

## Dance Top 10 for 2015: Women had an outsized role on this year's list



Aparna Ramaswamy, co-artistic director of Ragamala Dance, in "Song of the Jasmine." (Alice Gebura)

### **Laura Molzahn**

With shows by Wendy Whelan in January, Carrie Hanson in March, Onye Ozuzu in August, Twyla Tharp in November, and the female choreographers of Hubbard Street's winter program this weekend — well, 2015 has proved the year of the woman. That shouldn't be remarkable, because women predominate in dance, but it is. You'll find an unusually high number of additional picks by women in my chronological list below of the top 10 dance works of the last year — along with some fine representatives of the other sex.

**"Song of the Jasmine,"** Ragamala Dance, April at the Museum of Contemporary Art: Minneapolis-based mother-daughter team Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy, collaborating with innovative composer-saxophonist Rudresh Mahanthappa, commingled jazz, carnatic music and bharata natyam dance in this synergistic, utterly contemporary evening-length piece. As a performer, Ramaswamy elicited the essence of the feminine; moving precisely, delicately, she used her hands and face so wholeheartedly you could smell heavenly jasmine yourself.

**"A Streetcar Named Desire,"** Scottish Ballet, May at the Harris Theater: In a brilliantly structured reimagining of the Tennessee Williams classic, choreographer Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, aided by theater and film director Nancy Meckler, wasted not a moment or a step as she created empathy with Blanche (no easy task) and with the story's gay lovers (unseen in the play). In this lush, emotional work — Lopez Ochoa's first full-length narrative ballet — the sparing use of point work gave it all the more impact. The Scottish Ballet dancers, making their Chicago debut, were wonderful.

**"Clover,"** The Cambrians, June at the Preston Bradley Center: In the decayed grandeur of a 1926 Masonic hall, Chicago artists Benjamin Holliday Wardell, Michel Rodriguez Cintra and Melinda Jean Myers presented the charismatic final version of their jointly created and performed "Clover." In a departure from earlier "Nexus Project" works, this piece had more structure, more dancing, and fewer spoken texts and jokes. The result was a stronger connection between the dancers and with the audience — and a real emotional wallop.

**"Don Quixote,"** Royal Ballet, June at the Auditorium Theatre: Carlos Acosta's boisterous 2013 staging proved marvelously comic, carrying its three hours with ease and concluding with a sunny, beneficent vision of the good and beautiful. The Royal Ballet, which hadn't performed here in 37 years, met all expectations, and on opening night Acosta as goodhearted, rowdy Basilio and Marianela Nunez as his eager lover were at once convincing flesh-and-blood people and superhuman dancers. Thankfully, this 19th-century ballet lived and breathed.

**"Supreme Love,"** Tapman Productions and M.A.D.D. Rhythms, September at the Athenaeum Theatre: This 50th-anniversary tribute to John Coltrane's album "A Love Supreme" featured live music by the Rajiv Halim Quartet and some stirring, nuanced tap dancing. One of the great joys of the true-blue American forms of jazz and tap is what they reveal of the individual artist, revelations fostered here by the intimate space and well-balanced sound. Though the slim narrative was a bit clumsy, its heart was in the right place.

**"Bloodlines,"** Stephen Petronio Company, October at the Dance Center of [Columbia College](#): A program of three works, including Merce Cunningham's "RainForest" and Trisha Brown's "Glacial Decoy," provided the absolute best kind of education — that is, the fun kind. Though Petronio's troupe struggled a bit with the Cunningham dance, it was good to see the leap from this pathfinder's work to that of Brown and her successor, Petronio. His "Non Locomotor," however, proved the most delicious of the bunch. Generous use of the spine and an experimental hip-hop score by Clams Casino suggested an intelligent night at the club.

**Hubbard Street Dance Chicago,** October at the Harris Theater: It was a feat (and a treat) to present three William Forsythe works on one bill, only one of which, "Quintett," was already under the company's belt. The other two required vastly different skill sets: While the 14 dancers of "One Flat Thing, reproduced" had to be acrobats, basically, to negotiate a grid of 20 large steel tables, the four dancers of "N.N.N.N." needed to be quiet, to listen, to respond sensitively, all while maintaining a sense of humor. As wonderful as Gustavo Ramirez Sansano's new "I am Mister B" was in March, the Forsythe program was the year's most astonishing feat.

**"Jewel Tones: Spectrum,"** October at Links Hall: You didn't have to be a Buddhist to love the concluding performance of Jessica Marasa's improvised "Jewel Tones" series, mining the Buddha's teachings on light. The eighth and final show, "Spectrum," brought together three of Chicago's top experimental jazz musicians — Mike Reed, Jason Roebke and James Falzone — with four marvelous dancers: elegant mischief-maker Ayako Kato, sly Adriana Durant, powerful Onye Ozuzu and joyous Marasa. Getting seven distinctive

improvisers to come to a conclusion was like herding cats, with no one to do the herding, but the end proved thrilling, satisfying.

**Jessica Lang Dance**, November at the Harris Theater: This exquisite company made its Chicago debut with a program distinguished by Lang's strong sense of design, extending to both the look of the stage and the crisp lines of her choreography. Her intellectual curiosity — evident in "Tesseract of Time," a collaboration with architect Steven Holl, and in the moving "Thousand Yard Stare," for which she did extensive research on veterans — added depth and interest to a smart, unique evening.

**"The Nutcracker,"** Joffrey Ballet, December at the Auditorium Theatre: Earlier in the year the Joffrey gained some terrific new repertoire with the company premieres of Stanton Welch's "Maninyas" and Justin Peck's "In Creases" as well as a world premiere by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, "Mammatus." But the final run of Robert Joffrey's "Nutcracker," concluding Dec. 27, made me fall in love, finally, with what has become, over 20 years, Chicago's sweetheart. Maybe the set and costumes are disintegrating, but we can't tell. And maybe its air of self-indulgence is a little cloying. It's also sweet. And year after year, no matter the cast, the dancing is top-notch.