAY OF YOUTHFUL CHOREOGRAPHY DANCE REVIEW | Festival offers rare combination of precision, emotion and beauty

By HEDY WEISS

It was a quirky catalog of the new, the bold and the frequently beautiful Tuesday night at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance. It also was the ideal opening salvo as the Chicago Dancing Festival set off on its third annual showcase of all facets of American dance -- a series of events that will culminate Saturday night at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park, with all tickets free of charge.

The kickoff "New Dances" program -- a sampling of five works created by "a new generation of American choreographers," and performed by companies from Chicago and both coasts -- suggested the widely differing approaches being taken by younger choreographers who all have accrued formidable lists of credits, and who use the movement vocabularies of classical ballet, contemporary dance, jazz and even physical theater to make something wonderfully fresh.

The evening's most breathtaking work -- Jessica Lang's "To Familiar Spaces in Dream" -- came first. Exquisitely danced by the Virginia-based Richmond Ballet (a real revelation here), it was an all but impossible piece to top. It also created a sense of keen anticipation at the prospect of seeing Lang's upcoming commission for the Joffrey Ballet, which debuts in spring 2010.

If architecture is sometimes defined as "frozen music," Lang's work for eight dancers and a collection of squared-off white columns of varying heights might be described as "liquid architecture." Set to the music of Philip Glass, Craig Armstrong and John Cage, the work's interplay of human forms and architectural building blocks suggested countless subtly shifting moods and meanings. Most wondrously, it consistently managed to feel charged with emotion and meaning rather than abstract theory.

The sleek dancers, in Tamara Cobus' intriguingly textured white costumes, were marvelous in

their pairing of precision and grace, with Lauren Fagone and Maggie Small the particularly outstanding members of a masterful ensemble that also included Shira Lanyi, Valerie Tellmann, Jesse Bechard Thomas Garrett, Kirk Henning and Thomas Ragland. A hypnotic piece from first image to last.

On an entirely different note, the River North Chicago Dance Company brought down the house with its favorite, Robert Battle's "Train," a work of obsessive, almost ritualistic percussiveness that easily finds its ways into the heart of anyone who has ever stood at the front of a subway train and thrilled to the way it hurtled through a tunnel. Set to the hard-core rhythmic music of Les Tambours du Bronx, this piece has a palpable engine. That engine clearly has found its way into the body of dancer Hanna Britson, a petite powerhouse who has made the central solo in "Train" her own. Clayton Cross, Monique Haley, Lauren Kias, Lizzie MacKenzie and Cassandra Porter provided the rest of the fearsome force here.

The two technically deft couples from Oregon Ballet Theatre (Anne Mueller, Alison Roper, Artur Sultanov and Lucas Threefoot) danced the tricky series of duets in choreographer Trey McIntyre's "Just" with polish. But while the work, set to a tiresome score by Henry Cowell, had its inventive moments (particularly a sense of marionettelike movements), too often it felt as if McIntyre lacked any comprehensive view of the piece and was just filling the music with steps. "Ah! Crudel" ("Ah! Cruelty"), a duet by the Canadian-bred, New York-based choreographer Aszure Barton that is set to a Handel aria (recorded by Renee Fleming), turned out to be a hugely captivating experiment in dance theater. Barton, a favorite of Mikhail Baryshnikov, possesses a real flair for the dramatic. Here she put estranged lovers at opposite sides of what might be a kitchen table, and lets the woman (Cherice Barton, the choreographer's sister) rip into her man (James Gregg), who obviously engaged in some earlier act of treachery.

Cherice Barton, in a long, emerald green velvet sheath, used her amazingly arched and articulate feet to grand effect, and with just the pointed walk of her fingers across the table, demonstrated that every appendage has great potential for expressiveness.

The evening came to a close with "The Age of Innocence," the hugely difficult, grandly dramatic work that Edwaard Liang recently created for the Joffrey Ballet. Set to music by Philip Glass and

Thomas Newman and inspired by the romances limned in Jane Austen's novels, it homes in on two particular relationships amid a grander structure suggesting formal ballroom scenes. The ballet has both a grand sweep and modernist sense of invention.

Victoria Jaiani and Fabrice Calmels (an ideal dance partnership) were superb, as were Megan Quiroz and Thomas Nicholas, and Derrick Agnoletti was absolutely on fire in the fascinating male quartet that also featured Mauro Villanueva, Aaron Rogers and Raul Casasola. Though the ensemble was not always in perfect synchrony, the beauty and force of this ballet shone through.

NOTE: Featured tonight at the Harris Theater will be the "Modern Masters" program, highlighting work by six established choreographers of the 20th century including Jose Limon, William Forsythe, Lar Lubovitch, Jerome Robbins, Christopher Wheeldon and Nacho Duato. Although all tickets have already been spoken for, there is a chance you can still snag one. For details, go to www.chicagodancingfestival.com.