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Nederlands sets high-water mark

DANCE REVIEW | Awe-inspiring vision of choreographers provides edge

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It was worth the wait. And now that Chicago audiences have glimpsed the breathtaking genius of the Nederlands Dans Theater in two performances this week at the Auditorium Theatre, the clamor to lure the company back on a regular basis surely will be sounded.

But if you missed the altogether transfixing troupe this time around (its first appearance in this city in 35 years), you missed one of the most stunning dance events here in decades.

While “dance” is the given in this troupe’s name (NDT has set the standard for contemporary work in Europe and beyond since the 1970s), it is “theater” that gives the company its unique edge. Unquestionably, the 24 bravura dancers, with their precisionist technique and gestural brilliance, are beyond masterful. But it is the intensely audacious and imaginative vision of its choreographers — and their sublime synthesis of music, design, sound and unique



Nederlands Dans Theater dazzled at the Auditorium from the opener, “Shoot the Moon.”

nando Hernando Magadan.

“Wings of Wax,” by long-time resident choreographer Jiri Kylian, came next. Evoking the tension between life on Earth and the larger spin of the rest of the universe, its centerpiece is a large, up-ended tree continually orbited by a suspended spotlight. Four couples engage in complex, high-speed partnering and circular patterns, with mood-shifting music both baroque and modern.

movement vocabularies — that lifts this ensemble to a stratospheric level.

The astonishment began with the first piece, “Shoot the Moon,” a joint creation of Leon Lightfoot and Sol Leon. A sort of danced version of an Ingmar Bergman film, it is set on a turntable that rotates from scene to scene to reveal wallpaper-covered rooms in which two couples and a single man engage (in various permutations) in the turmoil of love, intimacy, betrayal, loneliness, rage, angst and despair.

The expressionistic movement, set to a most evocative Philip Glass piano concerto, is so original and so filled with jagged emotion that it seems as if these characters have devised a language all their own. At moments they are in such extremis that they almost literally climb the walls of their evocative rooms. Some action is performed just out of sight and projected via video. The dancers were a particularly brilliant Lesley Telford, Stefan Zeromski, Aurelie Cayla, Medhi Walerski and Fer-

Canadian choreographer-designer Crystal Pite’s “The Second Person” was the final powerhouse piece on the program, and why Pite is not world famous on the basis of this single 35-minute epic alone is difficult to understand. A profound meditation on how we move through life (both literally and figuratively), it is the dance equivalent of anything penned by the most vaunted French existentialists. Uncanny in its concept and execution, it makes philosophy flesh. And a magnificent original score by Owen Belton (along with spoken text) fits it like a second skin.

With a painted skyscape of heavy gray clouds, the work’s central image is a complexly jointed, deftly manipulated wooden puppet. This “jointedness” is echoed throughout the dance as the characters connect and disconnect from themselves and others. But it is the final sequence — an astonishing act of transformation in which a live dancer (Telford) becomes the human puppet — that inspires gasps of awe.