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Dance Chicago marks 15 years

By Sid Smith

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John Schmitz likes to say that when he and the late Fred Solari launched the first Dance Chicago in 1995, they never dreamed there'd be another.

But the popular fall showcase of troupes and dancers both known and novice celebrates its 15th anniversary this year. "Young dancers today can't conceive of a time when there wasn't a Dance Chicago," says Schmitz, artistic producer of the fest. "Some participants in this year's 'Dance Slam' competition weren't even born when we started."

Big changes accompany the celebrations. Almost unthinkable, Dance Chicago will be absent from the Athenaeum Theatre, its 14-year home run by Solari until his death in 2006.

Though rumors abound that Schmitz and the Athenaeum had a falling out, he and the theater say it isn't so. The relocation combines a need to adapt to changing times, spread the fest's geographic wings into the suburbs and give the Athenaeum room to continue its move to more varied programming.

"There are no hard feelings, and we may well be back there in the future," Schmitz says. "I don't know anybody who works harder to please people or make productions work than Dan Solari," a reference to Fred's son, who is now Athenaeum general manager. "But Dance Chicago is an enormous burden for any one theater and ties it up for a long time. I think they appreciate the year off."

"I agree and think the move is good for them," Dan Solari said. "These are tough economic times. You have to consider your audience, downsize to cut costs and play to your advantages. Smaller venues make more sense for many Dance Chicago programs."

Dance Chicago's multiple programs, featuring 130 troupes and 300 works, will run Friday through Dec. 12 at four locations: the Theatre Building, 1225 W. Belmont Ave.; the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie; the Nichols Concert Hall in the Music Institute of Chicago in Evanston; and the Sang Theatre auditorium at Wheeling High School.

There will still be the big and plentiful, beginning with Friday's North Shore Center opening "Dance Slam"

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and Saturday's anniversary spectacular there, featuring 15 troupes and many styles, from Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago II to Von Heidecke's Chicago Festival Ballet and contemporary practitioners such as NoMi LaMad Dance and the Hip Hop Connexion.

But some Dance Chicago programs just aren't perfect fits for the Athenaeum's 985-seat proscenium space. By comparison, the Theatre Building's south unit accommodates 148 patrons, according to Schmitz.

"We'll be shying away from the huge ensemble works, with more emphasis on the intimate," Schmitz says. "It's always been a part of our mission to help newer troupes develop audiences and infrastructure. But because the Athenaeum is so large, a lot of these groups couldn't afford to rent the theater on their own after the festival."

Off-season engagements and surveys suggest strong suburban interest. Then, too, Dance Chicago is a victim of its own success. Some charter troupes, such as Luna Negra Dance Theatre and Thodos Dance Chicago, now self-present elsewhere. "In some ways, we created our own competition," Solari says.

"We always struggle," Schmitz admits. "We have to break even every year. Last year the economy was horrible. But our ticket revenue wound up \$25,000 more than expected. We won't match that this year, because we have fewer seats to sell. But our outlay is less too. The goal is to be more cost effective."

Quirky and unpredictable, Dance Chicago endures as a gritty, grass-roots compendium of the area's present dance scene and its possibilities. Such veterans as the accessible Giordano troupe and confounding soloist Bob Eisen could play on the same bill.

"In the beginning some audience members had never seen anything like it, this format where you experience a different dance company and even a different type every few minutes," said Corinne Gloger, a photo stylist and member of the organization's board of directors since the outset. "I thought when we started, it was about audience. Dance novices turned into avid fans. But over the years I've come to appreciate how important this festival is to the dancers. This gives them opportunity."

"With the changes, we wanted to create a new hunger for the festival, something new again like we did in 1995," Schmitz says. "So we'll see how it works."

For ticket information: North Shore Center (847-673-6300), Theatre Building (773-327-5252), Music Institute (847-905-1500, ext. 108) or dancechicago.com.

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