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No longer just a freebie, Dancing Fest a summer highlight

By Sid Smith, Special to the Tribune

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By my count, five dancers fell to the floor to end four separate works this week as part of the Chicago Dancing Festival at the Harris Theater.

But these were no flubs. These were artfully engineered anti-grace notes that accomplished very different imagistic messages in Jessica Lang's "Crossed," Lar Lubovitch's "Coltrane's Favorite Things," Robert Battle's "Takademe" and **Mark Morris'** "V": martyrdom, exhaustion, surrender and a stylistic wink. Conveniently, they also serve as symbols of the subtle accomplishments in programming and artistry on view in Thursday's sublime concert, a festival rapidly evolving from novel freebie to seasonal high-water mark.

Gone were the second-string ballet selections of yesteryear. The only pure ballet, in fact, came courtesy of the very best in the profession: Christopher Wheeldon's "Liturgy," danced by the New York City Ballet's Craig Hall and Wendy Whelan, the magnificent ballerina who originated the role.

Whether by chance or shrewd programming, and I suspect it's the latter, fest founders Lubovitch and Jay Franke offered up a virtual conservatory seminar on choreographic accomplishments of the last quarter century. Geezers like me love to pine for the era of **George Balanchine, Martha Graham** and **Alvin Ailey**. But here was a blissful, intelligent and unforgettable program showing off the breadth of work since 1985, when **Paul Taylor's** "Last Look," the oldest piece on the bill, premiered. Taylor is 80, but most of the dance makers here are much younger, like Battle, 38, artistic director designate of the Ailey troupe and one of the nation's most important choreographers.

All but Taylor's work date from this century — "Coltrane" and "Crossed" are less than a year old. The fine work included Morris' troupe in his incomparable "V," a superbly structured 2001 piece set to Schumann, accompanied by an excellent live ensemble and flush with luminescent leitmotif after leitmotif — crawling on the floor transformed into haunting dance. "Coltrane" is a new personal best from Lubovitch, a breezy and yet exhaustive meeting of dance and jazz, that trickiest of marriages, shown off by his terrific ensemble, former Chicagoan Jonathan E. Alsberry in particular.

The **Joffrey Ballet's** lovely performance of "Crossed" luxuriated in Lang's abstract take on ritual and iconography, mixing gamboling and solemnity while reinventing sacred music. Taylor was not to be overshadowed, thanks to Linda Kent's sensitive, authentically detailed staging of his dystopian "Last Look," infused with the Gothic spasms and lunacies of Juilliard School students, already pros, all nine of them.

The free fest's finale Saturday at the Pritzker Pavilion includes Morris' "Grand Duo," Ailey II in Battle's "The Hunt" and the Royal Ballet's Leanne Benjamin and Edward Watson in a pas de deux from "Manon."

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday / **Where:** Pritzker Pavilion in **Millennium Park**

Tickets: Free; more information at **chicagodancingfestival.com**