



[Chicago Dancing Festival: Live review](#)

Posted in [Around Town, Dance](#) by [Zachary Whittenburg](#) on August 28th, 2010 at 4:37 pm



Kanji Segawa in "Takademe." Photo: Todd Rosenberg

This review covers performances August 25 at the Museum of Contemporary Art and August 26 at the Harris Theater. I'll finish up tomorrow with thoughts on the August 27 event "The Dancing Skyline," also at the MCA, and "Celebration of Dance," tonight's free event at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park.

In Christopher Wheeldon's *Liturgy* (2003), performed at the 2010 [Chicago Dancing Festival](#), New York City Ballet dancers Craig Hall and Wendy Whelan begin in darkness, Whelan front and center, Hall directly behind and up against the wall. At the end of the duet, to the 1992 version of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres for Violin, Strings and Percussion*, they return to the same motions, only with Hall just a foot or two behind Whelan. What happens in between, to close the gap, is movement half comprised of their limbs locked together—one pretzeled being made of two parts—and half danced by the two separated by physical distance. (And, one senses, incompatible desires. One motif sees Whelan leave the stage entirely; Hall throbs in place until she returns, but with a palm held out to where she went as if to say, "please don't come back.") Particularly interesting is Wheeldon's repurposing of a pantomime gesture from 19th century narrative ballet—a dabbing of both sides of the skull with a broken wrist, fingers skyward, that means royalty—in a way that leaves whether the two are crowning themselves, or referencing unseen forces, open to interpretation. *Liturgy* is the finest work by Wheeldon I've seen, although that list doesn't include [Polyphonia](#) (2001), acknowledged by most as his masterpiece.

What makes this program—dubbed "Modern Masters" and the first of the Festival's three public performances—so successful is that the evening itself echoes the path of *Liturgy*. It begins with a reprise of [the Joffrey Ballet's spring season hit, Jessica Lang's *Crossed*](#), which holds tightly to form, pattern and structure despite a score collaged from religiously-themed choral pieces by Handel, Mozart and des Prez. As a duet, if you will, between rational and spiritual concerns, both are in the same room, but as far from each other as possible.

Following works run the gamut from Paul Taylor's *LAST LOOK* (performed by students from the [Juilliard School](#)) to Lar Lubovitch's *Coltrane's Favorite Things* (performed by the Festival co-founder's

[New York company](#)) to Kanji Segawa in an electrifying solo from 2000 he may know better than anyone on Earth (more on that below).



Juilliard Dance in "LAST LOOK." Photo: Todd Rosenberg

The closer, Mark Morris's 2001 *V* performed by [his company](#), is to *Crossed* as *Liturgy*'s end is to its beginning. As a duet between rational and spiritual concerns, the piece to Robert Schumann's [Quintet in E flat for Piano and Strings](#) is much closer to a meeting of these poles—it's even more ordered and symmetrical than the Lang (Morris, for someone labeled a "modern-dance" choreographer, is in many ways one of the field's staunchest classicists), but the movements of *V* (floppy-footed gallops, jerky crawls, triumphant salutes) are human and honestly exuberant.

Both works end with the dancers rushing to form a tableau. In *Crossed*, it's a line of bodies viewed end-on away from which two collapse in opposite directions, forming a cross shape if seen from above. In *V*, a crescendo of lifts and plain running ends with the dance's seven couples in an oval scene like what you see at the end of a one-act court ballet like *Paquita*: harmony, not sacrifice.

Lubovitch's dancers lend the program its showiest, wildest dancing. *Coltrane's Favorite Things* (which repeats on [the company's September 22 bill at the Harris](#)) shouldn't work: the bare-stage, wings flown, ladders-strewn-about anti-set is older than the hills, and Coltrane's [live, honky take on that Rodgers and Hammerstein chestnut](#) seems like it'll clash with the dancers' workout togs and canvas sneakers. All that drops away, though, once it's clear there's more than enough happening between the nine superb performers to hold your attention. Jonathan Alsberry and Katarzyna Skarpetowska (who mix like napalm), and a men's trio between Jason McDole, Attila Csiki and Christopher Vo do the impossible: meet Coltrane's raw energy.



Jonathan Alsberry and Katarzyna Skarpetowska in “Coltrane’s Favorite Things.” Photo: Todd Rosenberg

LAST LOOK is the most ambitious addition to the lineup. It was choreographed in 1985, and looks it: Taylor has, from time to time, taken a shine to reflective surfaces, as in the decorative silver heels and disco-ball headdresses of *Cloven Kingdom*; here, Alex Katz’s designs put the women in rhinestone chokers, bracelets and anklets and neon satin robes. Full-length mirrors are scattered around the dark stage. Men wear matching drab green silk shirts and pleat-front pants. We’re a stone’s toss from a [Laura Branigan video](#). The dancing is difficult to do and to watch, with lots of staccato hopping, body slams, dying-fish flops and seizures. Taylor’s brilliance is largely obscured by the work’s oppressive anger—these are nine elegant people on the off-day to end all off-days—but he does nail the sensitive atmosphere of a breaking point, where the slightest disturbance can cause a tornado. Segawa’s performance was added last-minute between the Taylor and Morris pieces; as my companion put it, it was like a sorbet, and absolutely necessary. One thing’s for sure: The Juilliard dancers are mature, both emotionally and technically, far beyond their years.

The Festival kicked off the night before at the [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) with a gala performance and reception. Although not open to the public, 100 tickets (1/3 of the theater’s capacity) were released the week before to a variety of dance folk, ensuring a house mostly full of fans. The show was brief—about an hour—consisting of excerpts, shorts, speeches by Lubovitch and Festival co-founder Jay Franke, as well as by the MCA’s director of performance programs, Peter Taub. In keeping with the Festival’s [audience-development goals](#) and efforts to contextualize its offerings, each dance was introduced by a silent projection of archival footage.

Proto-globetrotting ballerina [Anna Pavlova](#) was shown in *The Dying Swan* solo [Michel Fokine](#) made for her in 1905, on [film shot just two years later](#); it faded as the Joffrey Ballet’s Victoria Jaiani took the stage in the same role. This *Swan*, as coached by Joffrey director Ashley Wheater, was more honestly bird- than ballerina-like: Jaiani flapped and thrust her arms as if being deboned before collapsing into her fatal fold, her head lolling against one shoulder with succinct finality. This was followed by an extreme fast-forward to the gutted, futuristic duet from Wayne McGregor’s [Qualia](#) (2004), danced by Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson of London’s Royal Ballet, where McGregor is resident choreographer.

Most of [what I’ve said about McGregor’s work](#) applies here, too, although *Qualia*, to moody breaks and beats by Scanner, benefits from its brevity and, because there are only two bodies onstage, it’s easier to project meaning and relationship onto the cold torsions, sudden death of limbs, and defiant leg extensions. Benjamin and Watson don’t sacrifice the precision without which McGregor’s work falls hopelessly flat, but add heated looks and thoughtful touches that inject some significance into their white camisole and short-short-clad exercise.



Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson in “Qualia.” Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Another film followed, that of Alvin Ailey in his own *Revelations*, which introduced [dancer Kanji Segawa](#) in *Takademe* by Robert Battle (the recently appointed head of [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater](#)). I’ve seen Segawa dance [this onomatopoeic solo](#) before—his moves seem to create Sheila Chandra’s vocal acrobatics—but here he was disciplined, restrained, until the solo’s final 15 seconds, where he allowed himself a wild explosion. Certain things are only possible when someone’s performed a role dozens (if not hundreds) of times.

[Video of Martha Graham in her solo *Lamentation*](#) introduced Hall and Whelan in the duet from George Balanchine’s 1957 *Agon*. (A stretch, by the way: they’re contemporaneous pieces, more or less, but apples and oranges.) The era in which Whelan could give this duet the power it demands has passed, but I’d still take her interpretation, soaked in experience and comprehension, over some child who thinks it’s just a venue to demonstrate her flexibility. Closing out the gala was an anecdote about Lubovitch’s contraction of the dancing bug, followed by the first movement of his 1978 *North Star* (also coming in full [to the Harris in September](#)), a navy blue whirlwind to [Philip Glass’s score of the same name](#). In the ’80s, these were called his “trance dances” because of their hypnotic patterns. Indeed, you get a bit lost in the ebbs and flows, but again, his company’s dancers are so pristine and extraordinary, there’s always something amazing to notice.

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