

At Harris Theater, River North dancers give their all

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RIVER NORTH DANCE CHICAGO AT THE HARRIS THEATER FOR MUSIC AND DANCE

Talk about a "dance till you drop" approach to performing. When the enthralling River North Chicago Dance company takes over the stage of the Harris Theater for Music and Dance -- as it did this Valentine's Day weekend -- it seems compelled to show its audiences everything stored up in its repertoire, while also raising the curtain on a slew of world premieres. And this tireless ensemble of 13 dancers can launch itself into a program of eight tremendously demanding pieces as if the simple matter of maintaining an oxygen supply was entirely beside the point.



Artistic director Frank Chaves and his performers are, in fact, generous to a fault. Their program easily could have had the audience cheering with two or three fewer works on the program. Less can, indeed, turn out to be more.

That said, the company certainly knows how to get off to a socko start, as well as how to stage a grand finale.

Ensemble dancer Monique Haley turned choreographer and created an instant winner with her world premiere, "Uhuru" (the Swahili word for "Freedom"), set to the irresistible vibe of Akoya Afrobeat. Exuberant, playful, full of rapid-fire gestural moves and percussive energy, the fiendishly difficult piece reveals a wonderful sense of musicality and a dazzling use of space and patterning. The work, which culminates with a breathtaking sense of satisfaction, should become a company standard-bearer.

Chaves' monumental "Underground Movements," which premiered in 2006, already has become a staple, and when the River North dancers join forces with the costumed, movement-spinning members of the Chicago Children's Choir to interpret Evan Solot's fascinating score, what you get is something between a trip into 15th century Hieronymous Bosch's vision of hell and a New Orleans carnival parade. Christopher Ash's lighting and set design help set the otherworldly mood swings.

Chaves also supplied two premieres. "Tuscan Riff" features three couples dressed in designer Jordan Ross' corseted blue-gray costumes, moving to the quirky, lyrical music of Rene Aubry and Andrew Bird in a way that hints of Renaissance formality. "Sentir em Nos ("Even for Us"), a lushly melodramatic duet set to the singing of Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli and Portuguese fado artist Dulce Ponte, was exquisitely danced by Michael Gross and Melanie Manale-Hortin.

The sensational Hanna Britson reprised her knockout solo in Robert Battle's percussion-driven urban ritual "Train," with Clayton Cross, Lauren Kias, Lizzie Mackenzie, Jessica Wolfrum and Monique Haley driving the backup engine. Haley also turned up the heat in "Beat," a "structured solo improvisation" by Ashley Roland. And the hugely attractive, technically impressive company -- which also includes Christian Denice, Brandon DiCriscio, Reginald Harris, Cassandra Porter and Ricky Ruiz -- slip-slided its way through "Pulse," choreographer Danny Ezralow's cosmic whirl, lit by Joshua Starbuck and given a coppery sheen by Jackson Lowell's costumes.

