



The Joffrey Ballet in the world premiere of Annabelle Lopez Ochoa's "Mammatus." (Photo: Cheryl Mann)

THE YEAR IN REVIEW: THE BEST DANCE OF 2015

HEDY WEISS on December 18, 2015

Dance is in its purest, most unfettered glory on the concert stage. But that is not where it ends. Movement of all kinds is an intrinsic element in theatrical productions, too, and often is the key to defining character. At times there is nothing more enjoyable than to watch an actor or actress find the “inner dance” in a role.

So, here is a list of some of the finest moments of dance — in all its guises — as seen on Chicago stages during the 2015 season:

The Joffrey Ballet, which happens to be in exceptional form at the moment, displayed its gift for theatricality in “Unique Voices,” its winter program of three contemporary ballets. In the “Tulle,” Swedish choreographer Alexander Ekman’s wild and wacky send-up (and homage) to classical ballet’s rigors, the company was in full circus mode. In “The Man in Black,” Canadian choreographer James Kudelka’s evocation of Johnny Cash, Joanne Wozniak pulled on cowboy boots and moved as if on a windswept prairie. And in Australian choreographer Stanton Welch’s feverishly sensual “Maninyas,” Anastacia Holden was a standout.



The Joffrey Ballet, with (from left), Fernando Duarte, Joanna Wozniak, Edson Barbosa and Derrick Agnoletti in “The Man in Black.” (Photo: Cheryl Mann)

The Joffrey brought more thrilling new work to the stage with its brief September program, “Millennials,” with the most memorable of its three ballets the world premiere of Annabelle Lopez Ochoa’s “Mammatus.” This absolutely breathtaking piece, which opens with the dancers in tight formation, looking like Hitchcock’s blackbirds ready to attack, is imprinted in my memory. Finally, for its fall season, the

Joffrey brought Hamburg Ballet choreographer John Neumeier's modernized classic, "Sylvia," to the Auditorium Theatre. The sight of the powerhouse female ensemble, their bows and arrows at the ready as they ran onstage, erased all memories of feathery white swans.



The Huntresses in the Joffrey Ballet production of John Neumeier's "Sylvia." (Photo: Cheryl Mann)

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago also is in flawless form, with the dancers moving so seamlessly together that they often seem like one body with many limbs. But their mixed repertoire programs tend to have too much of an abstract sameness. Just how well some narrative element can work for them was evidenced by Alejandro Cerrudo's hypnotic choreography, an excerpt from "The Art of Falling," their hit collaboration with The Second City. The troupe also performed at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance, debuting the fast and furious "Mr. B," Spanish choreographer Gustavo Ramirez Sansano's homage to George Balanchine and his ballet, "Theme and Variations." And in this month's winter series, it was Robin Mineko Williams' "Waxing Moon" that was the standout.

Although this summer's **Chicago Dancing Festival** was a very mixed bag, a couple of works were special. At the gala outdoor concert in Millennium Park it was Lane Alexander's "In the Meantime," a bravura interweaving of three percussive dance forms — featuring the seductive flamenco of Ensemble Espanol Dance Theater, the Chicago Human Rhythm Project's tap magic and the Trinity Irish Dancers. One of the Dancing Festival's programs at the Harris Theater featured New York's Ballet Hispanico in "El Beso" ("The Kiss"), another work by Sansano. This work, by the



*Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's Jacqueline Burnett in Robyn Mineko Williams' "Waxing Moon."
(Photo: Todd Rosenberg)*

ingenious, high energy choreographer with a great sense of humor, character and design, explored many types of kissing with wit and wisdom. Delicious on every count.

During its annual visit to the Auditorium Theatre, the **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater** performed Matthew Rushing's new work, "Odetta," a gorgeous blend of richly expressive movement set to the formidable vocal stylings of the fabled singer dubbed "the voice of the Civil Rights Movement." The work's 10 memorably theatrical, character-driven sequences flipped from expertly limned comedy to fierce political commentary.

Jessica Lang's "Thousand Yard Stare," one of several works on a single night's Harris Theater program, was a remarkable evocation, minimal yet profound, of soldiers in formation and at war. Moving and masterful.

Fierce and lushly gorgeous ballet dancing by Yumelia Garcia, Randy Herrera and Jennifer Goodman in Gordon Peirce Schmidt's "Day of the Gypsy" at the Harris Theater.

The stirring revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "**Oklahoma!**" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora was made even more potent by choreographer Katie Spelman's highly original reimagining of Agnes DeMille's "Out of My Dreams" ballet in which

Laurey suffers nightmarish visions of sexual entrapment by the farmhand, Jud Fry. Spelman's character-defining choreography for the rowdy cowboys and feisty girls of the prairie, also were terrific.



Katie Spellman's choreography for "Oklahoma!" at the Paramount Theater in Aurora, with Allison Sill as Laurey. (Photo: Liz Lauren)

Memorable dance elements in other musicals/dramas included: The sublime revival of "The Addams Family Musical" at the Mercury Chicago Theater, with choreographer Brenda Didier making everything on stage move; Matt Crowle's terrific tap number and romantic ballroom dance numbers in Drury Lane Theatre's revival of "White Christmas"; Marc Robin's shipboard tap spectaculars in "Anything Goes" at the Marriott Theatre; and again, Katie Spelman's terrific punk rock numbers for The Hypocrites' take on "American Idiot."

Something in the way they moved: The skinning of a whale in Lookingglass' "Moby Dick" by means of a rotating woman in a crinoline; "imagined" boxing sequences in "The Royale" (at American Theater Company); the otherworldly moves (and sleight-of-hand) of Ariel (Nate Dendy) in "The Tempest" at Chicago Shakespeare Theater; Kate Arrington's shocking evocation of arthritis in "East of Eden" at Steppenwolf Theatre; and both the slow dancing and sexed up dancing in the Northlight Theatre's production of "Charm" at the Steppenwolf Garage.



Nate Dendy (standing) was a master of motion as Ariel in “The Tempest,” at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater. (Photo: Liz Lauren)

- ◀ Daily Sizzle
- ◀ Dance
- ◀ Stage
- ◀ Ballet Hispanico
- ◀ Chicago Dancing Festival
- ◀ Drury Lane
- ◀ Ensemble Espanol Spanish Dance Theater
- ◀ Hubbard Street Dance Chicago
- ◀ Joffrey Ballet
- ◀ lookingglass theatre
- ◀ Paramount Theater Aurora
- ◀ The Hypocrites



HEDY WEISS

Hedy Weiss has been Theater and Dance Critic of the Chicago Sun-Times since 1984, reporting on local, national and international productions, as well as a wide range of other subjects including art and architecture, books, travel and international affairs.

 [@HEDYWEISSCRITIC](#)

← Dear Abby: Wife would rather see his money than him

Dear Abby: Crushing on boy, 14, who's not allowed to date →

MORE FROM THE WEB

[Puppet Application Orchestration is here!](#)

Puppet Labs

[2016 Best Activewear For the Quintessential Woman On-The-Go](#)

Fabletics

[What These Star Wars Characters Look Like Now Is Incredible](#)

Your Daily Dish

[Charlize Had A Hard Time Letting Go Of This Home And We Can See Why](#)

Lonny