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Dance Chicago offers a smorgasbord in many guises

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Talk about a smorgasbord of dance. The weekend's opening program of Dance Chicago 2008 - the three-week festival at the Athenaeum Theatre that showcases dance in all its many guises -- dished out so many different "tastes" of the art form that it was difficult to keep track of them all. Along the way, the spirit of invention and eclecticism not only kept the audience more than sated, but turned this whole starter meal into an alluring suggestion of the many things to come.

Though a number of the upcoming programs will be more specialized (with one focusing on tap, jazz and hip-hop, another on Chicago street dance styles, another on "fringe" experiments and yet another devoted to the theme of romance), all promise to have their own particular mix-and-match qualities. A choreographer's showcase, a program of "new moves" and an all-encompassing final weekend promise to feature much the same something-for-everyone sort of programming. And it must be said that John Schmitz, Dance Chicago's founder-producer-curator, has quite a gift for lining up works that might be radically different on the surface, yet complement each other when juxtaposed on the same program.

Friday night's bill for the initial weekend of this 14th annual Dance Chicago season included:

- "Loose Canon," a hilariously irreverent interpretation of the Pachelbel "Canon in C" by way of choreographer Jon Lehrer (a Giordano Jazz Dance veteran). The Pachelbel score is overexposed, but Lehrer and the dancers of his wonderfully game Buffalo-based company, LehrerDance, found a way to play with that notion and were funny and brilliant at the same time. The company also closed the program with Lehrer's driving piece, "A Ritual Dynamic," whose title says it all.
- "Poppin Masters," a bravura break dance routine, courtesy of four members of the Stick and Move Dance Company, that lit up the stage with echoes of Michael Jackson, vaudevillian Bert Williams and Samuel Beckett. A real winner.
- "Zapateados Jarochos," with 18 sparkling dancers from Chicago's Mexican Dance Ensemble, dressed in stunning white costumes, engaging in some thrilling percussive footwork. The irresistibly celebratory spirit came by way of choreographers Samuel Cortez and Samuel Barriga.
- "Wings," Gus Giordano's fluid, spiritually soaring male solo, danced with great beauty and superb technique by Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago's exceptional Cesar Salinas. The work is set to Joan Baez's marvelous recording of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot."
- "Meetings Along the Edge," choreographer Venetia Stifler's seductive, ritualistic, ethnically tinged work for her CDI/Concert Dance Inc. troupe, set to stirring Iranian popular music, with handsome costumes by Matilda Clark.
- "Etude," a supercharged, ritualistic work by the widely admired choreographer Robert Battle, performed by five exceptionally fleet members of DanceWorks Chicago, and set to the driving sound of Les Tambours du Bronx.
- "meet them and wonder again," an absurdist feminist duet performed by Lucky Plush Productions' Julia Rhoads and Asimina Chremos. The women, dressed in corsets and rosy hoop skirts (with a hidden cache of knives beneath one of those skirts), might definitely be dubbed "the weird sisters."

- The Gypsy Dance from "Don Quixote," performed with great elan by the gorgeously trained Ruslana Apreleva, a dancer with the American-based Moscow Ballet. Apreleva's flexible back and fine line are a model of the finest Russian style.
- Excerpts from "Folk Tales," Kate Skarpetowska's zesty, earthy, folk-dance-influenced piece set to the exuberant sound of the Warsaw Village Band, and danced by members of the Houston Metropolitan Dance Company (which also wins the prize for most unconventional bodies).
- "New Faun," a most intriguing "remake" of Nijinsky's fabled ballet "Afternoon of a Faun," created by South Korean choreographer Kim Geung Soo and his ballet company. An archival film of the Nijinsky original unspools simultaneously with the interplay of a very contemporary man and woman who seductively glimpse each other at what might be a dance club or singles' bar. ("Daybreak," a demanding new work for three couples -- specially created for the troupe by Altin Naska -- challenged the dancers' technique beyond their capabilities.)
- Finally, when ballet is only "so-so," it is not so good. The New York-based Ajkun Ballet Theatre tried to pull out all the stops in a performance of the almost laughably over-the-top trio "Walpurgis Night." Only Bolshoi-level dancers should even attempt this novelty piece.

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