

Wet Chicago Dancing Festival finale still manages to shine



Laura Molzahn

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It was a drippy night at the Pritzker Pavilion on Saturday: The last performance of this year's Chicago Dancing Festival pretty much laid to rest the notion that a free concert under the stars is necessarily a good thing. Yet many folks — including fully exposed unfortunates huddled under ponchos and umbrellas — stuck it out to the end of this two-hour show without intermission.

With one major exception, it was worth it.

A down-to-earth aperitif, the CDF-commissioned "In the Meantime" opened the evening with tastes of three percussive-dance Chicago troupes, assembled by Lane Alexander: Ensemble Espanol, Trinity Irish Dance Company and Chicago Human Rhythm Project. Sharp and classy as Champagne in a crystal glass, "Meantime" featured a small sample of each company in their native forms (flamenco, Irish dance, tap), then put them all together in a fizzy test tube of rhythm, ably supported by a live cajon, bass and accordion player.

Also new was Miami City Ballet, which made its Chicago debut at this year's festival. Strong and elegant, it brought Twyla Tharp's wonderfully atypical "Sweet Fields" back to our city: Her company performed it here in 1996, shortly after its premiere.

Tharp made her considerable reputation by proving herself smarter and brasher than the boys' club of classical choreography. In "Sweet Fields," though, she celebrates the loss of ego. This benign vision of a reverential Shaker community, set to 10 hymns by William Billings and other 18th-century American composers, has all of Tharp's invention but eschews sass. Though it resembles her nostalgic "Baker's Dozen," this piece for 11 approaches that work's flippant wit only in the final section, a bracing contrast with the rest.

If Miami City Ballet was the evening's big discovery, the festival debut of Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre proved its disappointment. The 25 dancers generally weren't up to the challenges of Mark Morris' 1999 "Sandpaper Ballet"; unison or canon sections on a wide and unforgiving stage looked limp and messy.

Morris may have also challenged himself with way too many ditties by '50s TV favorite Leroy Anderson. Given the repeated lines of dancers standing at attention, "Sandpaper Ballet" gave the unfortunate impression of regimented cheer. Only the final section, set to "The Syncopated Clock," revealed the choreographer's vaunted musicality.

Brian Brooks Moving Company made the evening fun again with Brooks' 2013 "Torrent," a gentle cascade of

shifting lines, matter-of-fact ensemble movement and impassioned solos, duets and trios set to Max Richter's beautifully pared, moving adaptation of Vivaldi's "Four Seasons." Walking again and again from the dark rear of the stage to the front to meet our eyes in the "Winter" section, its eight dancers became more than ever individuals.

Unfortunately, the freedom of "Torrent" made the regal "Sleeping Beauty" grand pas de deux, danced by American Ballet Theatre soloists Sarah Lane and Joseph Gorak, look stodgy. Yes, it's a showcase for technique, but taking it out of the context of the story robs it of emotion and personality.

The Joffrey Ballet concluded the evening with Justin Peck's 2012 "In Creases," which received its company premiere in April. Now looking agreeably lived-in and sunny, it's a work worth seeing often.

Laura Molzahn is a freelance critic.

ctc-arts@tribpub.com

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