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Artemis Danza debuts 'Traviata' at Logan Center for the Arts

By ANDREW PATNER For Sun-Times Media November 11, 2013 4:59PM

Contemporary dance troupe Artemis Danza is making its American debut Thursday night in Chicago, coming from Parma, Italy to both commemorate the Giuseppe Verdi bicentennial and hoping to shake up your ideas about what a dance company does.

Much modern dance developed out of rebellion against the — literally — strait-laced nature of classical ballet. From Nijinsky to Martha Graham to Paul Taylor and beyond, new generations of choreographers and dancers created different visual and physical languages to express ideas more personally.

In large part, though, discipline and training was carried over into the new forms much more than many founders might have admitted. And this blending of strict preparation, control and tight structure in new works has continued, especially in the United States, including Hubbard Street.

But back in Europe, another dance revolution was emerging. Such choreographers and company founders as Frenchman Maurice Bejart in Switzerland and Russian Boris Eifman in St. Petersburg looked to cinema, spectacle and showmanship not for subject matter to respond to but as inspiration for creation. As these forms of entertainment reached people and their emotions, desires and fears so directly, why not use the human body — or as many human bodies as possible — to do the same in dance?

Artemis Danza tries to take from this in-your-face, more-is-more school and, by drawing on the rhythmic gymnastic and martial arts training of its founder and choreographer Monica Casadei, tighten it up and concentrate it. Unsurprisingly, in recent years Casadei has used opera as her launching point, the art form that had always tried to wed discipline with extremes, emotions with high art, spectacle with drama.

"Traviata," the piece Artemis Danza brings this week to Chicago and then Los Angeles, the only other stop on the company's tour, was the first in a trilogy that includes "Rigoletto," which premiered last year, and this season's mash-up of, of all things, Verdi's "Aida" with the work of the other operatic bicentenarian, Richard Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde." A co-ed troupe of highly athletic dancers in various states of formally costumed and informal dress — and undress — enact the emotions, tensions and distress of the the story of the courtesan Violetta Valery rather than offering a straight narrative, storybook ballet.

The Italian Cultural Institute, sponsors of the event, chose the new Logan Center for the Arts at The University of Chicago and its visually and acoustically attractive performance hall for this debut to offer a different showcase from traditional venues. The university also has long been associated with both Italian cultural and academic exchange and research on Verdi's complete works.

What would Verdi or Petipa think? Who knows. But when they put elephants or dancing sugar plum fairies on stage, they, too, were looking for new ways to connect with audiences.