

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

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Late Edition

New York: Today, plenty of clouds, a few showers, high 84. Tonight, mostly cloudy, low 73. Tomorrow, partly cloudy, high 85. Yesterday, high 86, low 74. Weather map is on Page B10.

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ONE DOLLAR

At an Annual Festival of Dance, Jazzy Is as Jazzy Does. And It Does and Does.

By ERIKA KINETZ

CHICAGO, Aug. 7 — People have asked for decades what jazz dance is, yet basic questions about it remain unresolved: Must it be performed to jazz music? Should it be art or entertainment? Historically, it has been a free (think Elvis), idiosyncratic (think Fosse) and urban (think Savoy Ballroom) form, based in rhythm and feeling. The pelvis has always been important.

The most recognizable piece of jazz dance on display this weekend at the 14th annual Jazz Dance World Congress here was "Giordano Moves," a tribute to Gus Giordano performed on Friday night by Giordano Jazz Dance Chicago, the company he founded in 1962 and that his daughter Nan now directs. The music was by George McRae. The dancers wore jazz shoes. Their sleek lines and high, silent jumps had the feel of a well-oiled 1958 Chevrolet Impala, a pure expression of another era and something we remember as historically sexy.

Mr. Giordano's company was perhaps the first to dedicate itself to the art of jazz dance and, in 1990, he founded the Jazz Dance World Congress to help elevate the form. This year, the congress was held from Wednesday through Sunday in Chicago. In addition to the festival performances, which neatly filled the Harris Theater, there was a barrage of dance classes that drew some 850 participants from more than 20 countries.

The congress took an inclusive view of what qualifies as jazz dance, offering straight African dance and tap pieces, as well as choreography by Jerome Robbins, Mia Michaels — who choreographed Celine Dion's show at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas and is now working on Fox's new "So You Think You Can Dance?" reality show — and work by companies like Philadanco and Battleworks Dance Company that identify themselves as "modern" or "contemporary." Even Jazzercise, the exercise program founded by a Giordano company alumna, showed up, and on Sunday offered a cardio/strength/stretch class on the great green lawn of Chicago's Millennium Park. There was precious little jazz music to be heard at any of the events.

Jazz dance itself has always been a hybrid. "That's the wonderful thing



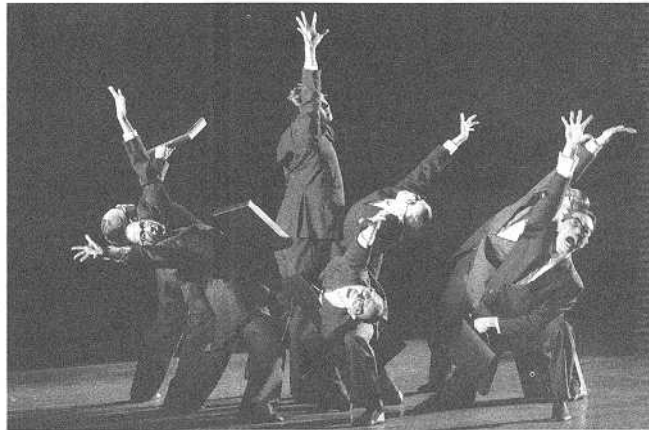
The Philadanco troupe of Philadelphia performing "Blue," by Christopher L. Huggins, at the annual jazz dance festival, this year in Chicago.

about jazz," Robert Battle, the artistic director of Battleworks, said in an interview. "Not to be patriotic, but it is what this country is supposed to be founded on." In 1945, The New York World-Telegram described Robbins' dances for "On the Town" as a "rich new blend of classic technique, jive, tap and what is unctuously called adagio." Cut the "new," change jive to hip-hop, and that's not such a bad description, even today.

If the festival is any indication, jazz, like America itself, remains adaptable. Kumiko Sakamoto, the artistic director of the Masashi Action Machine, based in Nagoya, Japan, studied traditional Japanese dance as a child and discovered jazz

in Sweden as teenager.

"That was the first time I learned to freely express myself instead of having strict rules," she said in an interview. In the early 1980's, she and Masashi Mishiro, the troupe's choreographer and star dancer, came to the United States in search of what Ms. Sakamoto calls "real jazz dance." They ended up studying with Frank Hatchett at Broadway Dance Center. The legacy of those years, as well as Mr. Mishiro's early training in gymnastics, judo and karate, are all evident in the choreography, which he likes to describe as having "Western style and Japanese soul." The group has performed at the festival every year since its inception,



Masashi Action Machine in "Japanese Businessman" by Kumiko Sakamoto and Masashi Mishiro.

though never in New York.

Vittorio Biagi, who danced for Maurice Béjart and directed the Lyon Opera Ballet, brought his Rome-based company, Danza Prospettiva Vittorio Biagi, to the festival for its third appearance in the United States. An otherwise vibrant man, he looked frankly exhausted when asked to categorize his work. "It is not classical," he said. "It is not jazz. It is me."

Perhaps the important question these days is not what jazz dance is, but what of its legacy should be retained. America's early jazz dancers sold ice in Harlem, boxed, fought in wars and with each other. When they danced, they did it for fun and for money, which meant that it had to be entertaining. Cynicism had not been educated into them, and the competitive, childlike thrill of figuring out how to spin one's chin had not been educated out. It was a deeply human endeavor.

That's not quite the case today; some choreographers seem overly dazzled by the impressive technical capabilities of their dancers' beautiful legs.

One can only hope they paid close attention to Robbins' "Passage for

Two" duet from "NY Export: Opus Jazz," which was danced Saturday night by Britta Lazenga and Samuel Pergande of the Jeffrey Ballet. Robbins possessed a serene, ennobling belief in the power of gesture, a confidence that some contemporary choreographers seem to lack.

We also have jazz to thank for unlocking certain blockages suffered

fall flat on their backs. They exhale, mouths agape, in sharp heaves. This kind of grief touches the deepest apparatus of life: the lungs and, maybe, the heart itself.

Meanwhile, the afternoons were filled with the muted thunder of several hundred pairs of feet hitting the carpeted floor of the Grand Ballroom of the Palmer House Hilton. The dancers were so young, most of them, and they had to move so fast, arms akimbo as they scrambled after the music, that there was no space for self-consciousness — or for musing questions of what jazz is or isn't.

Some of the movement felt bland and derivative: how on earth did the dark exultations of the old Savoy Ballroom end up diffused among small, expensively trained bodies beneath rococo arches with painted peacocks and noble stone horses? But there was much sweat and effort all around, and there is beauty in that. Moms with camcorders ringed the balcony above. If this is jazz dance as it is lived today, at the least it may serve as a reminder that there is absolutely nothing wrong with giving all you've got, whether to God, an audience or your mother.

With hundreds of feet a-stomping, who has time to define a style?

through much of modern history, namely the frozen pelvis of polite society. That has laid the ground for many other things, one of the good ones being Mr. Battle's "Strange Humors," a duet for two men set to music by John Mackey, which was performed Friday night. Mr. Battle, who is a Juilliard graduate and formerly with the Parsons Dance Company, said he devised the dance at 3 a.m., while on tour, and it does have a late-night rawness about it. His dancers