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Destination: Dance Chicago

Festival brings best of dancing to Windy City

By Karen McDonough

It's rare that a world renown choreographer who heads his own highly successful and very booked touring dance company would establish an annual dance festival, a huge undertaking that requires an enormous amount of time, energy and support.

But for Lar Lubovitch presenting the Chicago Dancing Festival, a free, three-day event now in its fourth year, is a passion and a calling. His vision, which is shared by festival co-founder Jay Franke, is to bring great dance to the public at no cost in Chicago, Lubovitch's beloved hometown.

"We want the American dance world to know that Chicago is a major dance center and the city is now becoming a dance destination," Lubovitch says.

The festival has been hugely successful since its inception in 2007 when it made a splash attracting an audience of 12,000 at the Jay Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park. A dance audience of that size is unheard of anywhere. With a line up of ballet and contemporary dance stars from the U.S. and Europe, featuring the work of top choreographers, this has become the city's most popular summer dance event. And it's becoming a favorite among the top echelon of dancers both here and abroad.

"The word is getting out," says Franke, a Julliard School graduate who has danced with the Twyla Tharp Dance Company, "THARP!" The 58 Group, the Lyric Opera Ballet Chicago and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago. Franke joined Lar Lubovitch Dance Company five years ago. "I go to class in New York and dancers are talking about dancing on [the outdoor Pritzker] stage."

This year's festival begins Aug. 26 at Chicago's Harris Theater and includes a lecture demonstration at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Aug. 27. The closing night performance at the Pritzker Pavilion Aug. 28 is an extravaganza of some of the best of ballet and modern dance. This year's ensembles include the Mark Morris Dance Group, Joffrey Ballet and works by Robert Battle and others.

The idea to stage a summer dance festival on the shore of Lake Michigan began about five years ago around the time Lubovitch, who is based in New York with his company, bought a place in Chicago where he lives part time. While the Windy City has always had a rich dance community, Lubovitch has watched it grow into a vibrant place for dance with several venerable anchors including the Joffrey Ballet, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago to name a few.

Still, in the choreographer's eyes, something was missing. "What it didn't have was a world class dancing festival that distinguished Chicago as a dance destination," he says.

Chicago, for Lubovitch, is a majestic city full of incredible architecture that left an artistic mark on his heart as a youngster. His artistic aesthetic as a dancer and choreographer was shaped by the beauty that surrounded him. His eye for architecture has translated into how he choreographs dance. "Chicago is an inspired and beautiful city," he says. "This [festival] is very personal to my heart and it's kind of a blessing."

When Franke joined Lubovitch's dance company, he brought with him a benevolent background. A few years earlier, Franke had started the Chicago Arts Project as a conduit to bring jazz dance to inner city schools. While working on that project, Franke had the idea to start a dance festival unique to Chicago but he didn't have the necessary resources at the time. After joining with Lubovitch, together they brought forward the Chicago Dancing Festival.

"I'm honored that Lar would look at me as a co-director. He's been a great mentor to me," Franke says. "I think he continues to push himself in new directions whether it's choreography or this festival. We feel like we're making an impact on creating this new audience since they're typically younger and many are seeing dance for the first time. Hopefully they'll turn around and buy a ticket to something else [another dance performance somewhere] this year."

Both Lubovitch and Franke were committed to making the event free "to invite everyone to the party," Lubovitch says, in an effort to overcome the elitist impression attached to the art form. Funding for the festival comes from a core group of donors and non-profits and the executive director, Gregory Russell, handles most of the details of organizing the event which frees Lubovitch and Franke to focus on the curating.

Lubovitch was also inspired by memories of another free, outdoor dance festival staged a generation ago; the Rebekah Harkness Dance Festival which was held intermittently over five summers between 1963 and 1970 at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park following the annual Shakespeare Festival. Many of New York's top dancers at that time, from ABT, NYCB and elsewhere, participated in front of jovial crowds, Lubovitch remembers.

With planning this festival, Lubovitch and Franke were determined to have the dancing, not just the choreography, take center stage. "We're really focused on bringing the highest quality of dancing to the city and setting a standard for dance itself," Lubovitch says. "When you look through this roster, it's some of the best dancing going on."

Planning the next festival starts immediately after the current one ends, and next year marks CDF's fifth anniversary. Lubovitch explains that he and Franke restyle the event each year and first select the featured artists. Then they see which companies are performing some of the most important work today at the highest level. Ballet West (from Salt Lake City), for example, was invited on the strength of its Serenade which earned critics' top marks when they performed it during Ballet Across America at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. two years ago.

The festival's finale has become the highlight of the weekend and consistently attracts thousands. Having seven different dynamic performances on stage, by companies and individual artists, creates a palpable, kinetic energy, Franke says, that takes on the excitement of a rock concert. Even for those who've never seen dance before, it's hard not to be blown away by the beauty and energy of works by Balanchine or Mark Morris or Christopher Wheeldon especially in a dramatic outdoor setting.

The festival runs Aug. 26-Aug. 28. (Aug. 26): Modern Masters at the Harris Theater; Joffrey Ballet in Jessica Lang's Crossed; NYCB guest artists Wendy Whalen and Craig Hall in Christopher Wheeldon's Liturgy; Julliard Dance in Paul Taylor's Last Look; Lar Lubovitch Dance Company in his Coltrane's Favorite Things and Mark Morris Dance Group in his V.

The lecture and demonstration, The Dancing Skyline, (Aug. 27) at the Museum of Contemporary Art features a conversational exchange between Lubovitch and Chicago architect Dirk Denison, moderated by dance writer and critic Lucia Mauro. The performances are: Wendy Whalen and Craig Hall in Balanchine's Agon pas de deux and Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Brian McGinnis in Lubovitch's Via Nova.

The closing night's Celebration of Dance (Aug. 28) at the Pritzker Pavilion includes: Joffrey's Exelon Strobel Step Up dancers in Derrick Agnoletti's Inferno; Utah's Ballet West in Balanchine's Serenade; Alvin Ailey II in Robert Battle's The Hunt ; Royal Ballet guest artist Leanne Benjamin and Ed Watson in the pas de deux from MacMillan's Manon; Mark Morris Dance Group in Morris' Grand Duo; Battleworks' Kanji Segawa in Robert Battle's Takademe and Joffrey Ballet in Gerald Arpino's Trinity.