

Weekend Chicago

Joffrey struts out new stuff

By Richard Christiansen
Entertainment editor

For 31 years, the Joffrey Ballet has served as an arena of discovery for young choreographers, first with Gerald Arpino and Robert Joffrey himself, and later with artists of succeeding generations, such as Twyla Tharp and William Forsythe.

On Thursday night, works by two of the latest choreographers to be showcased by the Joffrey were given their Chicago premieres in the company's program in the Civic Opera House; and once again, the excitement and joy of up-and-coming talent was on stage.

Mark Haim's "The Gardens of Boboli," first performed by the Joffrey less than a year ago, is the work of a very young choreographer, still in his 20s. It's Haim's first piece to be performed by dancers on point, and it's easy to see that he owes much to Paul Taylor in some of his choreographic ideas. But it's a lovely, lively dance by itself, teeming with invention and graced with a strong musicality that great choreographers always have.

It's danced to selections from the music of the 18th Century composer Tomasso Albinoni [played well by the pit orchestra under Chris Christensen's direction], so there's a trace of courtly elegance in its interplay between the five women and four men on stage. At the same time, there's a contemporary playfulness throughout, so that hints of aerobics and gymnastics, and maybe even a touch of disco, mingle with the classic vocabulary. But though "Gardens" is fun to watch, it's not a frivolous piece. It respects the music, while providing the dancers with a joyous workout; and it is full of star turns for every one on stage. And the Joffrey dancers are so good



Leslie Carothers and Tyler Walters in the Joffrey Ballet's "The Gardens of Boboli."

that even when they don't quite pull off the trick, as happened Thursday evening at the end of the ingenious male trio for Parrish Maynard, Peter Narbutas and Roger Plaut, they make the momentary wobble look like pre-ordained theatricality.

James Kudelka's "The Heart of the Matter," set to Sergei Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No. 2 [with the redoubtable Stanley Babin as soloist], also uses that Joffrey virtuosity, but in a more intense and obviously dramatic manner.

There are 20 dancers here, 10 men and 10 women, all dressed in designer Santo Loquasto's pale colors. The women parade about as

if they're handmaidens to the Greek gods, while the men sway about in a kind of zoot-suit slouch.

Two of the dancers, Glenn Edgerton and Dawn Caccamo, break off from the regimentation of their groups to engage in a long, bravura pas de deux, ending with a long and sizzling kiss; but that union is swiftly interrupted by the surge of dancers surrounding them.

It was an exhilarating evening of new work; but, as if to remind us that the old maestro still can't be beat, the program ended with Gerald Arpino's glorious "Light Rain," which once more set the audience cheering.