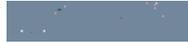


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By [Sid Smith](#):

Skeptics sneered when Dance Chicago announced plans to leave the Athenaeum Theater and traipse near and far, playing various venues, including some in the suburbs.



But the ragtag charms and come-as-you-are informality of the enterprise appear intact, judging from Sunday's Choreographers; Showcase at the Theatre Building. The 1 p.m. performance sold out, forcing hapless ushers to scurry to find seats for patrons as if filling a jet liner, and the wide array of short works on view, 13 in all,

is a reminder of what the fest does best: Throw everybody into the mix--young, old, veteran, newcomer, fun-loving and soul-searching-- and see what results. To keep to two hours or so, the works have to be short, robbing them of involved development, but enforcing a brevity that many experienced choreographers might be advised to heed more often. Sure, some of these pieces are little more than flashy exercises. But, at their best, these offerings are tiny gems that force their creators to work with a kind of haiku-like discipline, one reason you're almost always surprised at the quality, imagination and variety.

At the top of Sunday's list would have to be Dane A. Campbell and his zany extravaganza, "Be Our Guest." Campbell's Full Effect Dance Theatre is a hip hop troupe, and there's plenty of urban style in this piece to make the point. But there are also campy injections, daffy shifts in mood and music, accommodating saccharine Broadway and classical strains alike, in a piece in which 14 dancers deliver and then some. Clad in finery and ruffles, hosting, seducing and finally tormenting a woman dressed up like a satiny Red Riding Hood, the ensemble is wickedly funny, furiously fast and ultimately unclassifiable. Anything goes, delightfully so.

The best thing about this showcase and Dance Chicago in general is the chance to discover choreographers and dancers you may not have seen before. Sunday's group of dance makers was a pretty impressive, consistently entertaining bunch. Elijah Gibson's artfully casual "Just Another Day..." for Inaside Chicago Dance is a seductive opener, the dancers ambling in from the side, the moves gradually erupting as if improvised, carefully timed to the bluesy score from Floris. It eases back and forth from slowness to speed. Gibson has a wicked eye for grace notes: Just as they exit, back to their seemingly informal group, one dancer jumps into someone's arms as a goodbye. This one cries out to be joined by a follow-up movement or two for what promises to be a nice original.

Paul Christiano showed up as dancer and dance maker. In "The Lesser Known," he offered a complex piece characterized by his love of sculptural configurations, the dancers at times transforming themselves into cluttered transportation machines, living jungle gyms that roll each other along. The imagery is moody and edgy--one dancer exits by standing at stage edge, pulled by her feet by another dancer offstage.

Sunday the work's cast included an assortment of great Chicago dance veterans, Cheryl Mann, Mari Jo Irbe and Francisco Avina among them. In contrast, the exuberant, speedy athletes in Forum Jazz Dance Theatre appear to be all of 15 years old, their youth a major weapon in the pep of Brent Caburnay's ferociously acrobatic "Down the Rabbit Hole" and Eddie Ocampo's sultrier, subtler "updraught."

Some offbeat pieces were especially effective. Joshua Blake Carter has an impish sense of ensemble orchestration, his "Moura-Sion" ripe with its own movement logic, its own choral rules and a genuinely unusual design. The eight dancers in this pick-up ensemble often form groups and dance contrapuntally, in opposition to other groups or to the interesting score combining Arnaldo Antunes, Tom Ze and Gilberto Assis.

Consistently speedy this year, even the best pieces sometimes suffered from ragged execution, not every moment in perfect choral union and here and there a spill or stumble. The stage is large enough, but in a theater sometimes too intimate for these mostly quick and sizeable pieces--they'd be better viewed from a greater distance. But, even in a new home, the Choreographers Showcase endures, an unusual, unusually compact survey of the breadth of Chicago talent eager and waiting in the wings.

By [Laura Molzahn](#):



[River North's](#) 20th anniversary show, Saturday only at the Harris Theater, starred artistic director Frank Chaves. Not that he ever got up onstage, even to take a bow as the troupe's leader for the last eight years. In fact he goes back further: he and Sherry Zunker began sharing artistic direction of the company in 1994.

River North even survived being shoved center stage in 1993, when HMS Media's half-hour WTTW documentary brought hordes of the curious to the Harold Washington Library to see Zunker's "[Reality of a Dreamer](#)," also the title of the

video. It's not always easy to maintain your profile after a thunderclap moment of success like that one. For this program Zunker reinvented that 1992 piece, set to slightly different music.

Chaves deserves props not only for his prolific production of vigorous new dances year after year but also for keeping the dancers and dancing in mint condition. This is one sexy troupe, and not just because they're ripped. Watching them, I realized how seductive it is to be in the hands of performers so perfectly in control.

They fight for that control in Chaves's newest work, "Forbidden Boundaries." Talk about making lemonade out of lemons: Chaves drew on his own experience with a serious spinal condition to create this piece asking, as he writes in the program, "why, when we know how, do we forbid ourselves to succeed, to grow, to change?" In this ensemble work, devoted mostly to duets, one dancer personifying that regressive psychic force holds the other back-by the shirt. Then they switch roles.

And the issue with control? The shirts are stretchy, twisting easily into ropes that suggest straitjackets or leashes as the caught dancers strain to get away. Telling and crucial as these props are, they also add a wacky, difficult variable to the partnering equation, as one dancer holds another at a precipitously leaning angle or pulls his partner into an unwanted embrace. The most alarming and passionate of the dance's four sections--"the trio "Hidden Truth," for two men holding a woman by her sleeves--heightens these challenges. And the dancers not only met but surpassed them. Tiny [Lizzie McKenzie](#), whether flying through the air or falling to the floor at the mercy of her captors, was amazing, embodying the pain of having your life spin out of control.

The shirt wars run pretty much throughout "Forbidden Boundaries" but work best when the stage is less crowded. All the holding and leaning and the shirts themselves make the first section of "Forbidden Boundaries" rather muddy. That's not a problem in the section called "Harmony," when the performers dance separately and their flying shirts look like wings, and it's less a problem in the concluding section, which often showcases one or two duets at a time.

Chaves's duet "Sentir em Nos" ("Even for Us"), first performed earlier this year, held the evening's biggest erotic charge. Though "Forbidden Boundaries" pretty much sticks to unisex choreography, Chaves works well with sharply divided, even stereotypical sex roles. Here the man relentlessly manipulates the woman in fiendish choreography, tossing her around like a scarf or rolling her up his arms into a high lift. Michael Gross and Melanie Manale-Hortin made it all look not only easy but fun. That is, if you like your relationships seasoned with some conflict.

Traditional sex roles also dominate Chaves's signature ensemble piece, "Habaneras, the Music of Cuba" (2005), dedicated to his father. The dancing was beautiful, but there's too much of a muchness, with most of the six songs coming from the 50s and so many pretty arms and swirling skirts you'd swear you were watching a Latin number on "Dancing With the Stars." It's too bad that "Habaneras" comes across as stodgy given Chaves's obvious love for the Cuban music of his youth.

Zunker's remake of "Reality of a Dreamer," now called "Evolution of a Dream," replaces the original music--the Eurythmics' 1983 "Sweet Dreams" with cowriter [Dave Stewart's](#) new 2008 recording. Its oversweet orchestral opening made me long for the onstage amplified bass fiddle that made Zunker's original seem so raw and yearning. Also, though a few solos popped out here from the matrix of ensemble moves, I missed the original's star turn for [Wilfredo Rivera](#), whose snaky moves heightened the piece's dangerous edge. But