James Levine’s return to Ravinia cause for reflection on his impact

Little did anyone suspect that when James Levine made his Ravinia and Chicago Symphony Orchestra podium debuts, as an eleventh-hour pinch hitter in 1971, how important a chapter in the history of the festival the gifted conductor would go on to write.

On Saturday night he is scheduled to return to Ravinia, after an absence of more than two decades, to direct the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in the same work he led on that memorable night of June 24, 1971, one day after the relatively unknown Levine had turned 36.

Levine’s mammoth “Resurrection” Symphony (No. 2), the gala event is a fundraiser for the Ravinia Women’s Board, just as Levine’s Mahler was 45 years ago.

Ravinia’s 50th gala represents a significant closing of a circle. One is prompted to reflect on what Ravinia has lost in the decades since the greatly gifted Levine infused America’s oldest summer music festival with his artistic vision, innovative programming and seemingly boundless capacity for work at the highest level.

The classical music business in the U.S. has changed enormously since the festival’s former music director led his final Ravinia concerts in 1993 — not for the better, in many respects. Indeed, I’m not at all certain the conditions still exist that would enable a James Levine to shape the artistic fortunes of a major turn to Von Rhein, Page 3.

IN PERFORMANCE

‘Wastewater’ ***

Plumbing the depths of human despair

BY CHRIS JONES

Should all the hate, brutality and alienation coursing through the planet not be enough for you, I give you “Wastewater,” a dystopian triptych by gifted British playwright Simon Stephens and about as depressing a 100 minutes as you could spend in a Chicago theater this summer.

You also will not see any better acting in a Chicago theater this summer than what the women of Stepp Theatre’s Renda Thulin, Carolense Neff, Melissa Riemer — are doing on Berwyn Avenue under the fearless direction of Robin Witt.

And the men in the cast — Peter Moore, Joel Boyd.

Tap dancer Bril Barrett with conga player Monti Ellison, right, and the Eric Hochberg Trio at the Rhythm World festival event Monday.
Rhythmic rumble
Tap and jazz share center stage in artistic celebration

Howard Reich
My Kind of Jazz

There wasn’t a spare seat to be found Monday night at the Jazz Showcase, and even standing room was tight. Perhaps everyone realized that a very particular kind of lighting soon would strike.

With a top-notch Chicago jazz trio ready to play and a floor board positioned near the lip of the stage, two galvanic forms of expression were about to converge.

"Tonight we’re here to really celebrate the great American art forms of jazz and tap," said Lane Alexander, artistic director of the Chicago Human Rhythm Project.

"Rhythm is the universal language that we can find some common ground on," added Maud Arnold, left, Sean Kaminski and Starlinh Dixon take turns in the dance floor spotlight at the Jazz Showcase during "Juba," which marks the start of the long-running festival's grand finale week.

Alexander.

He was kicking off "Juba," the grand finale week of the 26th annual Rhythm World festival, which will culminate with shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art.

The occasion, Lane told the crowd, offered an opportunity to "celebrate our humanity together." Indeed, in light of all the tragedy in the world, the sheer joy of so many feet clicking, clacking — with the Eric Hochberg Trio — riffing buoyantly alongside them — offered much-needed respite and hope.

Dancer Maud Arnold, visiting from Los Angeles, stood up to the stage first, at which point Alexander asked her aloud:

"Have you figured out what you’re going to dance yet?"

"No, I just met them!" said Arnold, referring to the musicians.

To which Lane Chicago drummer Emile Adams responded, from behind his instrument, "This is jazz!"

Turn to Rhythm, Page 3

Centennial Celebration

Pier Dance
Now Through Sept. 29
Thursdays 8-10pm

Shake By The Lake — Ice Rink
7 Days a Week, Noon — 10pm

Miller Lite Beer Garden
Now Through Labor Day
Free Live Music Week — Noon

Aer Summer Fireworks
May 29 — Sept. 3
Wed. & Fri.

Celebrities

A+B notes
Jazz and tap combo attracts a crowd

Rhythm, from Page 1

Meaning that nothing had been choreographed, planned or so much as discussed in advance. If jazz is, as Whitney Balliett described it, “the sound of surprise,” no one was going to be more surprised than the performers themselves.

But jazz artists — whether musicians or dancers — have a gift for inventing on the spot. Or, as a performer I know likes to say: “It’s not what you play — it’s how you get out of it.”

Arnold and the musicians conferred for about a minute. Then Hochberg’s trio — with pianist Regina Thomas and drummer Adams — put down an Afro-Cuban beat, and the tapping began. Arnold offered plenty of lyrical flow, yet her tap rhythms syncopated crisply against the music accompanying her.

Bril Barrett, founder of Chicago’s M.A.D.D. Rhythms, stepped up next, announcing his intentions.

“We just go in the tradition of jazz,” he said to the audience. “We’ll just see where it goes.”

With that, he launched into the massive, stomping accents for which he’s known and admired, while the band played Harry Warren and Al Dubin’s “Forty-Second Street,” as appropriate a tap anthem as any. Barrett proceeded to divide the beat into what seemed like a million parts.

No dancer dug more deeply into the meaning and vocabulary of jazz, though, than Starinah Dixon, an original member of M.A.D.D. and, as it happens, Barrett’s sister. By this point in the evening, one took for granted a high technical level of performance, but Dixon offered so much more. She conveyed deepswing rhythm, crafted phrases like a singer and traded ideas with drummer Adams as if she were one of the band.

This wasn’t only dance. This was music.

Elsewhere in the evening, Carter Williams proved light on his feet and sharp in articulation; Nicholas Young added hand and body claps to very fast footwork; Tristan Bruns combined an agile technique with appealingly idiosyncratic movement; Ju-maane Taylor emphasized power, velocity and imagination; and Ayodele Casel defied gravity via exuberant vertical motion. If this didn’t lift your spirits, nothing could.

Sean Kaminski keeps things moving on the dance floor Monday at the Jazz Showcase.

Dancer Tristan Bruns performs in front of packed house.

“Juba” continues with events Wednesday through Saturday at the Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave.; phone 312-397-4010 or visit www.mcachicago.org or www.chicagotap.org.

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