**An Eccentric Sendoff**

*For a Festival’s Leader*

DURHAM, N.C. — “Modern dance is an ongoing revolution,” Charles L. Reinhart said in 1987. At that point Mr. Reinhart had run the American Dance Festival for almost 20 years; on Thursday night the festival celebrated his 43-year reign and final season as director with an opening-night gala at the Durham Performing Arts Center here. Mr. Reinhart was honored with an appropriately eccentric lineup of pieces, punctuated by brief tributes to his influence on the dance world.

There’s no questioning that influence: Mr. Reinhart (whose wife Stephanie, was co-director from 1993 until her death in 2002) transformed the small, home-spun festival, begun in 1934 by modern-dance pioneers at Bennington College in Vermont, into an international destination for modern dance. Under his direction major choreographers have been given first chances; classics of American dance have been revived; an international choreographer’s residency established, bringing in work from all over the world; and contemporary dance programs developed in places like China and Russia.

Durham has become a major summer dance destination, with hundreds of students from the United States and elsewhere descending on the Duke University campus each year to take a wide range of classes and workshops and to watch the dozens of performances that the festival crams into its six-week run.

On Thursday Mark Dendy paid tribute to the influence that the festival has had on young artists in a funny, wistful solo, “I Am a Dancer,” in which he offered the Martha Graham impersonator Richard Move a run for his money. Graham, as both dancer and choreographer, was a founder of the original Bennington festival, and Mr. Dendy, dressed in a bronze lamé gown and coiffed in a signature high bun, deftly wove that history with Graham-esque pronouncements (“Center stage is where I am”) and autobiographical reminiscences of his first encounters with teachers at the festival.

Tallman Trask III, the executive vice president of Duke University, offered a dryly succinct but heartfelt tribute to Mr. Reinhart, as did Chuck Davis (the ebullient director of the African American Dance Ensemble); William V. Bell, the mayor of Durham; and Jodee Nimerichter, Mr. Reinhart’s co-director and successor.

There was also a short, well-made biographical film about Mr. Reinhart, narrated by his daughter, Ariane, that began the evening. But mostly and rightly, dance prevailed. Mr. Reinhart and Ms. Nimerichter have been criticized in recent years for conservative programming, but the gala didn’t shy away from difficult work, although the first group onstage was Dr. Davis’s crowd-pleasing ensemble.

But there was also John Kelly in “Pagliaccio,” a strange, haunting solo by Martha Clarke, long associated with the festival, and Hubbard Street Dance Chicago in an excerpt from Ohad Naharin’s brilliant, tough “Three to Max.” Both were exceptional performances, with “Three” showing Mr. Naharin’s compositional genius and the dancers’ mastery of his particular movement style and its display of extreme displacements, naturalistic gesture and improbable juxtapositions.

And in the festival’s tradition of introducing work that hasn’t been seen in the United States before, there was the premiere of the Scottish Dance Theater, which presented a hard-driving duet, “Drift,” by James Wilton. Set to a mix of electronic and rock music, it was a little relentless in its endless rise-and-fall, crash-and-support partnering, but superbly danced by James MacGillivray and Natalie Trewhinard.

In his speech at the end Mr. Reinhart offered a self-deprecating thanks to everyone. “If you believe what they all said, I have a bridge to sell you,” he said. It was a nice end to an evening during which, rightly, the dance spoke loudest of all.