

Best in Chicago dance in 2019: Stunning performances in a year of transition

By LAUREN WARNECKE

DEC 10, 2019 | 5:00 AM



Yumi Kanazawa, Brooke Linford and company in the Joffrey Ballet's "Jane Eyre" at the Auditorium Theatre. (Cheryl Mann Photo)

For dance, 2019 was a year of transition. New leaders were installed at Chicago Dancers United, Links Hall and the Auditorium Theatre. The Joffrey Ballet kicked off its final season at the Auditorium, its performance home for decades, and is preparing to [move to the Lyric Opera House](#) next fall. Since last year's Top-10, three pioneers of Chicago dance have died: founding Hubbard Street Dance Chicago dancer [Claire Bataille](#), founding artistic director of Ensemble Espanol Spanish Dance Theater [Dame Libby Komaiko](#) and Christine DuBoulay Ellis, who ran the prestigious Ellis DuBoulay School of Ballet for more than 40 years with her husband, Richard Ellis. In some ways, it's felt like a year of great loss, but transitions make way for new growth, new voices and new ideas.

And even amidst all these organizational changes, the year produced some extraordinary dance. Looking down this list, one can't help but notice a banner year for the Harris Theater, which in addition to the shows listed chronologically below, also gave us the Chicago premiere of one of Australia's finest dance companies, Bangarra Dance Theatre, and "[Echo Mine](#)," Robyn Mineko Williams' gorgeous eulogy for Claire Bataille. With CEO Patricia Barretto at the helm, the Harris Theater has truly found its footing as a world-class presenter of music and dance from around the world, and a champion for many of Chicago's home team companies.



The dance company of Ragamala Dance at the Harris Theater. (Grant Halverson photo)

Ragamala Dance at the Harris Theater: Inspired, in part, by the ancient Indian board game Paramapadam, the [dancers in “Written in Water”](#) carved captivating patterns in bharatanatyam steps, mirrored by rich projections of a “game board” onto the stage. At the crux of the game: a moral dilemma in which players must choose between good and evil. But you needn’t have gotten any of that to be amazed by this work’s exquisite tableaux and glorious score, an ingenious, hybridized fusion of Sufi and Carnatic music, played live.

The Joffrey Ballet at the Auditorium Theatre: Joffrey’s two new full-length ballets handily deserve a spot near the top of any dance list this year: the world premiere of [Yuri Possokhov’s “Anna Karenina”](#) and the company premiere of Cathy Marston’s [“Jane Eyre.”](#) Exploring the two literary heroines pushed this company in every way, but most notably, the dancers stepped up in their character work and storytelling. And that’s not just Anna and Jane, though Amanda Assucena and Victoria Jaiani exquisitely rotated both roles; leading men Greig Matthews and Alberto Velazquez, and even the smaller character roles highlighted dancers like Yumi Kanazawa, Christine Rocas and Edson Barbosa — who even managed to impress me as Buffalo Bill in Christopher Wheeldon’s “Nutcracker” this month — as the Joffrey’s deep bench gets stronger with every production.



Alina Cojocar, Jeffrey Cirio and the English National Ballet perform Akram Khan's "Giselle" at the Harris Theater in Chicago. (Kyle Flubacker photo)

English National Ballet at the Harris Theater: If I had to pick the best thing I've seen all year, hands down, it would be **Akram Khan's "Giselle."** This highly-anticipated trip over the Atlantic by English National Ballet, who had not visited the United States in three decades, actually lived up to the hype, with an evocative, gorgeous retelling of one of ballet's most iconic works. Khan blends ballet with classical khatak and modern dance, which these ballet dancers conquered with such unabashed ease. And he swaps the idyllic German town and a few of the questionable trappings of the 1841 ballet by morphing the story, drawing from the horrid Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, when a garment factory collapsed, and more generally, stories of displacement and the refugee crisis in Europe. I simply had to see this twice; if I could have, I would have gone all four times.

Mordine & Company at Links Hall: A mix of old and new works were part of a perfect, pared down performance celebrating the modern dance company's 50th anniversary, with lovable Shirley Mordine as emcee. The highlight: a **restaging of "Three Women"** with archival footage of Mordine, Carol Bobrow and Jan Erkert dancing behind current company powerhouses Danielle Gilmore, Melissa Pillarella and Emily Stepleton.

Chicago Dance Crash at the Ruth Page Center for the Arts: With several full-length productions under its belt, Crash has pretty much mastered the narrative format. And "Lil Pine Nut," modeled after the story of Pinocchio, gave us some of the year's greatest choreographic ingenuity, cool designs, and a fun sampling of hip-hop with heart.



Ensemble Espanol Spanish Dance Theater performs "Pasion Oculta" by Irma Suarez Ruiz at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago. (Dean Paul photo)

Cerqua Rivera and Ensemble Espanol at the Auditorium Theatre: This was two concerts in one, with choreographer Wilfredo Rivera's full-length "American Catracho," by contemporary company Cerqua Rivera, followed by a full-octane performance of greatest flamenco and folkloric dance hits by Ensemble Espanol.

A Celebration of Lar Lubovitch at the Harris Theater: The Harris' **fall season opener** paid tribute to the prolific choreographer with four works danced by top notch performers from around the country, including Ballet Austin, the Martha Graham Dance Company, and members of the Lubovitch company, Hubbard Street and the Joffrey Ballet. Clean lines, exquisite dancing, compositional excellence and to-the-point designs are just some of the reasons I loved this program, a refreshing and unforgettable night of Dance, capital D.



"Can't Take This Away" by choreographer Randy Duncan is part of the Giordano Dance Chicago Fall Series at the Harris Theater. (Todd Rosenberg photo)

Giordano Dance Chicago at the Harris Theater: Giordano can almost always be counted on for high-quality entertainment, and one thing is for sure: [this jazz dance company](#) refuses to be counted out. After nearly 60 years, the quality is as high as it's ever been, with a fall season opener that boasted a roster of tireless and electrifying dancers, a groove-inspired new work by choreographer Peter Chu, a gorgeous remount of Marinda Davis' "Flickers" and a couple boisterous 1990s revivals.

Natya Dance Theatre at the Dance Center: A captivating blend of puppetry, bharatanatyam, kathak and more came together almost seamlessly in Natya's "Inai: The Connection," created by [Hema Rajagopalan](#) and India's Astad Deboo. What I treasure most about this production was not its perfection, but rather, its rawness, individuation, and willingness to push at the boundaries of thousands-years old dance traditions to find new saliency for concert dance audiences.

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