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Dallas Morning News Dance Festival - Artist Square, Dallas, Texas

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The nights were hot, the breezes paltry, and the ants out in force. But who cared? Not the crowds who showed up at the free outdoor Dallas Morning News Dance Festival.

For once the festival, which began in 1984 with two dance companies, lived up to its promise. From earnest and hohum, this festival suddenly hit upon the magic formula: intensity and contrast. Just about everyone looked good.

And some looked brilliant. The biggest hit was--surprise--a student group, in Bolero, no less. This Bolero, by Luis Montero, proved to be a supremely theatrical concoction of flamenco and ballet, where every tonal change galvanized the dancers into a new and arresting deployment of capes, poles, fans, and lightning footwork. Montero and guest artist Webster Dean led an ensemble of twenty-seven dancers from the Booker T. Washington High School for Performing Visual Arts. To call the work stunning would be an understatement.

For a different kind of adrenaline rush, Dallas Black Dance Theatre leapt, swaggered, and snarled through an excerpt from George Faison's Mad Pain. Commissioned for the company's appearance at the 1996 Olympics Arts Festival, the dance offers more swagger than substance. But no matter: the dancers were convincingly defiant, and the rap music--from the sound track of the Michelle Pfeiffer film Dangerous Minds---drew whoops of approval.

Ballet Dallas turned John Clifford's evocative Fantasies into a tone poem about unfulfilled yearnings. Only Michele Coker of the foursome captured the ballet's aching loveliness, but a stray breeze here and there lent atmosphere.

When they weren't hunkered down on the yellow couch that occupied centerstage, staring vacantly at an invisible TV, the rambunctious crew from Dancers Unlimited were attacking the couch with cartoonish glee. An original score by Frank Lacey (husband of choreographer Sherri Lacey) provided just the right antic note to the work, called New Potatoes. On the more serious side, the company oozed and glided through Lori Darley's suave Tissage ("Weaving"), a dance vaguely African in decor and Celtic in mood.

The sure sign of ballet lite: ankle socks with toe shoes. These appeared on two of the three non-professional ballet companies (the third stuck to simple tutus). Dallas Metropolitan Ballet bounced and caromed through Serenade for Swing, unleashing enough daredevil lifts to fill a dozen ballets. Ballet Concerto sashayed through Michael Vernon's cowboy-and-cowgirl ballet, Western Sweet, with admirable aplomb and rather more finesse than any dance to a song named "Cattle Call" would lead you to expect. Chamberlain Ballet looked light, fleet, and airy in Robert Scevers's Waltz Fantasy, like a junior Fort Worth Dallas Ballet.

As for the real Fort Worth Dallas Ballet, it looked dependably sleek and elegant in Paul Mejia's Brandenburg II, aided by the cool authority of Maria Terezia Balogh in the central adagio.

The chief disappointment was Anita N. Martinez Ballet Folklorico, which ran way over its allotted twenty minutes in the Aztec-inspired Adoration of the Gods. As spectacle, it was eye-popping--towering headdresses, wispy costumes. But as dance? Interminable.

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