

## *River North Chicago Dance Company Valentine's Weekend Engagement*

By Sid Smith

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Choreographer Robert Battle seems blessed with a limitless talent to entertain. The man who gave River North Chicago Dance Company "Train" is back with two more works, a new one called "Three" and a solo, "Ella," first performed earlier by his own troupe.

Both are irresistible and, like "Train," decidedly inimitable. Though it boasts one noteworthy solo, "Train" involves a modest-sized ensemble and a nod to choral imagery. Solos and trios are about something else, a more intimate artistry, and it's here that Battle maybe shows off his innovation, quirkiness and originality best, zeroing in for tight body shots that are the choreographic equivalent of a close-up. He injects both pieces with an almost infinite amount of gestures and modest, short-lived motions that are speedy and crammed, just this side of frenetic. These are feasts of detail, yet each work is distinct from the other.

"Ella" demands this approach by definition. Here Battle attempts the nearly impossible: Charging a dancer with illustrating, dipping inside and replicating the quicksilver wonderland and finesse of Ella Fitzgerald's scat. Vocalists, of course, are challenged to duplicate the great Fitzgerald's skills; dancers, you'd think, wouldn't stand a chance.

And yet Battle and River North's amazing Lauren Kias do just that. The score is a track called "Airmail Special," a scat amalgamating various songs, phrases and notes, and Kias echoes the vocals with an elaborate catalogue including spinning forearms, swoops, cartwheel-like exercises and one spectacular collapse to the floor. No single gesture or trope seems to last for more than a second, so that Kias is rapidly changing, just like Fitzgerald's vocals, few of the images repeated.

With a cagey sense of stagecraft and no small knack for design, Battle makes it possible by alternating the fast, dart-like echoes of the changing notes with slow, more languorous pauses and lilt, built-in retards to give Kias a chance to catch her breath. At one point, two male dancers, goofily attired, cross the rear of the stage, another reprieve for Kias and part of Battle's disarming use of humor to pull this off. Kias herself, while delivering a technical knockout, also manages a light, subdued rakishness, nothing cloying or overly solicitous, but an oh-what-the-heck air that serves both the dance and the spirit of the tribute to Fitzgerald.

"Three," Battle's new work for the troupe, somewhat takes up a similar mission in another direction. Here the music is a seamless mix of various percussive strains from the likes of Eleventh Hour, Art of Noise and Taiko Drums. The soundtrack is pounding, aggressive, like "Train," yet impish and delectable, too, an inviting serenade of techno-noise. The three men are mostly in two separate clusters--Michael Gross and Ricky Ruiz are paired, alternating with Christian Denice, who performs in solo. For all the sophistication, the movement both here and in "Ella" has a carefree, casual, pop and streetwise vocabulary--sass, hip-hop and even one miniature quote of the limbo in "Three" are part of Battle's arsenal. But it shifts so rapidly and so smoothly that the effect is more tour de force than eclectic list. Battle is also witty more than he's outright funny, which is a terrific strength. There's a guiding intelligence that make "Three" not just appealing, but audaciously clever. Almost off-handedly, the dancers find themselves standing on their heads. The tiny, embedded structures minutely ape and illustrate the pulses of the percussive score, whether it's a back and forth tug of war between Ruiz and Gross, or a mock superior strut from Denice. The finale is a carefully wrought bit of geometry whereby the united trio break up again: The Gross-Ruiz combo shoot Denice away, as if he's cannonball to their cannon.

Lauri Stallings' "Suppose" is a bit of a disappointment. Like Battle's "Three," it is redolent with offbeat, alien-like gestures set to a disturbing, other worldly score mixing Deadbeat and Gustavo Santaolalla. Some of the quirks and frenzied spasms for the seven dancers are interesting, as are some elements of the design and Stallings' shifting use of combinations. But "Suppose" somehow doesn't add up or come together, more a finely tuned exercise--or maybe a work in progress.

The engagement, which plays through Saturday at the Harris Theater, 205 E. Randolph Dr. (312-334-7777), includes revivals of Sherry Zunker's "Evolution of a Dream," Monique Haley's "Uhuru" and Frank Chaves' "Tuscan Rift," "Sentir em Nos (Even for Us)" and "Forbidden Boundaries."