

CHICAGO SUN TIMES
AUGUST 22, 2008

CITY COULD TAKE CUES FROM FESTIVE PAGEANT DANCE REVIEW | Program reflects the best of vibrant scene

By Hedy Weiss

Anyone contemplating a model for the cultural component for a possible 2016 Summer Olympics here needed to look no further than Wednesday night's glorious climactic event for the 2008 Chicago Dancing Festival in Millennium Park. It might not have been high-tech, high-budget Beijing, but it was magical nonetheless. And best of all it was free.

The audience, estimated at close to 10,000 (about 1,500 more than for last year's inaugural event), began filling the space long before the blissful two-hour performance even began, and barely a soul gave up their chosen spot until the last of the eight featured dance companies left the stage. The muse of dance conjured the most ideal weather imaginable. And the festival's organizers -- choreographer Lar Lubovitch and dancer Jay Franke -- did the rest, making sure everything moved like clockwork in a program that was ideally paced, and that deftly mixed- and-matched both choreographic and musical styles.

Delivering the opening fanfare was Chicago's dynamite troupe, Muntu Dance Theater. Five male drummers called everyone to attention, with a ferociously danced and acted excerpt from Moustapha Bangoura's "Initiates of Bagatae" -- a female coming-of-age ritual from the African nation of Guinea -- setting things in motion.

From traditional African dance it was on to a complete about-face as the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company presented his "Concerto Six Twenty-Two," a sunny, tremendously fluid, playful piece set to Mozart. The work showcased his dancers' highly polished technique and, more crucially, their luminous spirit.

"A Stair Dance," one of the most beguiling pieces of the evening, came via Eliot Feld's Ballet Tech Kids Dance, the pre-professional troupe comprised of New York City public school students trained in Feld's tuition-free dance school. Feld displayed a real touch of genius here as he took Steve Reich's rhythmically complex and sophisticated music and made it totally accessible by having his five fleet young dancers engage in playground-style footwork.

The crowd literally leapt to its feet following Kanji Segawa's tour de force solo turn in "Takademe," choreographer Robert Battle's sensational exploration of body language and gesture set to the verbal-vocal wizardry of Sheila Chandra. Segawa -- intense, as sinewy and controlled as a gymnast and surprisingly comic -- nearly stole the show.

Of course Chicago's two banner companies, the Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, wowed the crowd, too. With a large ensemble dancing the fiendishly tricky final section of Twyla Tharp's "Waterbaby Bagatelles" (to music by John Adams), the Joffrey fireworks were especially luminous thanks to dancer Mauro Villanueva, who combines extreme eloquence and virtuosity, and to tiny Allison Walsh, all speed

and breeziness. Hubbard Street's Robin Mineko Williams and Terence Marling were captivating in Ohad Naharin's duet "Passomezzo" (set to "Greensleeves"), a work of extreme intimacy and big impact.

Back for the second time were American Ballet Theater's Yuriko Kajiya and Jared Matthews in the Black Swan pas de deux from "Swan Lake." Matthews was all princely elegance. Kajiya whipped off 32 razor-sharp fouette turns and held some uncanny balances, but brought little to the role's dramatic aspects.

Bringing things full circle was Evidence Dance Company in Ronald K. Brown's African-rooted "Upside Down." The piece was long and shapeless, but by then the audience was so giddy it hardly mattered.

hweiss@suntimes.com