

Range, polish give Giordano an elite mix

By Hedy Weiss, Dance Critic, Chicago Sun-Times

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With its sensational program at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance over the weekend, Gus Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago demonstrated that it now belongs in the front ranks of this city's resident companies.

Not only is this a troupe of top-flight dancers supported by the most polished design work. But even more crucially, it is a company that has steadily been building its repertoire, and in doing so has amassed a wide range of pieces that suggest the ever-broadening definition of "jazz-based dance."

In the process, it has demonstrated that an ensemble rooted in this technique can be a magnet for very sophisticated choreographers.

Works by two such choreographers -- Davis Robertson (a former Joffrey Ballet dancer now working freelance in New York), and Ron De Jesus (a longtime Hubbard Street dancer now in Twyla Tharp's "Movin' Out" on Broadway) -- served as the brilliant bookends for the program.

Robertson's "Entropy" (created in 2002) is a genuine stunner -- a thrilling, elegant, vibrantly sensual abstract work that demands bravura dancing by five couples.

Using the vocabulary of classical ballet, modern dance and jazz in the most seamless fashion, the choreographer has created some startling effects by shifting moods radically (not incidentally, in the world of physics, "entropy" is the capacity of a system to undergo spontaneous change). He also shows himself to be a master of the big picture (the patterns of the ensemble are complex, but so are the ways in which multiple smaller groupings work in counterpoint), and to be an ingenious creator of bold, unusual movements.

The first half of his piece is set to a powerhouse tango-based score by the modernist composer Astor Piazzolla. The second half is set to the Dhol Foundation -- the vibrating basso chants of Buddhist monks. The opening of the latter section is danced to the sound of chirping birds -- with the men standing in place and slowly rocking the women in their arms. And it is one of the single most beautiful moments I've seen on a stage in a long time.

This is a work that demands superb dancing and marathon endurance, and Kimberly Cunningham, Autumn Eckman, Elijah Gibson, Meghan Grantin, Christiane Kitchen, Jon Lehrer, Joel Longenecker, Lizzie MacKenzie, Nicholas Pupillo and Bryant Williams were fully up to the task.

Rebecca Shouse's steely-hued tunics and Kevin Dreyer's masterful lighting enhanced the piece further.

The program closed with De Jesus' "Prey" (from 2003), a breathless, hard-edged, adrenalin-infused look at male-female relationships, set to the driving sound of Kodo and lit by Ryan O'Gara to suggest a red-light district.

At one point, a woman in red satin appears in a square of light; at another, two women stand in a similar block of light, their skirts blowing in the breeze. Later, a man is caught in a similarly sharply lit circle.

Couples engage in a contemporary version of Apache dancing, with all its rough moves and slashing rage. (The work's title says it all.) And in a climactic sequence, the women hurl themselves at their partners with such speed and force that they seem either suicidal or pumped up on trust.

Eckman, Gibson, Kitchen, Longenecker, MacKenzie, Pupillo and Williams were also featured here, and together created a volcanic finale.

Blazing lights were all the rage in Gus Giordano's "Sing, Sing, Sing," too -- a duet set to the classic hot jazz number by Louis Prima. The oldest work on the program (it dates from 1983) and the one that conforms most closely to the standard vision of Fosse-esque "jazz dance," it retains its feverish power to excite. The dance, in which two women in white tie and tails cast giant shadows on the back wall, was performed with fire and high energy by Cunningham and Jeannine Trinko.

Cunningham and Lehrer teamed for a terrific performance of "Cesura" (2000), Lehrer's seductive, push-pull pas de deux set to the music of the British musical group Smoke City.

Dressed in black and white bathing suits (costumes by Sarah Brazo and Lehrer), with clever on-off lighting effects courtesy of John Imburgia that reflected the "pause" or "interruption" suggested by the work's title, this expertly crafted piece examined the "can't live with, can't live without" phenomenon in relationships.

That syndrome also was the theme of "Punk You Very Much," Michael Rioux's world premiere piece -- to the music of the White Stripes, Liam Lynch and Modest Mouse. Full of youthful energy, this punk cartoon for five characters (with zesty costumes by Nan Zabriskie) was driven by a combination of adolescent anger and confusion, but also had its humorous moments.

"Taal," Nan Giordano's fleet, lyrical, but close-to-kitschy play on Bollywood dance, and "Bridge and Tunnel," Lehrer's ode to Simon & Garfunkel and the high school playground antics of an earlier time, completed this exceptionally satisfying and exuberant program.