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DANCE REVIEW

Dance Chicago opening lineup diverse, spirited

By Lucia Mauro

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Dance Chicago, the fall festival that showcases homegrown talent, is a celebration of local artists, not a competition among them. Yet Friday's opening-night program at the Athenaeum Theatre featured works that hinted at a playful and profound competitiveness. For such an eclectic lineup, co-founder/artistic director John Schmitz positioned the numbers so that serious works did not immediately precede or follow more entertaining ones.

The only world premiere was "Thwack," Eddy Ocampo's jazz- and percussive-based nod to the creative one-upmanship of teens in an abstract playground. It arranged its combative duets in a non-threatening yet virtuosic way. Overall, "Thwack" was fun and intricate, but it also tread familiar terrain.

"Trip-up," an aggressive and rhythmic duet danced by Tan Temel and Sernaz Demirel of Istanbul Dance Theatre, demonstrated a relentless in-your-face battle. The dancers gave focused, muscular performances. Nevertheless, the movement got stuck in a repetitive pulsating limbo from which the couple could not escape.

On the opposite end of the competitive-theme spectrum was Dmitri Peskov's revised duet, "Chronicles of a Marriage." Set to Henryk Gorecki's soul-bruising music, the piece began at some obscure point in a troubled relationship. Peskov, who performed the duet with the exquisite Christina Eltvedt, favored precise gestures and partnering that allowed ambivalent emotions to pour forth. This couple's fits of anger and passion made their plight feel like indefinable waves of grief.

"Walkie Talkies," an excerpt from Julia Rhoads' new full-length "Cinderbox 18" for Lucky Plush Productions, paired four dancers with their own seemingly innocuous chatter that managed to strike a deep psychological chord. Lia Bonfilio, Elizabeth Lentz, Meghann Wilkinson and Zachary Whittenburg created a deceptively simple illusion as they unearthed insightful revelations from small talk.

The bulk of the program included well-received works from Lauri Stallings' "ahimsa," a grand-scale theatricalization of isolation within a crowd, for River North Chicago Dance Company; Lucas Crandall's atmospheric "Lullaby" for Thodos Dance Chicago; and Mark Howard's effortlessly airborne "Step About" and "Just Shannon" for Trinity Irish Dancers. Altin Naska choreographed the opening number, "Street Set," which served as a kaleidoscope for the 13-year-old Dance Chicago, pairing ballerinas, tap artists and break dancers.

Dance Chicago runs through Dec. 2 at the Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport Ave. Tickets: \$5-\$25. Call 773-935-6860 or 312-902-1500.

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