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LAR LUBOVITCH

Risky effort pays off for choreographer

By Sid Smith and Tribune Arts Critic

It was quite an eventful year for choreographer Lar Lubovitch – his accomplishments add up to a trifecta of art, production and backstage advocacy.

Lubovitch's "Cryptoglyph," unveiled by Hubbard Street Dance Chicago last spring, is one of the most enchanting original works from a Chicago choreographer in years. Last summer, Lubovitch, working with dancer Jay Franke, launched a risky effort to produce a free outdoor concert of dance, and the result, the Chicago Dancing Festival in August at Millennium Park, brought together a stellar and historic lineup of local and national troupes.

And this fall, as the Joffrey Ballet was finalizing its search for a new artistic director, Lubovitch urged the troupe to consider the San Francisco Ballet's Ashley Wheater, a former Joffrey dancer and ideal selection the company wound up hiring.

For "Cryptoglyph," set to music by Meredith Monk, Lubovitch played architect himself, designing the set. "The music is based on Meredith's extraordinary ability to use her voice in uncanny and even inhuman kinds of ways. Some of it is composed of just utterances, consonants and vowels. So I covered the stage with large, multicolored plastic letters and occasionally short phrases. The idea of the piece came with the way the space would look."

The festival, meanwhile, brought together dancers from the Joffrey, Muntu Dance Theatre of Chicago, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, American Ballet Theatre and the San Francisco Ballet, among others, for the first time in the city's history. Next year, plans call for a second indoor night at the Harris Theater and participants including the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Jose Limon Company and works by George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins.

"The idea was to bring dance to people who've never seen it and to set the bar higher in Chicago, a celebration and a laying down of the gauntlet," Lubovitch said. "It didn't take that much persuading to get the companies. There's a collegial feel among dancers, who don't get to share the stage with each other that often."

Lubovitch, 64, discovered dance at the University of Iowa, studied at Juilliard and launched his own eponymous, New York-based troupe, which turns 40 next year. His resume includes nine commissions from ABT. But in recent years, he bought a home and has been spending more time here after returning to work behind the scenes on Robert Altman's "The Company."

Lest anyone challenge his Chicago credentials, he notes proudly, "I grew up at the corner of Maxwell and Halsted streets until we moved north when I was 5," he says. "That's a legendary neighborhood now, and a badge of honor."

INSPIRATION

All his career, Lar Lubovitch says, he has been inspired by architecture. "Growing up here, whether you know it or not, you develop an eye for structure," he says, citing Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and the innovative curved concrete of Bertrand Goldberg, who designed Marina City. "Choreography involves space, balance and all the other elements of architecture. ... Dance is like a building, just unfolding in time."

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