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Dance Chicago takes bold step by moving to multiple venues

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This season marks the 15th anniversary of that monthlong smorgasbord known as Dance Chicago. And John Schmitz, the festival's artistic director, is doing everything in his power to shake things up.

From the start, this festival has had a multipronged mission, and that will continue. Not only is it a showcase for the whole spectrum of Chicago area dance performance (from contemporary work and ballet to hip-hop, ballroom, steppin', tap and ethnic), but it offers both established and emerging choreographers an affordable stage free of the expense of mounting an entire program alone. And with its wide variety of offerings, it attracts audiences that run the gamut from self-styled high school hipsters to veteran dance aficionados. Yet much has changed since Schmidt and the late Fred Solari initially devised their mix-and-match concept.

In a nutshell: Chicago has become a vital and important center of American dance, with a slew of major resident dance companies, four major downtown dance venues (the Auditorium, the Harris Theater, the Dance Center of Columbia College and the Museum of Contemporary Art Theater), a busy calendar of visiting dance companies from around the globe, an annual summer dance festival in Millennium Park and several important training facilities. Along with this has come an enthusiastic, knowledgeable and ever-growing dance audience. And then there is the matter of the economy and its impact on all arts programming.

So Schmitz decided to part ways with the festival's longtime home base, the Athenaeum Theatre's 985-seat mainstage space (it was not a happy parting, he confessed). And he has embarked on a multi-venue, urban and suburban plan of action. Performances (involving a total of 130 companies or solo artists in 300 works) will now be staged at Theatre Building Chicago in Lake View, the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in Skokie, Evanston's Music Institute of Chicago and Wheeling High School.

"The Athenaeum was problematical on many fronts," Schmitz said. "Most of the work we presented was developed in smaller spaces and had to be converted to fit the Athenaeum's larger proscenium stage, which involved extra costs. I also wanted venues with more comfortable seats, a full service bar (as at the Theater Building), valet parking and a friendly, well-staffed box office."

Seating capacities were considered in the planning.

"Yes, the 148-seat Theatre Building means a significant cutback in seats, but that's about right for most contemporary shows, and it's always nice to be sold out," Schmitz said. "Plus, for our bigger events we've got the 870-seat North Shore Center [for the hugely popular Dance Slam event on Oct. 30, and the big 15th anniversary spectacular on Oct. 31], and Wheeling High's Sang Theater [for Dance Slam West on Nov. 28]. We've also got a 10 a.m. family 'Nutcracker' in Evanston on Dec. 12, and a grand finale there the same night. My dream for the future is to get part of Dance Chicago in a venue on the South Side."

The Theatre Building programs will include many of the favorite categories from years past, including "New Moves," "Dance Romance" and "Choreographers' Showcases," as well as a "Fringe Carnival," a "Jazz Cabaret" and a full concert by the Cerqua Rivera Dance Theatre.

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