Get ready for a mash-up of choreographic samplings at Chicago’s Joffrey Academy of Dance.

Ray Mercer, Bennyroyce Royon and Carlos dos Santos Jr. are the winners of the 2012 Joffrey Academy Choreographers of Color Awards. This month they’ll each present new neoclassical, contemporary and modern work made for the Joffrey Ballet’s trainees.

“The Joffrey is an American company, and American dance is a mixing pot,” says Joffrey Academy artistic director Alexei Kremnev. His goal, besides presenting choreographers of different ethnicities, was to commission a stylistically diverse group to set new work on his 32 trainees, ages 17–21.

Dancers spent two weeks (a total of 48 hours) in January and February working with the choreographers, who come with experience that spans dance forms. Mercer has studied and taught at Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and he is in the Broadway cast of The Lion King; dos Santos has choreographed for Colorado Ballet, Aliley and DanceBrazil, and he’s danced with a number of U.S. and Brazilian companies; Royon is a Juilliard grad, founding member of Rasta Thomas’ Bad Boys of Dance and a dancer with Armitage Gone! Dance.

Royon says that young choreographers don’t often have the following or interest that lets them finance projects with a larger group of dancers. He hopes that this will bring exposure to his work. “There are a lot of talented dancemakers out there, and we have to be able to practice to advance in our craft,” he says.

Mercer sees it as an opportunity to try his style in a different light, since he doesn’t usually work with ballet dancers.

“When you’re working under a different aesthetic, it gives you a different way to approach dance,” he says.

Dos Santos is most eager to work with the group because of their ages and stage in training, because they “have a freshness and eagerness about them,” he says.

This is the third year of existence for the Choreographers of Color Awards. In addition to space and time, the winners received $2,500 stipends to help with staging their works, which will each run 10 to 12 minutes and utilize up to 16 dancers. Applicants submitted written applications and video samples of their work.

The performance, Winning Works: Choreographers of Color Awards 2012, with work from each of the winners and Kremnev himself, takes place on March 11 at Harris Theater in Chicago.

For more: www.joffrey.com/choreographersofcolor