ADFs ‘Past/Forward’ exceptional
The themed event could be the biggest hit of the season

DURHAM
Regulars at the American Dance Festival know its annual “Past/Forward” presentation is often one of the festival’s most rewarding. This year’s edition is no exception – in fact, it may end up as the hit of the season.

The theme for each “Past/Forward” is “something old, something new.” The “old” offers revivals of classic works; the “new” allows established and emerging choreographers to experiment. That these works are built on the talents of the young dancers in the festival’s training program only adds to the freshness.

This year’s revival is Twyla Tharp’s 1996 “Sweet Fields,” an uplifting tribute to her Quaker background. Danced to the powerful urgency of un-accompanied Shaker hymns, the piece radiates the joy of living in its simple, clean movements and ecstatic aura.

Alexander Brady and Rika Okamoto’s re-staging is beautifully executed, the dancers’ beatific smiles and youthful exuberance pulling the audience into their elevated world.

Martha Clarke’s “Etudes For Italy” is a first look at a piece she’ll premiere next summer.

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spring in Milan. This dance-theater work puts a dozen dancers into intriguing, constantly evolving interaction. Clarke sets up mysterious dramas, from lovers' spats to bold seductions, unfolding in a shadowy dream world. A singular feature is the use of masks on the backs of dancers' heads. The astonishing precision with which the dancers contort their heads and limbs creates the illusion that their backs are their fronts. For now, the piece seems to be only a collection of ideas, but the dancers' fervent commitment keeps the viewer engaged.

If the evening had nothing but its 50-minute final work, however, it would still be a hit.

Taiwanese choreographer Bulareyaung Pagarlava's "Landscapes 2011 ADF" is inspired by the cultural and geographic diversity of its 18 performers. They first introduce themselves individually, establishing identities that follow them throughout the piece. Wildly inventive humor is the main element, from an all-male precision team working out to the "William Tell Overture" to oddly skittering robotic units that suddenly dart across the stage. There are riveting solos and duets, especially from guest artists Tao Ye and Duan Ni, whose amazing off-balance looseness makes them seem like broken marionettes. There's full nudity in several segments, but it's in such good fun few should be offended.

This program supplies all the thrill and wonder that make modern dance so addictive.

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