

Review: An all-star dance lineup comes together for ‘Celebration of Lar Lubovitch’



By LAUREN WARNECKE
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Dancers Craig Black, Jonathan Alsberry, Andrew Murdock in "Little Rhapsodies" in "A Celebration of Lar Lubovitch."
(Kyle Flubacker photo)

For a decade, the Chicago Dancing Festival filled Chicago’s great stages with the country’s best ballet and modern dance companies, for free. It was a crazy idea, but it worked, the brainchild of producers Jay Franke and David Herro, and choreographer (and native Chicagoan) Lar Lubovitch.

And then it was gone. The Chicago Dancing Festival ended unceremoniously after its 10th season, presumably because paying for and administering a totally free, world-class festival is prohibitively expensive! On Saturday, the Harris Theater opened its 2019-20 season with “A Celebration of Lar Lubovitch,” a tribute to the choreographer’s prolific 50-year career, and a

proper send-off to the festival he helped create, which brought so much good dance to this city.

Indeed, on that stage was an embarrassment of riches, local stars and national treasures dancing four works created by Lubovitch between 1997 and 2010. In Dancing Festival fashion, the entire roster — Ballet Austin, the Martha Graham Dance Company and dancers from the Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago — took a pre-show bow, and then audience members dug in for a perfectly curated sampling of Lubovitch's work.

There are a few things, almost without fail, one can expect to see in a Lubovitch dance: crystalline composition; exacting musicality; a quirky, laissez-faire, peasant-like quality blended with fastidious attention to detail; and circles, so many circles. Each of the works on this program — “Dvorak Serenade,” “Little Rhapsodies,” excerpts from his full-length ballet “Othello” and “The Legend of Ten” — tick all of those boxes, but there's something unique about each of the dances that shows off the range and depth of Lubovitch's talent.

All but “Othello” are plotless, set to classical music and refreshingly sparse in lighting and costume. They are exceptional examples of abstract, pure dance, a test of any dancer's technical ability. More than that, each dance is expertly tuned to the specific nuances of their casts. Ballet Austin makes its Chicago debut with the opening piece, “Dvorak Serenade” (2007), a wispy, buoyant, delicate dance set to four movements from the composer's “Serenade in E Major.” It stands in contrast to the other group work, “The Legend of Ten” (2010), performed by the extraordinary Martha Graham Dance Company. It's both a literal contrast — Ballet Austin wears breezy white tunics while the Graham company sports black pants and cummerbunds — and a qualitative one. Having only seen Graham dancers perform, well, Graham, it's refreshing to see them tackle Lubovitch's curvilinear aesthetic, but they do so with a crispness and subtle angularity which makes this work wholly different from “Dvorak Serenade,” despite their compositional similarities.

Tackling the chipper “Little Rhapsodies” (2007) are Craig Black and Andrew Murdock of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago and Jonathan Alsberry, of Lubovitch's New York-based eponymous dance company. Alsberry has been much in Chicago lately, working as a rehearsal director and stager at Hubbard Street, but this is a rare glimpse of him as a performer. For the last decade, Hubbard Street's rep has kept these dancers mainly slithering and sliding in socks; what a treat for us, to see the phenomenal technique of these three dancers as they bounded into the air, dancing Lubovitch's balletic vocabulary with charm and absolute ease, as if it's something they do every day.

Four Joffrey stars danced three scenes from the final act of “Othello,” a ballet Lubovitch created in 1997 and was last staged by Joffrey in 2013. Here was the

high drama this evening needed, with nearly the whole plot of Shakespeare's tragedy laid out in 20 minutes: Iago (danced by Temur Suluashvili) persuades Othello (Fabrice Calmels) that Desdemona and Cassio, Victoria Jaiani and Rory Hohenstein, who quietly retired in August to become a ballet master for Atlanta Ballet, have had an affair by planting Desdemona's scarf on Cassio. Spoiler: it doesn't end well for any of them. But their tragedy is our reward. Calmels and Jaiani's final duet, in which he strangles her with her scarf, is one of the most thrilling moments of an impeccable night.

Review: "A Celebration of Lar Lubovitch" (4 stars)

When: 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Harris Theater for Music and Dance, 205 E. Randolph St.

Running time: 2 hours

Tickets: \$30-\$145 at 312-334-7777 and www.harristheaterchicago.org

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.

[*lauren.warnecke@gmail.com*](mailto:lauren.warnecke@gmail.com)

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