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## **9,000 CHEER TEAMS FROM HOME AND AWAY DANCE REVIEW | As Bears play, fest ends with more winning moves**

By HEDY WEISS

About 9,000 avid dance lovers filed into Millennium Park on Saturday night for the grand finale of the third annual Chicago Dancing Festival. And OK, maybe they couldn't quite match the attendance numbers for the nearby Bears opener at Soldier Field. But 9,000 is an enormously impressive turnout for a single evening of high art operating on a modest advertising budget. And while the total salaries of the "star performers" in the dance arena probably didn't add up to one night's work for a single stadium athlete, the sense of high-stakes competition on architect Frank Gehry's pavilion stage, as well as the overall emotional heat generated, was every bit as fierce.

The program began with the exuberantly percussive snap, crackle and pop of Texas-bred Jakari Sherman's "Passing 15," a multi-layered feast of call-and-response dancing, singing, clapping, stepping, stomping, and a brief, expertly orchestrated bit of audience participation that featured the choreographer's Step Afrika! ensemble and infectiously high-energy support from the members of the Chicago Human Rhythm Project's BAM! ensemble and students of Chicago's Sammy Dyer School.

From there it was on to an almost giddy firestorm of bravura technique in the form of William Forsythe's aptly titled neo-classical ballet, "The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude," a fiendishly difficult work set to a bombastic Schubert symphony and brilliantly performed by members of the Houston Ballet. The ballet's title says it all, as three women in hooplike tutus of chartreuse (Jaquel Andrews, Melody Herrera and Sara Webb) and two male dancers (Connor Walsh and Joseph Walsh) — shooting stars, all — moved through choreography of exceptional difficulty and quirkiness at unimaginable velocities. The whole thing had an almost giddy-making effect because the five dancers were not just models of perfection, but met every challenge with that sense of sheer fun that comes with sublime skill and buoyant confidence.

The same sense of supremely confident technique and sheer delight in dancing marked the performance of the pas de deux from "Le Corsaire," the evening's flashiest bit of purely classical ballet, to which American Ballet Theatre dancers Isabella Boylston (as the princess) and Cory Stearns (as the exotic slave who loves her) brought a refreshingly modern briskness and ease. Petite, light, beautifully proportioned and wonderfully unfussy, Boylston spun like a top, while Stearns (who is VERY easy to look at) displayed an exquisite line and wonderful buoyancy. The pair's easy chemistry could be felt across the footlights.

The Dayton Contemporary Dance Company gave a superb rendering of "Vespers," the intense, often mysterious work of Ulysses Dove, the late choreographer who worked with Alvin Ailey's company. Although Dove dealt with a popular theme — black women in church — he put such a modern twist on it, and used such a contemporary score (by Mikel Rouse) that it countered traditional work. The piece, for six women and a dozen black chairs, was splendidly danced, with Sheri "Sparkle" Williams as the riveting lead "seeker." Representing the Ailey company itself was the ravishingly intense and sensual Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell in the solo "Cry," that grand three-part aria "dedicated to black women everywhere," that traces the journey from slavery to freedom.

The evening's finale came in the form of an overly long ballet spoof, 'Star Spangled Ballerina,' courtesy of the drag troupe Les Ballets Grandiva. The central pas de deux parody was truly funny, and would have sufficed on its own. But how much better it would have been to end on a high note, with a repeat of one of the three stunning works danced Thursday night in the "Modern Masters" program at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance — either Luna Negra's masterful rendering of Jose Limon's "There Is a Time," Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's mesmerizing performance of Nacho Duato's "Gnawa," or the Joffrey Ballet's performance of Jerome Robbins' "In the Night." As for my vote for next year's finale: It's the sensational "Bolero" of Chicago's Ensemble Espanol Dance Theater, which will have everyone leaving the park humming the Ravel classic.