Exhilarating start for dance festival

With a resounding reminder of the power of modern dance, the American Dance Festival welcomes the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company this weekend to the Durham Performing Arts Center.

Thursday’s opening night performance started with a season dedication by outgoing ADF festival director Charles Reinhart to visual art collaborator Alex Katz, who designed several ADF posters over the years.

The evening’s performance began with “Spent Days Out Yonder,” Jones’ piece exploring the influence of Latin culture in America. On the bare stage, three dancers moved with spareness and precision as players from the Durham Symphony began the second movement of Mozart’s String Quartet No. 23 in F major.

Together with the softly lit back screen and unobtrusive side lighting, focus was kept squarely on the movement of the figures. Additional dancers appeared, and compositions folded and unfolded. The effect was both calming and oddly invigorating, and introduced the spare aesthetic that would be repeated through the evening.

The evening’s second piece, “Continuous Replay,” startled several audience members as dancer Erick Montes took the stage naked, executing a series of precise movements, standing sideways, stage right.

The electronic score by John Oswald built slowly with ambient nature sounds – distant bird calls, bullfrogs, primitive chanting – as more nude dancers appeared, one by one. A remarkable narrative developed as the dancers cycled through the set of specific gestures — exactly 45 of them, according to program materials.

Gradually, the dancers darted off stage to accumulate clothing, and the score shifted to more contemporary sounds. An auctioneer. Vintage soul on a fuzzy radio traffic.

As the music became discordant, the dancer’s movements became more abrupt and violent. In the end, only Montes was still naked, glistening with perspiration, dancing in defiant repetition amongst all the modern anxiety.

After intermission, the company launched into the evening’s marquee performance, Jones’ celebrated “D-Man in the Waters,” accompanied by eight musicians from the Durham Symphony Orchestra.

IF YOU GO
What: Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company
Where: American Dance Festival
Durham Performing Arts Center
When: 8 p.m. tonight and Saturday
Cost: $23-$48
Contact: 680-2787; www.americandancefestival.org

SEE MORE
Dancers: More photos of the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company are at newsobserver.com/entertainmentpics.

Originally inspired by the death of a company member from AIDS in 1989, “D-Man” vibrated with affirmation and joy. The dancers initial movements suggested the ordered chaos of flocks of birds wheeling in the sky.

As the piece developed, a terrific exuberance built and the dancers pushed through to their limits – vaults and slides, gymnastic sequences, a rather impossible kind of backward sprinting. In a recurring motif, the dancers assisted and supported one another through specific movement – catching, holding, sometimes cradling.

“D-Man” provoked cheers and shouts from the audience, and finally the standing ovation that had been percolating after the evening’s first two pieces.

With the audience still buzzing in the DPAC lobby after the show, the consensus was clear — ADF and the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company have brought an exhilarating night of modern dance to Durham.