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Dance Festival ends with big finish

DANCE REVIEW | Chicago Dancing Festival in Millennium Park

BY HEDY WEISS Dance Critic / hweiss@suntimes.com



Ballet West performs "Serenade".

(Photo by Todd Rosenberg)

By 6:30 p.m. Saturday -- on one of the more perfect nights of the summer here -- the masses had already begun claiming free seats in Millennium Park's Pritzker Pavilion, and on the vast lawn beyond it.

They were an hour early for the great outdoor performance marking the climax of the 2010 Chicago Dancing Festival, which ultimately attracted a crowd estimated to be 10,500 strong. And as some of the dancers on the program warmed up on stage, in full view, you could already get a good sense of what the audience for dance in Chicago might be were ticket prices not an issue.

While the performances at this festival are of the essence (and they were uniformly impressive Saturday), it is the audience that is the real story. As viewers arrived in strollers and on walkers, comprising an ideal cross-section of every age and ethnic variety (with many veterans of the three previous festivals back to see more), the whole event could not help but send a dance enthusiast's heart spinning.

To start with, applause for the festival's co-founders and directors: Lar Lubovitch and Jay Franke, whose programming this year was both challenging and eye-opening, even for hardcore dance-goers. No dumbing down this time around, and it paid off, even if one of the pieces did end up testing the audience's attention span at times.

The evening began in grand style with a truly fiery turn by the Joffrey Ballet's Exelon Strobel Step-Up high school outreach program. More than two dozen powerhouse young dancers, of every size and shape, gave a hugely accomplished, fiercely confident performance of Joffrey dancer Derrick Agnoletti's hard-driving, fiendishly difficult work, "Inferno," set to a high energy Cirque du Soleil score. It was a real knockout.

Then it was on to the professionals, beginning with an airy, free-flowing rendering of "Serenade," Russian-trained choreographer George Balanchine's first American-made work (from 1935), which not only remains a textbook example of his neo-classical style, but also underlines his motto that "ballet is woman."

Danced by Utah-based Ballet West (whose artistic director, Adam Sklute, is a Joffrey veteran), this rendering of an often surprising work, set to the music of Tchaikovsky, was most notable for the way the large contingent of female dancers made exquisitely stylized movement seem altogether natural. One sequence, an especially gorgeous quintet of interweaving ballerinas, clearly captured the imagination of the audience and triggered spontaneous applause.

From there it was on to something completely different -- "The Hunt," a work for six dazzling male dancers (bare-chested and in red-lined black wrap "skirts") danced by Ailey II. Choreographed by Robert Battle, soon to become artistic director of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, this is a ferocious, ritualistic work that suggests the psychological and physical preparation undertaken before a dangerous venture into the forest. Tigers beware.

In many ways the most daring program offering was "Grand Duo," with the Mark Morris Dance Group performing a Morris piece that also suggests something ritualistic (a large, unified group at moments circles into two aggressively threatening groups). But this work is rooted in movement with an intriguing sense of antiquity, too -- as if the dancers (in interesting jewel-toned costumes by Susan Ruddle) have stepped off a Greek vase and found themselves in a modern world.

"Grand Duo" might have worked better had only a couple of its sections been presented. But the live music (pianist Colin Fowler and violinist Georgy Valtchev played Lou Harrison's fiendishly difficult score, a piece at once fascinating, propulsive and dissonant) did much to hold the audience's attention.

The classical ballet fireworks came with a performance of the wildly passionate, erotically charged pas de deux from Kenneth MacMillan's "Manon," danced (and acted) to brilliant effect by Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson of Britain's Royal Ballet. Benjamin is a tiny, passionate, bravura dancer whose fearlessness and energy is palpable, and she was superbly partnered by Watson, as the young writer/lover she distracts so completely from work.

Another audience-galvanizer was a repeat performance by the phenomenally articulate and often comical Kanji Segawa of the giddily winning solo, "Takademe," also by Robert Battle. The whole piece feels like a work of Japanese anime set to a pop twist on Indian classical musical. Great fun.

The exuberant grand finale of the evening came with the Joffrey Ballet's galvanic performance of Gerald Arpino's "Trinity," the Vietnam War era work that combines the playfulness of the sexual revolution of the late 1960s with a more solemn candlelit vigil. Derrick Agnoletti and Mauro Villanueva were standouts here. And while it might have been better to have seen the Joffrey (which just happens to look sensational these days) in a more substantive work, this suited the need for a rousing sendoff to the evening ideally.

And there is this good news: Planning already is underway for next summer's fifth Chicago Dancing Festival.