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Inspiring 'GIMP' pushes boundaries of dance

BY SID SMITH, Special to the Tribune

Heidi Latsky's "GIMP," which includes dancers who are disabled, is one of those ideas that arrive as visionary, only to soon inspire the question: "Why not?" Sure, dance is about the perfection of the body and superhuman skill. But that hasn't stopped it from embracing such themes as suffering, oppression, struggle and disenfranchisement. Moreover, as art, dance welcomes all manner of participants. No one would confuse Merce Cunningham with a six-pack-sporting hunk. Just as Liz Lerman so lyrically integrated senior citizens into her work, Bill T. Jones employed pudgy Lawrence Goldhuber for years to brilliant effect. Perfection comes in many guises.

"GIMP" played as part of the Chicago Humanities Festival on Sunday at the Francis W. Parker School, and it revealed a choreographer who is lean in style and something of a miniaturist. The six dancers, including Latsky herself — a Jones troupe alumna, by the way — engage in only one lift throughout, and they touch each other sparingly, though often in the most intense dramatic clutches when they do. They walk a great deal, and one of them, Lawrence Carter-Long, does so with a disabled gait.

They also pose a lot, underlining the mix of classical and modern scores with statuary defiance. In one unforgettable sequence, Akemi Nishida, a woman with an incompletely formed arm, delivers a powerful, haunting solo of slow, hypnotic self-caresses and solo expressions, a sequence electrifying in its transformation of disadvantage into piquant, sublime beauty.

"GIMP," fraught with anguish and alienation, is not to be denied occasional wry humor. In one section, Carter-Long vocalizes doubts that might well be in the minds of the audience. "I thought it would be weird," goes one of his lines.

Avoiding the sentimental, bringing small groups of dancers on and off, Latsky constructs an ever-changing landscape of mournful, exotic stage pictures, tableaux that can seem barren and weighted, only to be punctuated with frenzy. Toward the end, one performer swings his arms in repetitions that crescendo in speed and approach a dazzling hysteria.

The one-hour "GIMP" could be shorter and accommodate even more disabled dancers. But it both seduces and provokes, a stirring instance of art busting its own boundaries and nudging consciousness toward new, uncharted heights.