

# CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

## Dancing into spring

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**BY HEDY WEISS** Dance Critic

Nothing marks the coming of spring in Chicago more reliably than the arrival of a slew of dance companies, both homegrown and imported. This weekend alone there were concerts by Thodos Dance Chicago (with a world premiere by Ann Reinking), an initial Chicago visit by the dancer-acrobats of the Los Angeles-based Diavalo troupe, and Vincent Mantsoe's South African-based company. Coming soon are the Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, Natya Dance Theatre and American Ballet Theatre.

The good news is audiences appear to be keeping pace with all the activity. The turnout at Friday night's concert by River North Chicago Dance Company at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance - the first of three weekend performances -- was impressive. So was the dancing.

The Chicago premiere on the River North bill was artistic director Frank Chaves' "Underground Movements," a massive full-company piece set to Evan Solot's richly textured and colored score -- a specially commissioned work whose pre-recorded instrumental part was overlaid with complex, stunningly rendered live vocal accompaniment by members of the Chicago Children's Choir.

Chavez's sweeping, primal, Paradise-meets-Hell vision has the grand scale of some cinematic epic set in Brazil, while its striving, tormented figures are reminiscent of those on the massive bronze "Doors of Hell," created by sculptor Auguste Rodin. The work (with designer Christopher Ash's lush lighting crucial to the overall sense of primordial mystery) is at once spiritual and erotic, with bodies emerging out of a fog, forming a circular tribe of sorts, and subsequently set into a state of chaos. Captives ultimately find freedom and redemption and a carnival celebration erupts. A solo, danced with fervor by Brittany Blumer, is part of this big, roiling stew of apocalyptic dreams.

Also apocalyptic was the program's opening work -- Kevin Iega Jeff's "Sky," set to music by Steve Reich and Sigur Ross -- though it was a faster, more furious modernistic version of this notion. Initially, the dancers look to heaven as the sky sometimes seems to be falling in on them; later that sky seems filled with promise.

Julia Rhoads' sly, seductive piece, "In the Oasis" -- set to Pink Martini's amusingly funky version of Ravel's "Bolero" -- puts the dancers into a playfully archaic mode as if they were living hieroglyphics. The piece was wonderfully performed by Elgin-bred Hanna Bricton (a swift-moving young redhead with a formidable gift for carving out space and commanding the stage), Clayton Cross, Melanie Damiano, Jason Hortin, Mari Jo Irbe, Luke Manley and Shane Ohmer.

Chaves' 2003 work, "The Mourning" is lush, lyrical and passionate, and Daniel Ezralow's "Pulse" was less magical than it seemed in previous performances. But Lynne Taylor-Corbett's "Blown Away: Images of the Dust Bowl" -- a tragicomic riff on a prairie town in a spin -- retains its many pleasures, with fine dancing of the local eccentrics by Lizzie Mackenzie, Monique Haley, Cross, Hortin, Jessica Wolfrum, Sean Hilton, Ohmer and Irbe.