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Best dance of 2025: From Joffrey to Trinity, a year of big swings for Chicago dance



Trinity Irish Dance Company members rehearse at Katten Landau Studios in the Loop on April 13, 2025, in preparation for performances at the MCA in May. (Eileen T. Meslar/Chicago Tribune)



By **LAUREN WARNECKE**

PUBLISHED: December 10, 2025 at 5:30 AM CST

As long as I've tabulated this list of the best in Chicago dance, I don't think any year has been quite as gratifying as this one. Frankly, I love an underdog. So, to witness the exhilarating culmination two people quite literally wrestling with each other for five years in the studio, or to see a company like Chicago Repertory Ballet now reaching its full potential, is such a pleasure and privilege. I hope you've enjoyed watching as much as I have.

"Knockout" at Steppenwolf in January: The [hour-long duet](#), devised and performed by Erin Kilmurray and Kara Brody, was developed from a pandemic diversion exploring the art of meeting people. The result served as both a requiem and a mandate, illustrating the necessity for and messiness of algorithm-free, fully confusing and unpredictably palpable, screen-free interactions with real, live humans.

The Joffrey's whole, entire year: It's safe to say the Joffrey Ballet (whose New York chapter is [beautifully chronicled](#) at Wrightwood 659) could not have imagined the year they've had three decades ago, showing up in Chicago penniless and on the brink of closure. Against all odds (and perhaps better judgment), then-artistic director Gerald Arpino believed it would work. Apparently, he was right. Current artistic director Ashley Wheater has stretched his company to the limit this year, with some of the biggest and rangiest repertoire ever — and they've risen to every occasion. The delightfully wacky one-act ["Princess and the Pea"](#) came a few months before Christopher Wheeldon's enormously ambitious ["Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."](#) The U.S. premiere of Liam Scarlett's ["Carmen"](#) was mere weeks before the company's Harris Theater [debut](#) — all capped off with a magical ["Nutcracker"](#) that's finally found its full, glorious footing



Victoria Jaiani and Amanda Assucena in "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" by the Joffrey Ballet. (Cheryl Mann)

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the Auditorium in March: Opening night of the Ailey company's annual visit to Chicago was one of the more special moments in this critic's career, marking the [final time](#) veteran dancer Vernard Gilmore would perform with the company in his hometown. Gilmore retired last season after 30 years with the organization. The joint appreciation shared between dancer and audience for a most remarkable career is something I'll never forget. When they come again next spring, Gilmore's front-and-center spot in "Revelations" every night will be someone else's. And that dancer will be working under new leadership; the former head of Juilliard's dance division, Alicia Graf Mack, has just begun her tenure as the fourth artistic director of that lauded institution.

"Children of Dharma" at the Harris Theater in March: Minneapolis-based Ragamala Dance Company has thrice visited the Harris, [most recently](#) illustrating sacred stories from the "Mahabharata" through stunning music and dance. "Children of Dharma" was less opulent than previous works shown in Chicago, but no less impactful, forcing the eye toward the dancers and the story they tell through physical gestures and emotive expressions. The gist seemed to be the reward that comes from care for the earth and each other, and how resisting material temptations will pay off in the end — an apt lesson for us all.



Twyla Tharp Dance's 60th anniversary "Diamond Jubilee" performance at the Harris Theater in Chicago is accompanied by Chicago-based Third Coast Percussion and flutist Constance Volk. (Kyle Flubacker)

Twyla Tharp at the Harris Theater in April: The two works that made up her 60th anniversary ["Diamond Jubilee"](#) felt unexpectedly sentimental for Tharp, who revisited her 1999 tongue twister of a dance called "Diabelli" out of a desire to ensure it didn't get lost. Even her newest work, the stunner "Slacktide," was made in the shadow of her 1986 tour de force "In the Upper Room." Surprising, indeed. But if I know anything at all about Twyla Tharp, it's her ability to defy expectation again and again.

Trinity Irish Dance Company at the Museum of Contemporary Art in May: Trinity Irish Dance's first-ever self-produced concert was small by comparison to its usual digs at the Auditorium and other big houses around the world. But for its 35th season, they brought Irish dance to [spaces it's never been](#). That includes both the storied dance festival Jacob's Pillow and the MCA, where they premiered a landmark collaboration between artistic leads Mark Howard and Chelsea Hoy and contemporary dance choreographer Stephanie Martinez. Called "The Sash," the piece is a powerful message on peace through the lens of Northern Irish composer Kevin Sharkey's upbringing at the height of a bloody conflict between Catholics and Protestants.



Nate Kinsella and Robyn Mineko Williams in "To Leave You," which opened the Chicago Performs festival with performances at the MCA. (Chris Strong)

"To Leave You" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in September: Part multimedia curio cabinet, part karaoke party, Robyn Mineko Williams' [deeply personal sketch](#) was created and performed with fellow long-tenured Hubbard Street Dance Chicago alums Jessica Tong and Jason Hortic (plus inextricable contributions from composer Nate Kinsella and Manual Cinema's Julia Miller). The trio's post-Hubbard Street lives showed up in "To Leave You," a piece with movement vocabulary that is perhaps more cautious than what they might have performed a decade ago, but is unquestionably gratifying and imbued with a physical place and practice that still fit like a glove — with all the complexities, curiosities and hindsight of middle-agedness added.

"The Capulets" at the Ruth Page Center in November: One of the biggest swings of the year came from Chicago Repertory Ballet, whose original [full-length ballet](#) featuring lesser-known characters from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" was its most ambitious project to date. Ambition alone isn't a reason to celebrate. The entire team brought this company to the next level, with an immersive multimedia setting and capable ensemble rising to the occasion — that occasion being artistic director and choreographer Wade Schaaf's vivid imagination.



Wade Schaaf's world premiere of "The Capulets" by the Chicago Repertory Ballet at the Ruth Page Center for the Arts. (Jorge Sigler)

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago at Steppenwolf in November: Of the three programs on view this year, the [most recent](#) stands out as clear evidence of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago's excellence, and artistic director Linda-Denise Fisher-Harrell's curatorial vision for her company. It's deeper than "we do it all," which has been a perpetual theme of Fisher-Harrell's tenure thus far. Indeed, the presence of works by Bob Fosse, Ohad Naharin, Johan Inger and Aszure Barton on a single evening certainly seems to support that idea. But the nuance is an excavation of the company's history and extrapolation of its long-standing ability to present dance and dancers on the vanguard.

Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater at the Auditorium in November: After skipping its usual summer dance series in Skokie, the Ensemble Español dancers were clearly itching to perform, finding a new gear for the company's 50th spirited [anniversary kickoff](#) this fall. In addition to cyclical favorites by the company's founding and current artistic directors, audiences were treated to spectacular solos by longtime company members Jose Torres, who recently stepped into a leadership role, and Claudia Pizarro-Lara, whose riveting presence has not graced Ensemble Español for several years. Having now properly celebrated the past, this great Chicago cultural institution can now turn its eyes to the future.



Ensemble Español Spanish Dance Theater performs a 50th Anniversary Celebration at the Auditorium Theatre. (Jose Calvo)

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