

The Herald-Sun

ADF a Durham stand-out

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Thirty-six years ago, in 1977, much of what characterizes Durham's dynamic rebound that is so evident today was far in the future.

The Durham Bulls played at the aging Durham Athletic Park. The movie, "Bull Durham," which would make it perhaps the most famous minor-league team in the country, was still a decade away and the gem that's Durham Bulls Athletic Park farther off still.

The American Tobacco complex and what's now West Village were both churning out cigarettes, their groundbreaking roles as two of the state's largest historic revitalization sites not even imagined. Duke University had yet to win a national basketball championship – or a Nobel prize.

But in 1977, the American Dance Festival, which had started in 1934 as the Bennington School of Music in Bennington, Vt., and had spent 30 years in Connecticut, decided to move to Durham, lured in large part by Duke.

That move put Durham on the map, in modern dance circles and beyond. It has evolved over the years into one of Durham's true signature events, drawing an international cast of performers, students, audience – and media attention.

The Durham Convention and Visitors Bureau website describes the festival as "the largest and most influential modern dance festival in the world, featuring more than two dozen modern dance companies and hundreds of choreographers, writers, and students participating in classes, seminars, and performances."

The festival kicks off its 2013 season – its 80th anniversary season -- this week, bringing to Durham a wide range of modern-dance performers, infusing Duke's East Campus and environs with the energy and enthusiasm of young students and drawing thousands of dance enthusiasts to venues ranging from The Durham Performing Arts Center to Motorco Music Hall.

The Motorco venue is new this year, an example of the innovative thinking from ADF's leadership that has kept the festival fresh and exciting through the years. ADF Director Jodee Nimerichter saw the Irish dance company ponydance in an Adelaide, Australia, bar. "It was so much fun when I saw it, I really wanted to recreate the experience here," she told Herald-Sun correspondent Susan Broili.

Shen Wei Dance Arts opens the festival Thursday at the DPAC – a venue whose creation was spawned in part by the success of ADF. Performances continue through July 27.

If you're a modern dance fan, or just have an interest in exploring the art form, the festival is a rich experience.

But its impact goes well beyond just entertaining dance audiences. We concur with Mayor Bill Bell who says in a video on the ADF website, that the festival is "one of the great things happening, than has happened, in Durham."