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Dance Chicago flourishes

15th installment of Dance Chicago incorporates a range of different styles of dance

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Audience members at one of Dance Chicago's performances usually assume they're watching one cohesive dance company's body of work rather than a number of different companies, which isn't to say that any of the shows lack different genres of dance. On the contrary, styles range from footworking to traditional Mexican folklore. It's that flawless integration of different origins of movement that has given Chicago artists who belong to unknown dance companies the kind of exposure to jump-start their careers for the past 15 years.

"That's what Dance Chicago does that's different than any other festival in the entire world," said John Schmitz, artistic director for Dance Chicago. "No one else does it that way—they simply assign minutes to people."

For the 15th consecutive year, Dance Chicago is hosting 17 performances from Oct. 30 – Dec. 12 that will feature 2,500 performers in three new theatres throughout Chicago, largely for the sake of creating an artists' community of unknown talents rather than a showcase of who's who in the Chicago dance scene, Schmitz explained.

Schmitz founded Dance Chicago about 15 years ago after working as a dancer, lighting designer, manager and practically every position in creating a dance production imaginable, he said. Now, he curates for Dance Chicago and filters through hundreds of applications from companies and dancers who wish to be a part of the show. The result is a diverse crop of unknown talent punctuated with some more well-known companies such as Giordano Dance Center.

"You can go to an entire hip-hop show and be fatigued in five minutes because the works are so repetitive and the beats and the concepts are so redundant," Schmitz said. "If you see hip-hop in my show, you get breaks with contemporary dance, with ballet or with tap."

Unlike years past, Dance Chicago won't be held at the Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport Ave., due to some of its shortcomings as a professionally operating theatre, Schmitz said. Instead, Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont Ave., will host shows including New Moves, Extended View, Dance Romance, Jazz Cabaret and Fringe Carnival.

Dane Campbell, founder of a hip-hop troupe called Full Effect, will have 12 to 18 dancers in Jazz Cabaret, Extended View and the grand finale for Dance Chicago.

Despite Campbell's lack of classical training, he began Full Effect in 1995 as a street crew doing mainly footworking, which is native to Chicago. The troupe has since evolved into a hip-hop theatre specializing in technical hip-hop with Broadway-style

theatrics, he said.

After first performing for Dance Chicago in 2005, Full Effect has appeared on season two of “America’s Best Dance Crew,” toured the Chicago Public Schools system and performed abroad.

Because of the nature of the all-inclusive shows at Dance Chicago, there are people who are going to be exposed to different types of dance, even if they’re not the normal fan base, Campbell said.

“In my company alone I have people who can do footworking and do ballet,” Campbell said. “That just shows you how diverse Chicago is.”

José Rochel, artistic director of Dance Chicago’s Mexican Dance Ensemble, said he doesn’t believe in the preconceived notions of stuffy, high-art dance performances, which he said is a testament to Chicago. The strong sense of community that Dance Chicago nurtures is what the festival excels at, he added.

Mexican Dance Ensemble began in 2001 as a nonprofit organization specializing in traditional Mexican folklore dance. With 32 active dancers, all either in high school or college, the ensemble has performed for Dance Chicago since 2005 with intentions of continuing to showcase their work at the festival for years to come.

Schmitz took Mexican Dance Ensemble under his wing by offering them residence at Athenaeum Theatre when they were without a practice venue a few years ago. Rochel said he has the utmost respect for Schmitz’s efforts in fostering such an accepting production.

Chicago, although not typically known for its classical dance, highlights diverse styles of dance—both urban and traditional, which is the object of what Schmitz’s Dance Chicago intends to showcase.

“We want to make dance comfortable and make it feel warm and good for you and we want to invite you,” Schmitz said. “We don’t buy into this alienation process that goes on. There are a lot of pieces that are challenging, but we put them on in such a way that makes it relatively comfortable for someone to see.”

For additional information visit DanceChicago.com.

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