

STAGE REVIEWS

Review: Arpino Centennial is a glimmering reminder of the Joffrey Ballet's huge legacy

By Lauren Warnecke

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Hyuma Kiyosawa (center) and Joffrey Ballet dancers in the Arpino Chicago Centennial Celebration at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago Sept. 23, 2023.

Countless Joffrey Ballet alumni descended on Chicago this week to celebrate the company's co-founder, Gerald Arpino, so the Auditorium Theatre's lobby was as star-studded and joy-filled as the stage on Saturday for the Gerald Arpino Foundation's Centennial Celebration.

Arpino would have turned 100 this year (he died in 2008). He led the Joffrey for two decades after co-founder Robert Joffrey died in 1988. Arpino moved the ballet company from New York to Chicago in 1995 as it was on the brink of closure.

It was risky. Chicago loved the Joffrey when it toured here, but there was no evidence Chicagoans would embrace a full-time ballet company of their own. Even the dancers weren't totally convinced; many kept their New York addresses for a few seasons until they knew the move was going to stick.

Spoiler: It worked. Arpino and the Joffrey captured Chicago's heart and the company is now inseparable from the city's arts landscape. Celebrating his centennial could not have happened any other place. The Joffrey's longtime former home at the Auditorium Theatre provided a perfect frame for a two-part retrospective of his best ballets this weekend — Arpino's favorite box empty and illuminated as Joffrey prima ballerina Victoria Jaiani stood alone onstage after Saturday's curtain call.

Jaiani begins her 20th season with the Joffrey this fall, one of only two dancers Arpino hired still active in the company. But this weekend serves as a reminder that Arpino's legacy is still felt here, and in fact, all over the country. Former Joffrey dancers are now rehearsal directors, artistic directors, college professors and academy directors, each passing on the work ethic, aesthetic and tenacity Arpino required — in their own way. Dancers from seven companies staged nine Arpino works for the centennial, a fitting tribute that captures not only the depth and breadth of his catalog, but the broad impact Joffrey alumni have had on 21st century American ballet.



Joffrey Ballet dancer Victoria Jaiani alone on stage in the Arpino Chicago Centennial Celebration at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago Sept. 23, 2023. (Cheryl Mann/HANDOUT)

Two duets performed Saturday gave a sense of Arpino's choreographic lifespan with "Sea Shadow" (1962) and "RUTH, Ricordi per Due," from 2004. The former is an example of how modern dance influenced him, with moody, enigmatic floorwork; a Maurice Ravel score and minimalist set (by Ming

Cho Lee) evoking an underwater world. Blink and you might guess it was a Martha Graham dance. Dancers Hee Seo and Cory Stearns, from American Ballet Theatre, seemed the least comfortable with their assignment. Coincidentally, “Sea Shadow” is an introspective (if not altogether enthralling) example of how Arpino and the Joffrey moved American ballet in a distinctly different direction from their New York competitors: ABT and New York City Ballet.

“RUTH,” on the other hand, fits Ballet West dancers Katlyn Addison and Hadriel Diniz like a glove. I don’t know if Arpino knew it would be his last ballet, but it comes across as a requiem, in hindsight, endeavoring toward a longer view than something like “Sea Shadow.” The latter was created at a time when Arpino was charged with filling out the Joffrey’s rep to make sure they had something to go on stage; the former, near the end of his life, when commissions were few and far between.

Diniz opens the pas de deux alone, with longing gazes toward the downstage right wing as Albinoni’s Adagio in G minor hums over top. He crouches, like Rodin’s “The Thinker,” fist to forehead; the piece ends this way, too. Where most pas de deux are intended to highlight the woman, Addison, a ghostly figure in Maria Pinto’s long, white gown and pointe shoes, only momentarily tugs Diniz out of (or perhaps within) his contemplation, despite several sumptuous attempts to the contrary.



Katlyn Addison and Hadriel Diniz of Ballet West in "RUTH" as part of the Arpino Chicago Centennial Celebration at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago Sept. 23,

2023. (Cheryl Mann/HANDOUT)

Oklahoma City Ballet kicked off Saturday's program with an inspired rendition of "Birthday Variations." The 1986 romp was commissioned by Becky D'Angelo as a birthday present for her husband, Dino — a Verdi lover and then-owner of the Civic Opera House (bought and renamed by the Lyric Opera in 1993).

With its Verdi score and plotless panache, "Birthday" bears a striking resemblance to Michel Fokine's "Chopiniana," its five ballerinas in pastel, romantic tutus swirling about a sole man donning tights and waistcoat (Alejandro Gonzalez, in this case). Chicagoans got a taste of "Birthday Variations" two years ago, resurrected by the Joffrey as an aperitif to the coming centennial celebration.

Then, as now, it is a feat of strength for any dancer endeavoring to do it, requiring simultaneous pinpoint precision and reckless abandon. That is a hallmark of Arpino's style, even more present in his 1978 "Suite Saint-Saens," which closed Saturday's performance with the Joffrey Ballet.

Joffrey pulled "Suite Saint-Saens" back into rotation last season after a long and intentional break from Arpino's catalog, imposed by current artistic director Ashley Wheater. Having performed "Suite Saint-Saens" ad nauseam himself as a Joffrey dancer in the '80s, Wheater smartly shelved works that had become overplayed out of financial necessity even after the Joffrey arrived in Chicago.

The break affords us an opportunity to once again relish in Arpino's style, with "Suite Saint-Saens" a shining example of his particular brand of neoclassicism.

For any dancer, Arpino's works are a litmus test — not of technique, exactly, though they require incredible skill. Rather, what makes someone an "Arpino dancer" is the ability to push to the edge. It's risky. A near slip or a bobble means you're probably doing it right. With "Birthday" and "Suite" as the evening's two ensemble works, made 10 years apart, one gets the sense of Arpino's uncanny ability to paint the stage — each dancer managing sweeping brush strokes filling every corner of their canvas. Add to this Arpino's magic at extracting the best from each dancer, an ensemble of soloists, if you will.

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The year 1978 turned out to be a good year for Gerald Arpino. His grand pas de deux "L'Air d'Esprit," created the same year as "Suite Saint-Saens," is one of his best, flawlessly danced by San

Francisco Ballet's Misa Kuranaga and Wei Wang and staged by former Joffrey dancer Tina LeBlanc. Modeled after the classical style as a tribute to early 20th century superstar Olga Spessivtzeva, Kuranaga and Wang perfectly captured Arpino's idiosyncratic interplay between legato and staccato and his unapologetic desire to make audiences feel good, above all else.

Time hasn't quite figured out where Gerald Arpino's legacy sits. His works can look dated. He does not often appear in history books as anything other than a footnote — the other guy who started the Joffrey Ballet. Having a dedication like this is meaningful and validating. But, though I never had the pleasure of meeting him, I suspect Arpino didn't think all that much about legacy. Every day of his life was about getting the best from a dancer and making sure the Joffrey Ballet survived.

The Arpino Chicago Centennial Celebration concludes Sept. 24 in a separate program featuring the Joffrey, Eugene Ballet, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, San Francisco Ballet and Ballet West; 1 p.m. at the Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Ida B Wells Drive; tickets \$53-\$146 at 312-341-2300 and auditoriumtheatre.org

Lauren Warnecke is a freelance critic.