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DANCE CARD

CHICAGO DANCING FESTIVAL IS AN AMAZING EVENT AT AN AMAZING PRICE

By SID SMITH
Special to the Tribune

In three years, the Chicago Dancing Festival has gone from a one-night novelty to one of the most exciting stints on our annual dance calendar.

This year's expanded lineup -- two indoor concerts at the Harris Theater and an outdoor one at Millennium Park -- will import top performers and troupes, some rarely seen here, joined by plenty of familiar faces and Chicago pieces well worth revisiting.

Each program is a potpourri rather than an in-depth look at one company -- an effervescent summertime tonic. And the price of the fest, which runs Tuesday through Aug. 22, can't be beat: Free.

The sweep of this year's offerings is awesome. The New York City Ballet's Wendy Whelan -- among the more renowned ballerinas in the nation -- and Albert Evans are on board for a Christopher Wheeldon pas de deux. The Houston Ballet is making its first appearance in several decades, and choreographers represented include the venerable (Jerome Robbins), the top-notch (Wheeldon, William Forsythe) and the red hot (Jessica Lang).

"It's called a dancing festival for a reason," says Lar Lubovitch, who co-founded the enterprise. "It's about bringing the highest level of dancing we can put on a stage. Having someone like Wendy Whelan is a statement of that fact. We think this year, we've really put together a survey of American dance and a look at the spectrum of all that's going on in this country."

When the fest began, did he think they'd get to this point? "We had no idea what to expect," Lubovitch says. "But Chicago's response was so tremendous, we realized we could aim high, expand, add more dates. After that first night, we were sure."

Reserved tickets for the two indoor events were snatched up weeks ago. But there will be stand-by vouchers available on the days of the performances at the Harris. To get a stand-by voucher, visit the Harris Theater box office at noon on the day of the performance until supplies last.

But the big event -- with no advance tickets required -- is the concert Aug. 22 at the Pritzker Pavilion, including American Ballet Theatre's Hee Seo and Cory Stearns in an excerpt from "Le Corsaire;" Dayton Contemporary Dance Company in Ulysses Dove's "Vespers;" Linda Denise Fisher-Harrell in Alvin Ailey's classic solo "Cry;" the Houston Ballet in Forsythe's "The Vertigi-

nous Thrill of Exactitude," the Chicago Human Rhythm Project and Step Africa; Lubovitch's company in a preview of his new work "Coltrane's Favorite Things;" and the Chicago debut of an all-male, Tockadero-like spoof troupe called Les Ballets Grandiva in "Star-Spangled Ballerina."

Some have said the festival will eventually charge admission fees. "Never," Lubovitch promises. "We want people to feel that dance is available to them and can enrich their lives."

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The Chicago Dancing Festival

Eclectic programs featuring national and local troupes and dancers

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Thursday and Aug. 22

Where: Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph Dr. (Tuesday and Thursday) and the Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park (Aug. 22)

Tickets: Free; chicagodancingfestival.com

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