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How to set Miles Davis into motion

BY HEDY WEISS

There is no other way to say it but this: River North Dance Chicago was on fire Saturday night at the Auditorium Theatre, where it presented the world premiere of Frank Chaves' brilliant new work set to the music of Miles Davis, along with six other pieces from the company's repertory.

Not only did the troupe's bravura dancers pull out all the stops from first move to last, inspiring rapturous applause at every turn, but they demonstrated (not for the first time in recent seasons), that River North is one of this city's most accomplished ensembles — deserving of a far higher profile on both the national and international scene.

This company is hotter than hot at the moment, and watching it (along with Chicago's other top troupes) you can only be amazed at how Chicago has moved from being something of a dance wasteland two decades ago to a true mecca of the art form. Just as a theater explosion occurred here in the late 1970s, dance is now undergoing a similar explosion.



But to the matter at hand: Chaves' masterful use of Davis' lushly seductive, rhythmically complex and invariably mood-altering jazz recordings in "Simply Miles, Simply Us," a work co-commissioned (in honor of the 85th anniversary of the jazz legend's birth) by the Auditorium Theatre and the Wharton Center for the Performing Arts of Michigan State University.

What sets Chaves' use of jazz apart here is the way he has fully sidestepped both "illustrating" the music and tapping into the clichés of jazz dance. Instead, he delves into the structure and instrumentation of Davis' work with keen intelligence and a sense of the beautiful, elegant and at times playful aspects of his work. He captures the interplay of Davis' horn with the sounds of his fellow musicians, and the sense of exquisitely controlled theme and variation and improvisational genius that marks his music. And he taps ideally into Davis' ability to establish a mood that makes everything else disappear as you listen.

Comprised of three sections, plus an intriguingly dissonant, electronic interlude that links an extraordinary duet to two larger ensemble sequences, "Simply Miles" (devised in collaboration with dancers Christian Denice and Ricky Ruiz) begins as the company gathers in a loose huddle to the music of "So What," and then forms a horizontal line from which various dancers step out, move forward and then return, much as musicians "step out" and play riffs. There are brief solos, a quintet, trios and more, with everything in a state of continual regrouping and return.

The work's hot-and-cool duet, set to "Blue In Green," was phenomenally danced by two of the company's most electric performers — Hannah Bricston (who also brought down the house as the soloist in Robert Battle's smoking engine of a piece, "Train") and Christian Denice (who did the same

in his solo, "Beat," a structured improvisation by Ashley Roland combining voguing, breakdance and gymnastics). Chaves has a unique gift for creating devilishly difficult partnering, and throughout the evening his dancers flew through every challenge he presented.

The final movement of "Simply Miles," set to "Half Nelson," begins with the company in silhouette (the piece was beautifully lit by Joshua Paul Weckesser), and it is a fast, jagged, sexy and, again, ravishingly "inside" evocation of the music.

The evening began with Sherry Zunker's "Evolution of a Dream," set to the Eurythmics hit "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)," and the propulsive synchrony of the dancers suggested (rightly) that 11 thoroughbreds had just been let out of the starting gate. Chaves' "Sentir em Nos (Even for Us)," a lushly sensual duet to the music of Andrea Bocelli and Dulce Pontes, was danced to perfection by Melanie Manale-Hortin and Michael Gross, while Kelly Michael Brunk and Lizzie MacKenzie gave a knockout comic rendering of Chaves' "At Last."

"Habaneras, the Music of Cuba," Chaves' 2005 beauty of a work, served as the program's irresistible grand finale, with the marvelous, tireless dancers (including Cassandra Porter, Brittany Blumer, Lauren Kias, Jessica Wolfrum, Brandon DiCriscio and all those previously named) dressed in Jordan Ross' motion-enhancing, rainbow-hued costumes, and moving through a series of six sections marked by fascinating mood shifts and music that could set a slug dancing.

If the producers of "Dancing With the Stars" had any sense at all, they would film this program and air it as a special.