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Chicago Dance Crash:

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"Chicago Dance Crash offers "RadioStars"

NOVEMBER 13, 2010

By Sid Smith

There's an old movie title from the '60s that goes, "What's So Bad About Feeling Good?" When it comes to the Chicago Dance Crash, the question might be logically rephrased to ask, "What's so bad about being entertaining?" This buoyant band of young artists, with their exuberant approach to performance and their passionate following, are reminiscent of the likes of the Annoyance Theater or the Neo-Futurists on our stage scene. They're brash, funky, bright and street friendly in style, but they're increasingly serious about choreography, too. Many of the eight short works on view in "RadioStars," part of the Dance Chicago festival this month at Stage 773, are intricately designed and artfully stage. They're breezy in phrasing and delightfully accessible. But there's an intelligence behind the good times of the Crash, and today's top Broadway choreographers could learn a thing or two about crafty pop and jazz dance making from this more economically humble outfit. "RadioStars" starts especially strong with Jessica Deahr's "Busy Signal," to Lady Gaga's "Telephone," an outing for six women in tight, silver lame pants and boasting exactly the kind of sly design that buoys this concert, which plays again at 5 p.m. Sunday. Deahr has a nice eye for manipulating this modestly sized ensemble to maximize its appeal. Two dancers, for instance, initiate cartwheels in unison at one point, but it's the way Deahr selects and places them that make the bit such a grace note. Blink and you miss it. That casual architecture is on view again in the sassy, strut-rich antics of "Papa Was a Rolling Stone," Jarrett Kelly's pert answer to the Temptations classic, an ensemble of six, clad in sleek black, whose well-timed bows and one dramatic circling of the stage invoke the Motown zest of the music instead of the more dour lyrics. Mark Hackman, now serving as interim artistic director of the troupe, once again proved an amiable host as well as a smart, appealing choreographer in his "Death of a House Party," wherein flashy moves and silky, discotheque stylistics prove anything but: A party dance you want to hop up and join. Pia Hamilton's interesting use of umbrellas in "Ella, Ella" and Brian Hare's kicky designs--I especially love the bit where three women spin across the stage while managing a kind of body slant--are also immensely enjoyable. In a move in line with Dance Chicago's all-comers-are-welcome, cross-pollinating mantra over the years, "RadioStars" invites two additional troupes along for the ride, FrameWork Dance Chicago and Ronn Stewart & Dancers. The latter deliver a remarkable suite to various covers of hits by the Police, one that includes a kilowatt solo by lanky, rubbery and seemingly double-jointed Stewart and a series of three duets that show off the terrific dancers he's working with, many of whom he met as a teacher at the Joffrey Ballet's academy. Nits? Oh, sure. I enjoyed the face-off concept of "Untitled," wherein Lyndsey Rhoads pits gymnastic wunderkind Chantelle Mrowka vs. hip hopper Chris Courtney. But I longed for them to do a little more than just dance in their separate universes--the piece cried out for some sort of get-together, both physical and stylistic. And the crowd of all three troupes together on stage for the finale, hand-clapping to Queen's "We Will Rock" while various soloists improvise star turns, sort of fritters away and loses steam--something of a ho-hum finish for an impressive roster of mini-works. But you'd be hard pressed to find a more enjoyable hour of dance anywhere. Stars of the radio? Nah. These are stars of our stage.