

River North Chicago Dance Company

By **Laura Molzahn**

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River North's 20th anniversary show, Saturday only at the Harris Theater, starred artistic director Frank Chaves. Not that he ever got up onstage, even to take a bow as the troupe's leader for the last eight years. In fact he goes back further: he and Sherry Zunker began sharing artistic direction of the company in 1994.

River North even survived being shoved center stage in 1993, when HMS Media's half-hour WTTW documentary brought hordes of the curious to the Harold Washington Library to see Zunker's "Reality of a Dreamer," also the title of the video. It's not always easy to maintain your profile after a thunderclap moment of success like that one. For this program Zunker reinvented that 1992 piece, set to slightly different music.

Chaves deserves props not only for his prolific production of vigorous new dances year after year but also for keeping the dancers and dancing in mint condition. This is one sexy troupe, and not just because they're ripped. Watching them, I realized how seductive it is to be in the hands of performers so perfectly in control.

They fight for that control in Chaves's newest work, "Forbidden Boundaries." Talk about making lemonade out of lemons: Chaves drew on his own experience with a serious spinal condition to create this piece asking, as he writes in the program, "why, when we know how, do we forbid ourselves to succeed, to grow, to change?" In this ensemble work, devoted mostly to duets, one dancer personifying that regressive psychic force holds the other back-by the shirt. Then they switch roles.

And the issue with control? The shirts are stretchy, twisting easily into ropes that suggest straitjackets or leashes as the caught dancers strain to get away. Telling and crucial as these props are, they also add a wacky, difficult variable to the partnering equation, as one dancer holds another at a precipitously leaning angle or pulls his partner into an unwanted embrace. The most alarming and passionate of the dance's four sections- "the trio "Hidden Truth," for two men holding a woman by her sleeves-heightens these challenges. And the dancers not only met but surpassed them. Tiny Lizzie McKenzie, whether flying through the air or falling to the floor at the mercy of her captors, was amazing, embodying the pain of having your life spin out of control.

The shirt wars run pretty much throughout "Forbidden Boundaries" but work best when the stage is less crowded. All the holding and leaning and the shirts themselves make the first section of "Forbidden Boundaries" rather muddy. That's not a problem in the section called "Harmony," when the performers dance separately and their flying shirts look like wings, and it's less a problem in the concluding section, which often showcases one or two duets at a time.

Chaves's duet "Sentir em Nos" ("Even for Us"), first performed earlier this year, held the evening's biggest erotic charge. Though "Forbidden Boundaries" pretty much sticks to unisex choreography, Chaves works well with sharply divided, even stereotypical sex roles. Here the man relentlessly manipulates the woman in fiendish choreography, tossing her around like a scarf or rolling her up his arms into a high lift. Michael Gross and Melanie Manale-Hortin made it all look not only easy but fun. That is, if you like your relationships seasoned with some conflict.

Traditional sex roles also dominate Chaves's signature ensemble piece, "Habaneras, the Music of Cuba" (2005), dedicated to his father. The dancing was beautiful, but there's too much of a muchness, with most of the six songs coming from the 50s and so many pretty arms and swirling skirts you'd swear you were watching a Latin number on "Dancing With the Stars." It's too bad that "Habaneras" comes across as stodgy given Chaves's obvious love for the Cuban music of his youth.

Zunker's remake of "Reality of a Dreamer," now called "Evolution of a Dream," replaces the original music—the Eurythmics' 1983 "Sweet Dreams" with cowriter Dave Stewart's new 2008 recording. Its oversweet orchestral opening made me long for the onstage amplified bass fiddle that made Zunker's original seem so raw and yearning. Also, though a few solos popped out here from the matrix of ensemble moves, I missed the original's star turn for Wilfredo Rivera, whose snaky moves heightened the piece's dangerous edge. But Zunker does know how to work the music's dramatic flourishes, and she has a gift for the well-placed neurotic tic.

Also on the program were Monique Haley's wild, funny "Uhuru," Chaves's elegant "Tuscan Rift," and "Beat," an improvised solo structured by Ashley Roland and performed here by the magnificent Christian Denice.