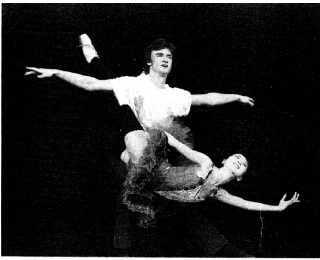


CHICAGO TRIBUNE  
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## FLASHY START

### All-star lineup provides plenty of pop for fest debut

By Sid Smith Tribune arts critic



Yuriko Kajiya and Jared Matthews perform Wednesday during a dress rehearsal for Chicago Dancing Festival.  
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CANDICE C. CUSIC

The heat was barely tolerable, the humidity worse, and the sizable crowd understandably testy awaiting the tardy start. But there was a charge in the thick air transcending paltry complaints, and by just about every measure, the first Chicago Dancing Festival at Millennium Park on Wednesday was a red-hot success.

Even the weather seemed to take note mid-performance and sent cool, Canadian-like relief, the breeze arriving with acute paradox during a performance by Ballet Florida. Dance aficionados aren't used to this kind of Lollapalooza-like all-star lineup, nor are they accustomed to free admission.

But offer top talent and the devotees will turn the Pritzker Pavilion into a field of light-fantastic dreams, with an excitement evident from the packed seating area, a fair turnout on the lawn (considering its restricted view) and the jubilant response. The ovations began early and built like an avalanche.

The festival is the brainchild of Lar Lubovitch and Jay Franke and produced by Millennium Park and the Museum of Contemporary Art. And this inaugural effort (the announcer invited everyone to next year's outing at program's end) married good taste and circus dazzle. Any program in Chicago that includes the Joffrey Ballet, American Ballet Theatre, the San Francisco Ballet and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre is historic, and the selections allowed for artistic expression with eye-popping showmanship.

The most striking revelation was Heigl Tomasson's "Concerto Grosso" and the impressive San Francisco Ballet men who performed it. Tomasson feverishly relishes male-technique here, weaving in and out of classical confines with the bravura impact or spectacle, despite a cast of only five dancers. Phenomenal Pascal Molat, speedy Hanusuke Yamamoto and smooth, assured Jaime Garcia Castilla top the cast.

Ailey created "Pas de Duke" for Mikhail Baryshnikov and Judith Jamison. Two of the troupe's most charismatic performers, Alicia J. Graf and Clifton Brown, danced it Wednesday. Graf is a dynamic technician with suppleness and elegance, while Brown is a star performer with breakneck speed and creamy execution.

ABT soloists Yuriko Kajiya and Jared Matthews aren't Zen masters of the celebrated pas de deux from "Don Quixote," but you'd never know it from their confidence. Despite his Wisconsin farm-boy looks, Matthews has the zeal of a star toreador. They're fun and feisty. She delivered 28 fouettes like a walk in the park, and his whipping turns had the force to fuel a power plant. "

Complexions Contemporary Ballet is an exciting company of hot young dancers, but Dwight Rhoden's "Red/the Force," though fast and flush with take-no-prisoners acrobatics, lacks dramatic clarity.

Lubovitch was pleasantly represented by Ballet Florida's beguiling version of his "Elemental Brubeck," a work incorporating Astaire-like ease and startling falls that echo the score's more jarring notes.

The energy of Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago once again demonstrated why it's asked to open every program it attends, and the Joffrey's "Light Rain" seemed reinvigorated by a cast led by gorgeously statuesque Valerie Robin and Fabrice Calmels.

There have been other all-star dance programs here in the past, and the Joffrey has already initiated the Pritzker with anniversary festivities. But the quality roster, not to mention the broad geography represented by the troupes, leave one hoping that the announcer's invitation proves not so much a case of loudspeaker whimsy as the promise of warm nights to come.

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