

Theater review: FastHorse crafts a captivating memoir in History Theatre’s ‘Fancy Dancer’

The production is guided skillfully by director Chay Yew, the longtime leader of Chicago’s celebrated Victory Gardens Theater



Larissa FastHorse performs her autobiographical solo show, “Fancy Dancer” — about being an Indigenous girl growing up in South Dakota who dreams of becoming a ballerina — at St. Paul’s History Theatre through Oct. 4, 2026. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)



By **ROB HUBBARD** | wordhub@yahoo.com | Special to the Pioneer Press

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Larissa FastHorse didn’t dream of becoming a nationally celebrated playwright with a Broadway hit and a host of premieres at the country’s most prominent regional theaters on her resume, although she has. No, when she was a girl growing up in Pierre, S.D., her fondest wish was to become a ballerina.

That seemed a tall order for a small-city girl of Indigenous descent who spent a chunk of her childhood in leg braces and orthopedic shoes. But it’s a quest FastHorse chronicles in fascinating fashion in her solo memoir for the stage, “Fancy Dancer,” which she’s currently performing at St. Paul’s History Theatre. Rare is the performer who can tell their life story in such an eloquent and involving manner.

Although recent decades have found FastHorse eschewing acting in favor of writing plays — indeed, she composed most of “Fancy Dancer” presuming that someone else would perform it — she was eventually convinced that she’d be the best person to tell her own story. And that brings a disarming genuineness and vulnerability to History Theatre’s season-opening staging.

Yet she seems a tremendously confident performer, assuredly striding about the stage, unspooling vignettes from her personal history while gracefully executing ballet moves that the now 55-year-old FastHorse surely hasn’t brushed off in decades. Aided by the evocative projections of Caite Hevner and Ann Slote, it becomes an increasingly involving story of a determined dreamer confronting discouragement and discovering herself.

If you attend expecting a lot of “triumph over adversity” tropes, know that this writer’s quite unique story defies cliché at every turn. She never goes out of her way to seek your sympathies, instead presenting the facts of her troubled childhood with frankness and establishing the premise that being abandoned by both of her birth parents naturally pushed her in the direction of seeking approval and acceptance.

But she has a very difficult time finding it, and it’s to the writer’s credit that she allows audiences to connect the dots as to why. While FastHorse states early on that encountering racism was a regular occurrence for an Indigenous girl in South Dakota, she never cites it in describing the abuse she endures at the hands of teen girls and mean-spirited ballet teachers. You’re also left to reflect on the clash between Indigenous values of cultivating community and old-world European principles that often cling to cruelty as part of the process of creating classical ballet.

The production is guided skillfully by director Chay Yew, the longtime leader of Chicago’s celebrated Victory Gardens Theater and a renowned playwright in his own right, while Price Suddarth’s choreography plays beautifully to FastHorse’s strengths.



Larissa FastHorse's autobiographical solo show, "Fancy Dancer," has its regional premiere at St. Paul's History Theatre, just a couple miles from the store where she bought her first ballet supplies. (Rick Spaulding / History Theatre)

“Fancy Dancer” premiered last year at Seattle Repertory Theater and is next on its way to San Diego’s Old Globe, each among America’s elite regional theaters. So it’s something of a coup for History Theatre to snare this play’s local premiere when FastHorse already has established relationships with the Guthrie Theater (which premiered her comedy, “For the People,” in 2023) and Children’s Theatre Company, which originally commissioned “Fancy Dancer” seven years ago.

Yet she’s returned to St. Paul, which had a seminal role in her dance journey: She’s said that she bought her first ballet supplies at Grand Jeté, a shop on Grand Avenue.

Rob Hubbard can be reached at wordhub@yahoo.com.

‘Fancy Dancer’

When: Through Oct. 4

Where: History Theatre, 30 E. 10th St., St. Paul

Tickets: \$66-\$15, available at 651-292-4323 or historytheatre.com

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