Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel joined an enthusiastic audience of dance fans at the Chicago Dancing Festival's Masters Program at the Auditorium Theatre Thursday night. The mayor, a former dance student himself, is supporting Chicago dance not only by talking about it, but also by going to see it himself. And what a lively and satisfying evening of dance to see: five pieces sampling dance history from 1841 to 2010. The older pieces are by master choreographers who have stood the test of time from 50 to 170 years; for the others, those who live will see, as the French say. What we can say immediately is that the level of dancing is high and the choreography is varied, inventive, and fascinating.

Petite Mort (literally “small death,” figuratively “orgasm” in French) (1991) by Jiri Kylian is set to Mozart, but starts with rumbling thunder. Six men slash the air with their thin-bladed swords and find lots of things to do with the blades besides fighting, while six women watch in the gloom upstage. There’s more rumbling, a striking lighting change, and a large billowing cloth that’s rushed forward to cover the stage and then is whisked away to reveal the six women. Mozart accompanies a series of beautifully fleet duets between men and women before the billowing cloth sweeps everyone off the stage. The women return in 18th century floor-length black dresses and whiz across the stage so quickly you can’t believe it, until the dancers step out from behind their gowns, which are self-supporting facades on wheels. The women dance with their dresses, as the men had danced with their swords. The longer duets that follow are more sensual and show the sexes as evenly matched, without period role-playing. The gowns make a sudden appearance on their own, just as the dance ends.

Hubbard Street Dance Chicago’s Petite Mort (literally “small death,” figuratively “orgasm” in French) (1991) by Jiri Kylian is set to Mozart, but starts with rumbling thunder. Six men slash the air with their thin-bladed swords and find lots of things to do with the blades besides fighting, while six women watch in the gloom upstage. There’s more rumbling, a striking lighting change, and a large billowing cloth that’s rushed forward to cover the stage and then is whisked away to reveal the six women. Mozart accompanies a series of beautifully fleet duets between men and women before the billowing cloth sweeps everyone off the stage. The women return in 18th century floor-length black dresses and whiz across the stage so quickly you can’t believe it, until the dancers step out from behind their gowns, which are self-supporting facades on wheels. The women dance with their dresses, as the men had danced with their swords. The longer duets that follow are more sensual and show the sexes as evenly matched, without period role-playing. The gowns make a sudden appearance on their own, just as the dance ends.
Nine Person Precision Ball Passing (1980) was playfully performed by River North Dance Chicago. Choreographed by Charles Moulton after he had done research on games, the piece places nine dancers in three tiered rows of three. Brightly colored balls are first passed in a set pattern from hand to hand by the middle dancers. Eventually everyone is passing the balls in changing patterns, first in their own rows and then fraternizing with other rows. A. Leroy’s bright music keeps the balls moving at a brisk clip through the complicated and ingenious patterns and although the dancers were clearly concentrating and some seemed to be talking or counting—and although the piece had been performed flawlessly earlier in the week—two balls were dropped. The performers kept smiling and moving (see the photo to see how they replaced the dropped balls), the audience enjoyed it all and, as the program says, “‘mistakes’ are inevitable.” In a final bit of serendipity, a yellow ball dribbled out from someplace and sat like a perky period to the end of the piece.

A change in the program next brought an excerpt from the one piece of classical ballet, The Joffrey Ballet’s Giselle. While it was a good idea to have a masterwork from such an early period, the performances by Victoria Jaiani and Temur Sulashvili in the Adagio from Act II lacked the emotional involvement that would have given the piece some context. Even so, the dancing demonstrated the steely strength supporting the lyrical loveliness of classical ballet.
Martha Graham Dance Company Artistic Director Janet Eilber introduced Graham’s *Embattled Garden* (1958), calling it not the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, but a contemporary look at temptation and an “erotic-melodramatic tragicomedy.” The dance offers Graham’s signature movements (cupped hands, stag leaps, leaps in second position), sets by her longtime collaborator, Isamu Noguchi, and convincing performances by the quartet of dancers. Mariya Dashkina Maddux as Eve and especially Tadej Brdnik as Adam are good examples of “born yesterday” innocence. They don’t stand a chance when Carrie Ellmore-Tallitsch (Lilith) and Maurizio Nard (called The Stranger, but the dance opens with his hanging upside-down in a very snaky way in Noguchi’s stylishly bare-limbed tree) come calling. Eve combs her hair, Lilith stalks across the stage with her apple-red mirror and juts out a hip…trouble!

The program finale was *Legend of Ten*, by Lar Lubovitch, one of the Chicago Dancing Company founders and artistic directors. Nine dancers, men and women identically dressed all in black, surge across the stage, often walking and running with flowing arm movements. The tenth dancer enters and is greeted with suspicion before being integrated into the constantly changing patterns, with the group sometimes swarming and sometimes breaking into waves of three. There was enough content for the audience to believe, when the dancers dropped to the floor and the lights went out, that the dance was over. But the lights came up again on two dancers lying in a heap on the floor, looking as though they might be survivors of some battle. The group enters from a corner upstage, with movements like those of the sowers of ancient times, spreading seed. Life seems to go on, and there is an energetic circle with movements of celebration, perhaps triumph, and clapping hands. The program is one of eight free events in the fifth annual Chicago Dancing Festival. Companies from Chicago and around the country are participating, offering dance fans and the dance-curious an opportunity to see work in varied styles in a single program. The Festival concludes with the final free performance at 7:30 p.m. on Saturday, August 27, 2011 at the Pritzker Pavilion in Millennium Park.

For more information, see chicagodancingfestival.com