

DANCE CARD

Miami City Ballet comes to Chicago at last

By Sid Smith
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

After nearly a quarter-century, it's high time the Miami City Ballet made its Chicago debut.

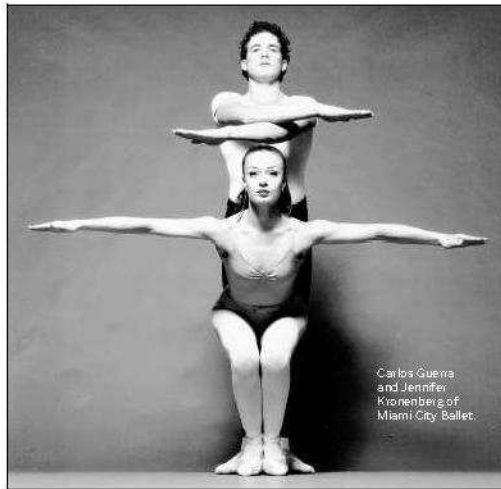
The "debut" is in fact a technical one; the troupe performed at the Ravinia Festival many seasons ago. But its gig this weekend at the Auditorium Theatre will be its official bow down town, showing off the company that legendary Edward Villella built. Works on tap include two by Villella's mentor, George Balanchine, as well as Twyla Tharp's majestic, postmodern masterpiece "In the Upper Room," reimagined by Elaine Kudo, one-time Mikhail Baryshnikov dancing partner.

"I feel the company is reaching a maturity right now and that our dancers have arrived," Villella says in assessing the company, which is down from its high point of 67 dancers to 43, a nod to the economy. "They're aware, bright and know who they are on stage."

Since he co-founded the troupe 24 years ago, there has been turnover. But many of the performers now with him have been in the company for some time, some for 10 years. Given his predilection for diverse repertoires, that seasoning is well appreciated.

"I can say guardedly we have a vast repertoire in terms of style," Villella says. "There's not just the 19th century base that influences so much ballet. There's the neoclassicism of Balanchine and the mix of modern, jazz, ballet and ethnic you find in Tharp. It takes time for people trained in 19th century technique to be able to jump from style to style."

The Auditorium visit will be a return for Villella — he danced there when the New York City Ballet reopened the theater decades ago. He chose the works on the program carefully: Balanchine's "Symphony in Three



Carlos Guerra and Jennifer Kronenberg of Miami City Ballet.

Movements" (set to Stravinsky) and his "Valse Fantaisie 1928" will join in the classical "Black Swan" pas de deux from "Swan Lake."

"Balanchine thought 'Symphony in Three Movements' a master work, and I agree," Villella says. "It's one of the more complicated ballets I've ever experienced."

In his dancing days, Villella was one of Balanchine's more electrifying male performers, and he danced the pas de deux in "Symphony" at its premiere. "I can bring to these works a knowledge of what's wrong and what's right," he says of his influence in rehearsal. "This is an anti-war ballet, Stravinsky's reaction to World War II, and I try to

Miami City Ballet

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway

Tickets: \$30-\$89; 800-982-2787 or ticketmaster.com

convey to the dancers the things Balanchine said to me in rehearsal. These are abstracted gestures, sure, but there's a substance behind them, they stem from a larger idea. The women thrust their arms up at one point, reminiscent of an explosion. He once told me to think of part of the pas de deux as the landing of a helicopter.

"I was there, and it's incumbent to pass it on," he says. "It's easy for ballets to get lost."

Villella takes a wry attitude toward the older classics, such as the "Black Swan" pas de deux. "Everybody has their own version of these classics, and who knows how much has been truthfully retained? Just work to keep it tasteful and not too much of a circus."

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