

Opening night of Chicago Dancing Festival a mixed bag



Laura Molzahn
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Review: Opening night of 2015 Chicago Dancing Festival a mixed bag

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How easy to read should dance be? Intentionally or not, the Chicago Dancing Festival's opening night, Tuesday at the Harris Theater, investigated that perennial question, presenting five works by four companies, all based in New York, spanning a wide range of audience friendliness.

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Making its festival debut, Ballet Hispanico danced the beautifully lighthearted, inventive "El Beso," a suite of vignettes devoted to the social and emotional ramifications and manifestations of the kiss. But this was no cold-hearted sociological survey. Brilliantly informed by the comic sensibility of Gustavo Ramirez Sansano, former head of Chicago's Luna Negra, "El Beso" (2014) was danced by 14 antic, quicksilver members of the 45-year-old troupe, now led by Eduardo Vilaro, founder of Luna Negra.

Cheesy music paved the way for laughs. Heavily orchestrated recordings of romantic zarzuela (Spanish light opera), which flourished in the late 19th century, both provided a genuine

dance engine and mined the popular form's over-the-top theatricality. Ramirez Sansano put to good use his gifts for comic gestural movement and almost clownishly abrupt, fractured choreography in group scenes whose orgiastic flurries of pursuit, capture and evasion suggested the comic violence and desperation of the social kiss.



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Stars of American Ballet (not to be confused with the American Ballet Theatre soloists performing later in the festival) is a pickup group formed by Daniel Ulbricht to tour outside New York. Ulbricht himself performed a 2008 showcase for his considerable talents, Servy Gallardo's 2008 "Tango," and four men danced Justin Peck's early (2011) "Distractions," powered by Alexander Rosenblatt's richly layered, inventive jazz variations on Brahms' Paganini variations, played live. Reminiscent of Jerome Robbins' "Fancy Free," Peck's appealing seriocomic take on men's pretensions and tribulations ended with the men flat on their backs, snapping arms and legs shut like the blades of a Swiss Army Knife.

Lar Lubovitch's "The Black Rose: An Ancient Tale" (2014), performed by his company, proved an exemplar of hyper-clarity. This lurid tale, which proceeds rapidly from the rape of a comatose child to the eye gouging of her lover and devouring of her newborn, was delivered with the look and telegraphed emotions of a silent-film melodrama. An uninspired commissioned score, veering from meandering to overwrought, failed to support the dancing's occasional sweeping momentum.

At the opposite end of the accessibility spectrum, Pam Tanowitz set "Heaven on One's Head" (2014) to two challenging string quartets by Conlon Nancarrow (also wonderfully played live), effectively underlining the work's spiky debt to Merce Cunningham, who used a Nancarrow player-piano piece in the 1960 "Crises." Focused on geometry, momentum, balance and their loss, "Heaven" defied audience expectations in multiple ways. Yet moments of laxity, of stumbling vulnerability — floppy hopping, stuttering lunges — tempered its stringency, providing poignant flashes of the human comedy.

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Wednesday 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. at Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago

Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph

Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park

Tickets: Free; chicagodancingfestival.com

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