

River North's thrilling 'Train' leaves the station

DANCE REVIEW | New piece gets fast-paced debut

February 18, 2008

BY HEDY WEISS Dance Critic

River North Chicago Dance Company's weekend engagement at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance might easily have been dubbed the "variety pack" special. The seven pieces on the bill included something for everyone, with styles, moods and music shifting quickly.

For pure high-velocity, red-hot, pedal-to-the-metal drive and raw theatricality there was the world premiere of choreographer Robert Battle's "Train," a work that could easily become the company's new signature piece. It is set to the pounding percussion of Les Tambours du Bronx, the internationally known percussion "orchestra" that blends Afrobeat, hip-hop, rock, metal, hardcore and techno, and just happened to have emerged two decades ago from a French neighborhood where many train workers lived.

Imagine mixing Les Tambours' rhythms with the thrill of watching a busy railway subway grid as trains race into space, creating a frenzy of light and sound, and you have some notion of what Battle has conjured here. Are the dancers chasing the trains, or vice versa? And what about that in-the-headlights solo danced with phenomenal fury and power by Hanna Bricton, a small, henna-haired dynamo? For all intents and purposes Bricton became the engine, with Clayton Cross, Monique Haley, Lauren Kias, Lizzie MacKenzie and Jessica Wolfrum linked up for the ride, and Christopher Ash's bold lighting straight from film noir. Thrilling.

The program's other world premiere, Julia Rhoads' "Between Three," was a lyrical but rather thin dreamscape for three women who might be sisters, muses, or uneasy aspects of the same young woman. The work had little of the fine wit and surprise Rhoads brought to "Cinderbox 18," her latest piece for her own company, Lucky Plush. But costume designer Jeff Hancock's floral frocks are lovely enough to be merchandised.

hweiss@suntimes.com