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The Chamber Dance Theater: Premiere Performance at the Pabst

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PREMIERE PERFORMANCE AT THE PABST

By Curtis L. Carter

The birth of a new Chamber Dance Theater has occurred in Milwaukee. Last October the company was only an idea in the minds of Carla Graham-White, assistant professor of dance at U.W.M. and Judy Gotshalks, a dance teacher in the U.W. Extension Arts.

The Milwaukee premiere at the Pabst Theatre May 14, marked the company's emergence as a major artistic group. A trial concert in February with the Fox Valley Symphony in Neenah, and a stream of teasers in the form of open rehearsal previews with such dance luminaries as Margo Sappington and Lotte Goslar, set high

expectations for the opening concert in Milwaukee.

The program of contemporary ballets offered variety: Margo Sappington's "Weewis," Lotte Goslar's "Leggerios," Manolo Vargas' "The Miller's Dance," and two lesser works, Vincente Nebrada's "Ole," and Wayne Davis' "Trio."

Unfortunately, the sequence of the program did not present the Chamber Dance Theater in its best light. Nebrada's opening "Ole" for five dancers did nothing to support the high expectations that pre-performance activity and rumor had established. The dancers -- Diana Turner, Pamela Phillips, Mimi Cichanowicz, Edwin Rupert, and Robert Buntzen performed the work with competence, executing some attractive lifts, but "Ole" was nothing special.

Davis' "Trio", danced by Richard Dickinson, Isabelle Kralj, and Charlie West, changed the festive mood of "Ole" to reflection on an open-ended tapestry of weaving bodies. Kralj's phrasing of occasional passages in the piece helped to make tolerable a dance that suffers from excessive repetition of movements and a lack of clear focus. Dancers crowded each other in the ensemble parts, complicating further tenuous visual patterns of "Trio." The main problem throughout "Trio" was an aimless structure which did not lead the eye or the mind with any particular clarity or direction.

The intermission came, leaving many viewers wondering. Was the project worth all of the fuss? A new company with high standards and the promise of excellence and variety would be a welcome addition to regular dance fare in the state. But a mediocre effort could hardly justify itself. So far, the company had not made a convincing case.

The evening's power had been reserved for the second half, which began with Sappington's "Weewis." "Weewis" explores episodes in the relationships of three couples, friends and lovers, in a New York apartment building. The dancers were

Judy Gotshalks, acting director, and Gary Chryst, on loan from the Joffrey Ballet; Margo Sappington, choreographer, Charlie West, ballet master; and company members Diana Turner and Sylvio Briffa. "Weewis" was stark, colorful, and by far the most exciting piece of the evening so far. Chryst, a superb dancer, was paired with Gotshalks, who could not match his speed or elegance of movement. The other couples were well-enough matched to give their interactions credibility. The vitality of "Weewis" offered a refreshing contrast, confirming the dullness of what had preceded.

The appearance of William Carter in "The Millers' Dance" continued the elevation in quality, giving a fine display of Spanish dance, one of Carter's specialties. The performance exhibited a strong sense of character dancing built on authentic, clean technique.

"Leggerios," freshly set on the company by its choreographer, Lotte Goslar, concluded the performance. "Leggerios" is a comic spoof on the fantasies and vanities of dancers. As the sub-title indicates, its movements are "light and swift." Prima ballerinas compete for center stage, evoking laughter at their desperate clashes of bodies and wills. The image of a dancer pedalling obliviously as she is carried, or of another bouncing through space, is humorous. And we delight in Goslar's irreverent play upon her art form. In most respects "Leggerios" represented the most coherent dancing of the evening. I did nevertheless experience a comparative lack in humor in this particular performance.

Chamber Dance Theater is launched, and expectations remain positive, despite a mixed opening. Leadership changes have taken place. Carla Graham-White, one of the company founders, had already left before the company's May debut. William Carter, formerly of American Ballet Theater, has been appointed artistic director. Their future depends on making good artistic choices and on establishing adequate financial support. Their success in both will be everyone's gain.