

DANCE REVIEW

Rubberbandance fuses passion, grace, and power

By Karen Campbell, Globe Correspondent | August 26, 2006

BECKET -- In the world of dance, ballet and hip-hop would appear to be strange bedfellows. The formal clarity and controlled elegance of ballet seem antithetical to the raw, athletic exuberance of street dance. But the two aesthetics are brilliantly melded in the choreography Victor Quijada creates for his Rubberbandance Group, performing this week at Jacob's Pillow. It's not a flashy juxtaposition of styles, but a new fusion that involves an expansive, sophisticated approach to physicality, line, and form.

That fusion is most evident in the dancing of the 30-year-old Quijada himself. Charismatic and articulate, Quijada began as a "baby breaker" on the mean streets of Los Angeles. Years of hard work and many ballet classes later, he worked his way into the companies of Twyla Tharp and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal before forming his own company in 2002.

You can see this evolution in the solo "Exercise in Wholeness and Awareness," part of a dynamite suite of dances he tags "Elastic Perspective." He's got all the break-dance moves, the acrobatic tumbles, the isolations; his hip-hop nickname was Rubberband. But he can transition with a brilliant scissor kick that sends him soaring, or a whip turn that propels him onto the floor. It's a dazzling combination of controlled athleticism, power, and grace.

The suite's other dances, ranging from the rousing opening quintet perfectly matched to Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet" to a stunning contact-improv-style duet for two men, showcase his innovative choreography and his talented troupe. The standouts are the two most disparate dancers in the company, break-dance champion Joe Danny Aurelien and co-artistic director Anne Plamondon, whose intensive ballet background gives Quijada's choreography a lithe, tensile clarity of line. Their duet to an aria from "La Traviata" is a delightful B-boy-style confrontation of one-upsmanship.

The second half of the program, a 25-minute quartet called "Hasta la Proxima," was oddly uneven in tone. The two contrasting duets for two couples are so different from each other that the ending leaves the work with a puzzling, unfinished quality. But it does highlight the enormous potential in Quijada's work for emotional and dramatic depth.

Kevin Turner and Lila-Mae G. Talbot's duet begins as a charming, flirtatious game. Gentle positionings of the arms and legs become more and more aggressive. Her tender touches to trigger movements quickly escalate to a push, a kick, a body shove, until he turns the tables and she doesn't want to play anymore. Even without the voice-over chronicling their feelings, which gets too cute, we can see the vivid shifts in emotional dynamics.

In the second duet, Quijada and Plamondon dance as if coming down from a drug binge, evolving from a chemically induced torpor to the painful throes of withdrawal. Plamondon's slow-motion contortions are interrupted by bursts of frenetic thrashing, as if she is casting off demons. She has the disjointed look of someone whose body is beyond her control, limbs seeming to rotate completely backward in their sockets.

Is Quijada her enabler, her savior, her codependent? It's never quite clear. As the two move toward and away from each other, their relationship alternates between a rigorous, muscular partnering and a connection so fragile, so sensitive that a simple breath by one can seem to blow the other away.