

Louis would have loved it

By LAURA A. BUCH

Louis Armstrong should have been in Rochester last weekend. He would have enjoyed himself. The reason? "Suite for Pops," a tribute to Armstrong, offered by the Oakland University Dance Theatre and the Afram Jazz Ensemble.

The music, composed by Thad Jones with Gary McFarlan, pays homage to Armstrong's inimitable style and his monumental contribution to jazz.

Choreography was the work of Mari Winsor, Carol Halsted and Jill Johnson, and combined jazz dance with elements of ballet, tap and modern style.

THE TITLE of the final piece could well have been the catchphrase of the evening: "A Good Time Was Had by All." Dancers and musicians performed with a vibrance that bespoke enjoyment, sustaining a high level of energy as mood changed from street scene to 30s dance hall to Mardi Gras. While actual Armstrong pieces were not used, the suite reflects his style, his sensuality, his gentleness and his humor.

That some of the dancers have strong theatrical backgrounds was evident in the performance. Elements of theater and mime were often successfully incorporated into the choreography.

There were some ragged edges—some unsynchronized movements, some discrepancies between music and dance. But what was occasionally lost in precision was more than regained in exuberance and expressiveness.

THE AFRAM JAZZ BAND, directed by "Doc" Holladay, played powerfully and with a professionalism achieved by few student ensembles. Progressions were tight and solos impressive. Fittingly for an Armstrong tribute, the band boasted several exceptional trumpeters, and a generally solid brass sound. Especially notable was the trombone solo by Jeff Whitbey in "Only for Now."

Balances did suffer at times. An otherwise fine flute solo did battle with more powerful backup instruments and lost. It was nearly inaudible. The unfortunate element of the concert was its location. The university's Studio Theatre is wonderfully intimate for plays, but a poor choice for this performance. The stage was unlevel, and the audience too close to the dancers. Action that occurred near the audience or close to the floor was lost beyond the first rows.

Cohesive and rather short, the suite built in intensity to its impressive conclusion, a return to New Orleans. Mardi Gras exploded on the stage and into the audience, with balloons, streamers and hand-clapping—a whirl of jazz and vigor, and an appropriate finale for a highly-entertaining performance.

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