



Arts & Entertainment / Theater Loop / Dance

Best dance in Chicago in 2017: Those who dared, won



KC Bevis with, background, Kristi Licera, Monterez Rezell, David Ingram, Zak McMahon and Porscha Spells, in Chicago Dance Crash and "The Bricklayers of Oz." (Ashley Deran photo)



By **Lauren Warnecke**
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For dance, 2017 was about taking risks. Companies tried new things, celebrated milestones and took on ambitious projects. The year had a “go big or go home” feel to it, and for these productions, those risks paid off.

“Red Giselle” by Eifman Ballet of St. Petersburg at the Auditorium Theatre in May: This decadent, schmaltzy ballet by artistic director Boris Eifman shares little with the simple elegance of “Giselle’s” Kingdom of the Wilis, but it was impossible to find anything wrong with his 1997 ballet “Red Giselle.” The subject is Olga Spessivtseva, a Russian ballerina who was famous for her portrayal of the role, and the intertwining of Spessivtseva and Giselle’s darker sides unfolds as a tragic, haunting psychological thriller that rivals any I’ve seen.

Hubbard Street’s Summer Series at the Harris Theater in June: The official kick-off to Hubbard Street’s 40th anniversary season was epic, [chronicling the company’s evolution](#) from end to beginning. Seamless transitions between a tender excerpt from Lucas Crandall’s “Imprint” to the euphoric visual atmosphere of Alejandro Cerrudo’s “One Thousand Pieces” to the stark utilitarianism of William Forsythe’s “One Flat Thing, Reproduced” in the first half sent chills up my spine, while the second’s revivals of audience favorites, Lou Conte’s “Georgia” and “The 40s,” produced smiles from ear to ear. We’d be remiss to not also mention December’s Winter Series, a triptych of works by Canadian choreographer Crystal Pite, whose ability to capture raw emotion in dancers’ bodies and suspend them across the stage straight to your gut is nothing short of miraculous.

Ensemble Espanol's "Raices" at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts in June: Style, flair and bravura are never lacking in an evening presented by Ensemble Espanol Spanish Dance Theater, but [this summer's "Raices"](#) was particularly special with the world premiere of Angel Rojas' "Defalla, Fuera de la Caja" and "Iroko," the latter a collaboration with Carlos Rodriguez. In both cases, Ensemble Espanol is forging a new future for flamenco — a visually striking, distinctly contemporary genre that echoes other concert forms without losing sight of its roots.

"Bricklayers of Oz" by Chicago Dance Crash at the Ruth Page Center in July: After a few seasons' hiatus from its big narrative shows, Chicago Dance Crash returned to the format this year, launching "Bricklayers of Oz" as a prequel to Dorothy's trip down the yellow brick road. While this, like all the others, was filled to the brim with blockbuster-level production value and jaw-dropping hip-hop moves, the subtle lessons on social consciousness and inclusion folded into this original story (by artistic director Jessica Deahr with lyrics by local rapper Al Tamper) are what make it really special.

Reggie Wilson's "Citizen" at the Dance Center in October: Across the four long solos that make up most of the first three-quarters of [Wilson's "Citizen,"](#) the most memorable moments were those in which each performer stopped dancing, paused and calmly, confidently gazed straight into the eyes of the audience. Tucked into these idiosyncratic solos, it was a powerful expression of individuality that, when glued together for a big unison dance at the end, seemed to indicate that one must exert himself and be fully present to feel a sense of community, of the collective, of belonging.

The Joffrey Ballet's "Giselle" at the Auditorium Theatre in October: Lola de Avila's staging of the quintessential romantic ballet is ultra-traditional, and it is that which makes the [Joffrey's flawless performance](#) of "Giselle" so wholly radical. The four lead roles — touted by many dancers as capstones of every classical ballet dancer's career — were played masterfully by Joffrey's usual suspects, but it was the surprisingly tight corps de ballet that produced true shock and awe. This was Joffrey at its very best, doing something the company typically doesn't — perfectly. How exciting.

Giordano Dance Chicago's Fall Series at the Harris Theater in October: Maintaining the legacy of artistic director Nan Giordano's father is a priority for this jazzcentric company, now more than ever as the [55th season opened](#) with "Giordano Moves," an exercise in classic American jazz codified by the legend himself, Gus Giordano. But GDC is increasingly highlighting favorites from the rep of now-defunct River North Dance Chicago; the juxtaposition of Gus' work and that of former RNDC director Frank Chaves is enough to make Chicago dance history buffs salivate, but it wasn't all nostalgia. The world premiere of Ray Mercer's electric "Tossed Around" had dancers literally throwing chairs across the stage amid near-impossible passes of dancing — performed with technical panache and plenty of pizzazz, per usual.

The Auditorium Theatre's "Golden Celebration of Dance" in November: Never mind 2017, the star-studded [gala celebrating](#) the 50th anniversary of this historic theater's grand reopening rivals some of the most memorable dance nights this decade. The evening included incredible performances by San Francisco Ballet's Maria Kochetkova and American Ballet Theatre's Daniil Simkin, dancing the pas de deux from Marius Petipa's "Don Quixote," and Washington Ballet phenom Brooklyn Mack, unmatched even by his partner Koto Ishihara (San Francisco Ballet) in the seldom-seen "Diana and Acteon." But the real star that night was the Auditorium itself, adoringly praised in the curtain speech by ballet legend Edward Villella just before gazing at New York City Ballet's Megan Fairchild and Daniel Ulbricht perform his signature role, "Tarantella."

Deeply Rooted Dance Theater's "Indumba" at the Logan Center for the Arts in December: This mesmerizing, hypnotizing work by South African choreographer Fana Tshabalala marked an aesthetic change for the 20-year-old Deeply Rooted Dance Theater, but "Indumba" is not as radical as it might seem for this company. Since inception, Deeply Rooted has been committed to themes connecting dance with social justice, equity, spirituality and body politics. With these passions already present, Tshabalala's dark, enigmatic piece about spiritual cleansing from the residual trauma of apartheid is in the dancers' wheelhouse, though perhaps not in their audience's. No matter — "Indumba" is unequivocally the dance of the year.

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