

THE TOC BLOG
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Chicago Dancing Festival, Days 3 and 4: Live review

BY ZACHARY WHITTENBURG

Celebration of Dance



Ailey II in "The Hunt."

Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Twenty-five teens from the Joffrey Ballet's Exelon Strobel Step-Up program (including Shawntara Mathis, profiled by TOC in April) stormed the stage at the Pritzker Pavilion August 28 to kick off "Celebration of Dance," the conclusion to the 2010 Chicago Dancing Festival. They performed *Inferno*, a maelstrom choreographed by Joffrey dancer Derrick Agnoletti to music from *Cirque du Soleil's O*, with the gusto and abandon of kids, but in tight unison belying their age. The Step-Up program is heading into its fifth year, and in March, four of its students (three of whom danced *Inferno*) went to South Africa to learn and perform the *Diski Dance*, a follow-along based on soccer moves created for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. *Inferno* was met with a roar of applause; Exelon Strobel Step-Up deserves one, too.

Six dances by six professional companies followed. Two were stand-alone one-acts performed in their entirety: *Serenade* (1935), by George Balanchine, and Mark Morris's *Grand Duo* (1993); the other four were briefs (Robert Battle's *The Hunt* and *Takademe*) and excerpts (from Sir Kenneth MacMillan's *Manon* and Gerald Arpino's *Trinity*). This trading back and forth—one piece would last two minutes, the next half an hour—gave the program a strange rhythm, but overall, the choreography and dancing were outstanding, the show was free, and the weather was perfect.

Salt Lake City's Ballet West served the Balanchine. At first, Mark Goldweber and Victoria Simon's staging felt too sharp—almost jagged—but as the work continued, the ensemble found a groove in Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings in C Major* that made its attack feel more fresh than audacious. The three principal roles for women—danced, interestingly enough, by a fiery redhead (Christiana Bennett), striking brunette (Elizabeth McGrath) and movie-star blonde (Haley Henderson Smith)—played well with and against the corps de ballet as this work requires, and the men, Christopher Ruud and Beau Pearson, were inscrutably blank, as is also the norm. (Balanchine made *Serenade* at a time when ballet as we know it was essentially nonexistent in America; he spent the year before in London and Paris trying to get *Les Ballets 1933* off the ground, the last of a series of ventures triggered by the breakdown of the original *Ballets Russes*, where he was resident choreographer, following Diaghilev's death in '29. The piece gives the impression he didn't have much to work with over here, especially when it came to men, who do little more in *Serenade* than support, lift, and do big, plain leaps. One of the things that makes it a masterpiece, besides Balanchine's extraordinary musicality, is that it retained its power as the skill and technique of American ballet dancers improved exponentially. He choreographed it for dancers who had yet to be born, but in a way that allowed amateurs to embody it just as fully.)

Kanji Segawa danced Takademe as wonderfully as he did Wednesday and Thursday; *The Hunt* (2002), performed by six men from Ailey II, was a tougher assignment. Battle's choreographed to Les Tambours du Bronx on a number of occasions—including *Train* (2008) and *Three* (2010) for River North Chicago Dance Company—but *The Hunt* shows that he'd yet to hone the synergy between movement and percussion that makes those later pieces so successful. Still, like all of Battle's works, it holds curious contradictions: The men, bare-chested and in long, black skirts lined with crimson, are preparing to raid a target or land some prize game, but often subgroup into pairs, suggesting the sub/dom dynamics that crop up in charged environments (squadrons, locker rooms, prisons) devoid of women. At one point, they're holding each other like tangoing couples. They yell at and shove each other, but in a way that suggests intense fraternity—these men would die for each other, regardless of whether or not they're friends. *The Hunt*'s concepts are interesting, and the Ailey II dancers amazing, but its timing slips off, causing the booming beats to suffocate rather than buoy its energy.



Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson in "Manon."

Photo: Todd Rosenberg

With all the spectacular dancing [Royal Ballet](#) stars Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson [gave to the Festival's opening gala](#), I expected another of Manon's duets. These are some of the finest classical dancers around—Benjamin uses her eyes as thoughtfully as she does her feet, and Watson's control will take your breath away—but this scene from Act I of the 1974 ballet, in which Manon lustfully interrupts des Grieux's letter-writing to Daddy, is less sumptuous than their other encounters, mostly a lot of bourées and running around. (Presenting the ballet's final scene, where Manon dies in a swamp near New Orleans, would've been poignant on Katrina's fifth anniversary.) Mostly, I just hope that these dancers or, hell, the entire London company, come to visit Chicago again someday soon.

Between his V, [danced Thursday night at "Modern Masters,"](#) and Grand Duo, we got a nice sense this week of Mark Morris's scope as a choreographer. Duo is as angular and experimental as V is ebullient, ordered and tidy, and in both cases, the addition of live music was a boon. Georgy Valtchev and Colin Fowler played Lou Harrison's Grand Duo for Violin and Piano with gusto, an armature on which Morris hangs a kind of rural ritual. I thought of strange protocol in a commune or compound, and traditions born in isolation, especially when the 14 dancers split into two factions, shoving gestures at each other, a street fight from an earthier *West Side Story*. The central motif is a wagging of two fingers (fore and middle) like finger-painting the air or conducting an invisible orchestra. Like all of Morris's dances, Duo is profoundly musical, but it's surprising to see him settle into step-for-each-count parity for such long stretches. It's not an easy work; I sensed many in the audience weren't sure what to make of it but, hey, I tend to consider that a good thing.

Perfect, then, that the Festival concluded with the "Saturday" section of Gerald Arpino's [Trinity](#), performed by the Joffrey Ballet, a ballet impossible to misinterpret. Choreographed in 1970 and premiered in Berkeley, the [Alan Raph](#)-scored piece sizzles with the energy of the era. Agnoletti had the audience in the palm of his, uh, jazzily swiveling hips and sassy punches, nearly everyone in the company got to burn across the stage with some pyrotechnic trick or sultry aside and there was a brief moment of—yes indeed—air guitar. *Trinity* is almost laughably dated, especially its Crayola-box Lycra costumes. (Barbie and Ken's entire aerobics class has come out to play.) But Arpino dances have a winning

sincerity no matter how short the shelf life of their designs, and his matching of Raph's dialing back—from Rocky training montage to lone horn bursts in silence—with a solemn procession of candle-bearers was probably the best possible way to exit the fevered chaos of "Saturday's" climax, and definitely a gentle release from a wonderfully exhausting week for dance fans.

The Dancing Skyline



Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Brian McGinnis in "Meadow."

Photo: Todd Rosenberg

The night before, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, critic Lucia Mauro moderated a discussion between choreographer Lar Lubovitch and architect [Dirk Denison](#), designer of restaurants [L20](#) and [Terzo Piano](#). I was running to Wicker Park to catch [bloom #3](#) at praxis place and couldn't stay for the whole program, but the beginning of the lecture and two dance performances highlighting its subject, similarities between architecture and dance, made me wish I wasn't double-booked.

"Different streets have different music," said Denison. "Architecture is the music of the streets." He went on to explain how repetition, of columns in a colonnade or streetlights along a highway, allows architects to address both movement and duration in building's fixed medium. Lubovitch discussed the influence growing up in Chicago has had on his approach to choreography, which is highly structured, and all three conversed about the effects of light on the container (in architecture) and the contained (in dance). Craig Hall and Wendy Whelan repeated Thursday night's performance of Christopher Wheeldon's *Liturgy*, replacing what was scheduled to be the pas de deux from Balanchine's *Agon*, and Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Brian McGinnis gave a touching performance of a duet from Lubovitch's *Meadow*, which starts with the two forming a kind of tree, includes abstractions of sundials, and ends with a quiet turning into darkness. It's a lovely poem about the passage of time.