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## GOOD CONNECTION

How the Chicago Dancing Festival got on its feet.

By Asimina Chremos



PHOTO BY NAN MELVILLE

He couldn't have known it at the time, but the creative attraction that dancer Jay Franke felt for choreographer Lar Lubovitch's work was the spark behind one of the most ambitious dance festivals this city has witnessed. In 2004, Franke had decided he was going to leave Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. He was finishing out his last season with the troupe when he peeked into a rehearsal for Lubovitch's *Love Stories* and, well, that's when he kind of fell in love.

"Because he was near the end of his contract with HSDC, "I wasn't even being considered for Lar's piece," he says. Nevertheless, Lubovitch's masterful style made such a strong impression that Franke visited HSDC artistic director Jim Vincent's office to ask if he could at least hang out in the studio to learn the material.

"As a dancer, you're always looking for that choreographer that you connect with," Franke says. After watching Franke practicing in rehearsal, Lubovitch pulled him from the sidelines and cast him in *Stories*. "I ended up staying [at HSDC] for another contract, just to perform that work," Franke says. "It was very special to me." Not surprisingly, once he completed his stint at Hubbard, Franke's next contract was with the New York City-based Lar Lubovitch Company; he continues to travel from his home in Chicago to participate in Lubovitch Company projects, rehearsals and performance tours.

"Lar is my mentor," Franke says. "I really look up to him. His career spans 40 years. He's choreographed for ice skaters, Broadway, so many things. In the studio he's always prepared—it's just wonderful to work with him."

In addition to the professionally satisfying dancer/choreographer synergy, Franke and Lubovitch developed a friendship outside the studio. "My partner, David, and I frequently go out to dinner with Lar," Franke says. It was during one of those dinners that the concept of the Chicago Dancing Festival arose. As the idea gained traction through discussion, Franke was surprised to find Lubovitch lobbying for the dancer's participation as a full partner: "He said, 'I'll never be able to do it without you,'" recalls Franke.

No doubt, Lubovitch saw beyond Franke's fine dancing and perceived both his strong connections within the Chicago dance scene and his visionary streak: In addition to dancing with Hubbard Street, Franke performed with Ginger Farley's experimental 58 Group and choreographed works for several companies, including Thodos Dance Chicago. Perhaps most pertinent to the Dancing Festival endeavor, Franke has run a non-profit: In 2001, he founded Chicago Arts Project, which brings arts-education programs to inner-city schools.

Franke senses that the Dancing Festival helps fulfill Lubovitch's desire to stay connected to his hometown. Although based in New York City since the late 1960s, Lubovitch grew up in Rogers Park, and his grandfather lived on then immigrant-friendly Maxwell Street. "He still has family in Chicago," Franke says, adding that the world-famous Lubovitch has stayed in touch while working on gigs such as the movie *The Company* (filmed in Chicago and featuring the Joffrey Ballet) and setting works for Hubbard Street. Franke also posits that, in Chicago, Lubovitch enjoys a more easygoing environment for creative projects: "New York presents a lot more obstacles for choreographers—there's more competition for support, rehearsal space and great dancers."

Today, Franke and Lubovitch are listed as cofounders of the nonprofit Chicago Dancing Company, whose mission is to "present a wide variety of excellent dance and build audiences for dance in Chicago," and tickets to all events are free. Clearly, the two want to share their love of dance with as many people as possible.

The second annual Chicago Dancing Festival takes place Monday 18–Wednesday 20.