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Grupo de Rua de Nitero

'Me And My Choreographer In 63', 'Telesquat', 'H2'

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by Ian Palmer



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Hip hop stands at the proverbial crossroads. On one side lie the estates, the concrete, the alleyways that have become the petri dishes in which street dance has evolved. Here is the MTV generation, here is the beating heart, here is the life-blood through which hip hop pulsates. On the other side, lie the theatres, the international stages, the acceptance of hip hop as a respectable contemporary dance medium and (dare I say it) the financial sponsorship which necessarily results. If any artist is to survive as performer, choreographer, or whatever, he or she must court such benefactors, cruel and harsh as it may be.

To these crossroads many artists have come and gone - some successful, others flounder. Perhaps two of the most influential artists who have striven to take hip hop down the road of theatrical respectability are Lorenzo "Rennie" Harris in the USA (whose company, Puremovement, some may recall having seen at the Peacock Theatre back in 2003) and the UK's very own Jonzi D, who thanks to his artistic association with London's Sadler's Wells (due in no small part to the wide-ranging vision of its astute Artistic Director, Alastair Spalding) has curated no less than three hip hop conventions at the theatre over the last few years. But successful and splendid as these weekends most definitely are (as both Louise Bennett and I reported back in April) there is little doubt that at crucial points of hip hop's development towards theatrical and artistic credibility it lacks a sense of vision, of forward momentum, of new creation. Luke Jennings, in his wonderful summing up of the 2006 Convention, in his May 7th *Observer* column, hit the nail exactly on the head when he wrote "for all the performers' energy... breakdance is standing still. Its various elements - the up-rock and the down-rock, the spins and freezes - are much as they were a decade-and-a-half ago." The vocabulary of hip hop, he continued, "hasn't yet successfully morphed into an expressive dramatic form. It's a bit like classical ballet in the mid-19th century."

And this is exactly the problem which faces Jonzi D and "Rennie" Harris (and any other artist attempting to take hip hop down the "other" road): hip hop needs a Petipa. To this eternal conundrum comes a young Brazilian choreographer called Bruno Beltrão, who I predict is set to inflict seismic shock-waves upon the hip hop world. Young and extremely gifted, he has done everything you would expect a precocious genius to have done: he taught himself hip hop aged 15, formed his own company aged 16, hit the Rio dance scene aged 21, began international touring aged 22 and now, aged 26, he is invited by Sir Brian McMaster, (in his out-going season as Edinburgh International Festival's Artistic Director), to garner the dance programme, by presenting his entire dance repertoire for the very first time in the UK. If his mother isn't proud of him, then there is no pleasing her.



Ugo Neves (left) and Alexandre Lima (right) in *Telesquat*
© Douglas Robertson

As with any young talent he has set about tearing apart the conventions of hip hop, and by doing so has estranged himself from the hip hop community (he need not worry, the Prodigal Son is always welcomed home). Thus, music is gone, the very force and energy of hip hop ripped untimely from the womb. Instead, the dance is performed to other sounds, unconnected to traditional hip hop, but strikingly powerful. In *Me and my Choreographer in 63* the dance is performed to a recorded conversation between Beltrão and the dancer Eduardo Hermanson whose soubriquet is "Willow" (the number of the title refers to the hotel room in which the conversation was held and the work conceived). It both informs and mystifies our perception of the dance. We hear them speak of God and love, of mushrooms and chickens, of everything and nothing. As we watch "Willow", (his short, rather squat body masking an irrepressible and bewitching power) flickering in short, muscular spasms, every fibre of his body seeming to be under the most astute control, under the intense gaze of a bright spot-light (he reminded me of watching Guillem in *Maliphant*) we ask ourselves whether text and dance are connected, are "Willow's" thoughts indelibly linked to the movements of his body? Which flows from which? Text to dance, or dance to text? Who, what, why is "Willow"? We neither find the answers, nor do we want them. It is the very fact that Beltrão has taken hip hop and made us think that is the crucial thing here and is set to give the street community a sock in the eye.

The same is true of *Telesquat*, his 2003 work (the term apparently refers to what happens to you if you watch too much television - children beware) which investigates the relationship between action, narrative and meta-narrative. The dancers perform behind a laser-display board (you will be familiar with such a device if you listen to *I'm Sorry, I Haven't a Clue*) which projects text out to the audience. From the first few minutes it becomes clear that the text is to provide an ironic, often humorous commentary upon the action - as the four dancers remain still (in silence), one lowers his eyes, another slowly falls to the ground, another bends and the other attempts to suppress laughter. As we watch and wonder what the devil is going on, the screen projects

the text "This man has lost his money. This man is looking for it. This man is helping. This man has found it". Thereafter, the hip hop dance explodes into both narrative and conversation off-set against the projected text, which both comments and subverts what we see on stage (for example a dancer might jump high into the air, whilst the under-lying text reads "He is still now".) But the very fact that movement and text are so opposed to one another, forces us to understand that the hip hop vocabulary does indeed have its own language, its own narrative structure, because we are forced to think, "the dancer is not doing *that*, he's doing *this*" and as soon as it becomes a noun, it automatically becomes its very own language . The point is drilled home to us when "Willow" once more appears and, in a kind of *Give us a Clue* moment, performs a series of movements and then asks random members of the audience what they see. The answers are simple, yet telling - sorrow, joy, happiness. It is hip hop responding in its own narrative language to human emotions.



h2 by Bruno Beltrao/Grupo de Rua de Niteroi
© Lucy Van Gerven, Academie van Anderlecht

If I have begun to make Beltrão sound like a contemporary dance choreographer living in a hip hop body then his brilliant *H2* will confirm him as such. Presented in the much larger space of the Edinburgh Playhouse, and marketed as much more Old Skool (it isn't, hence the reports of people leaving amid cries of Bull****), it struck me as his most refreshing, challenging and ultimately most satisfying work presented in Edinburgh. It is a symphony, an exploration of the quintessence of hip hop, it reveals the dance as if we were looking at a crystal under a microscope, or reducing chemical compounds to their individual elements (hence to the title *H2* perhaps?). We see it expanded, set at *molto lentissimo*, (locks which seem never to pop) once more (after a brief burst of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee*) to silence, or to a vast heart-like a-rhythmical beat. It was fascinating, seeing Balanchine's *Agon* two nights before, watching this piece and seeing how they both work to reveal an inner clarity to their respective dance languages (and how similar those languages actually are, many hip hop moves begin and end in either fifth or second position). It presents traditional hip hop in an entirely different perspective. It presents it as if were an extraordinary privilege arising from an aristocracy. And here I suppose is the problem which faces the street dance community, for their language is not an aristocratic one. And thus too is Beltrão's difficulty and one which I think he needs to be wary of: there cannot be a Balanchine until there has been a Petipa. Then the B-boys and B-girls will take him seriously.