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Dance Chicago opens a window to the world

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Transporting dance and theater companies across the globe is an expensive proposition, even in the best of economic times, so given the worldwide financial situation at the moment, it is downright amazing that such cultural trade still can take place.

This is just one of the reasons for paying attention to the arrival of a slew of international treats in the coming weeks -- performances that will enable Chicago audiences to become armchair travelers with none of the hassles of passports, visas and plane tickets. In fact, you won't even have to remove your shoes and belts.

Here's a closer look at some of the dance offerings (see sidebar for theater):

When Dance Chicago, the multi-week, marathon-like showcase of all aspects of dance began at the Athenaeum Theatre 14 years ago, its focus was decidedly local. And it played a vital role in exposing audiences here to the diversity and sheer joy of the city's then-burgeoning dance scene.

A great deal has changed in the interim -- most notably the fact that Chicago has become something of a dance mecca, with the Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago now just the top names among a slew of hugely impressive companies that run the gamut from ballet and contemporary dance to ethnic, percussive, hip-hop, ballroom and much more.

Many of these companies -- most of which were spotlighted for the first time thanks to Dance Chicago -- now tour widely and enjoy seasons of their own. And in recent years, these troupes have been joined at Dance Chicago by artists from around the country and the world.

The opening weekend lineup for Dance Chicago 2008 is a good indication of the eclecticism that artistic director John Schmitz has made the trademark of the festival. Mixed and matched on the trio of programs (presented Nov. 7 and 8 at 8 p.m., and Nov. 9 at 3 p.m.) will be performances of the following:

- • Moscow Ballet dancers in the Gypsy Dance from "Don Quixote."
- • Kim Geung Soo Ballet Company of South Korea in Geung Soo's duet to Debussy's "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun" and Altin Naska's "Daybreak."
- • New York's Akjun Ballet Theatre in Chiara Akjun's version of the classic "Walpurgis Night," set to music of Charles Gounod.
- • Houston Metropolitan Dance Company in Kate Skarpetowska's earthy, futuristic piece "Folk Tales."
- • Chicago's Lucky Plush Productions in "meet them and wonder again."
- • Mexican Dance Ensemble in "Zapateado Veracruzano."
- • Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago in Giordano's "Wings."
- • New York's LehrerDance, the company of former Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago member Jon Lehrer, in Lehrer's "Loose Canon" and "A Ritual Dynamic."
- • Chicago's Concert Dance, Inc. in Venitia Stifler's "Meetings Along the Edge."

- • DanceWorks Chicago in Robert Battle's "Etude."
- • Also performing will be Trinity II Irish Dance Company, Chicago Tap Theatre and Elijah Alhadji Gibson.

And that's just the start of things. Coming up will be such programs as New Moves (showcasing hot new choreographers); Dance Romance (featuring salsa, ballroom, modern and contemporary jazz works); "Extended View" (an evening of tap, jazz and hip-hop works); a Jazz Cabaret; the ever-popular Dance Slam; Chicago Streets (an exploration of urban dance); a Fringe Carnival (cutting edge, improv and more), and a variety of kids programs.

For a complete schedule and more information, visit www.dancechicago.com.

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