

Flexible flyers

Montreal's Rubberbandance Group stretches from hip-hop to Bach

By Lisa Arnett



GET DOWN Members of Rubberbandance Group hit the floor.

It's no doubt that both hip-hop fans and lovers of contemporary dance will admire Rubberbandance's director, choreographer and performer Victor Quijada, who came of age as a B-boy in Los Angeles' underground hip-hop circles. "All the older guys in the neighborhood were poppin' and electric boogalooing and breakin', and even before I knew all the names, I was doing it," he says. His category-defying troupe from Montreal is making its Chicago debut at the Hip-Hop Theater Festival on Friday 5.

After the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts turned him on to other dance forms, Quijada studied with postmodern pioneer Rudy Perez, was handpicked by Twyla Tharp to tour with her company Twyla Tharp Dance and then joined Canadian contemporary superpower Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal. "I was so hungry to try to bring together everything I had done on that journey, and do my own work," says Quijada, 30, who started his company in 2002.

Growing famous for its fusion of genres, Rubberbandance has earned tag lines like “the hip-hop group that dances to classical music,” and “hip-hop mixed with ballet,” but neither is quite right, according to Quijada. “It’s really like a genetic experiment,” he says, “taking genes from two different forms so that those forms don’t stay [the same], but that they have been informed by each other and changed.” Quijada’s choreography blurs the hard edges of breaking with contemporary sensibility, boasting delectably clever partnering and buoyant musicality.

“It is tough,” Quijada continues, “because we’ve done international contemporary-dance festivals where they see us and they’re like, ‘Whoa, who are these people? Are they trained dancers?’ They’re looking at half the company like, ‘Who are these black guys with dreadlocks?’—making their first judgments with this prejudiced approach. [Then] when we go to international hip-hop festivals, the guys are like, ‘That’s not break-dance. What are you guys doing? Who’s that girl—she’s not a B-girl.’ ”

Lucky for Quijada and his talented group, judgments cease after they take the stage. “We go somewhere and people think, Oh, you’re just a break-dance group, get dressed over there in the corner. And then they see what we do and say, ‘Oh my God, this is serious work. This is intelligent, serious, powerful work.’ ”

Tomorrow, Quijada and his company will dance excerpts from the touring show *Elastic Perspectives*, which they’ll perform in full at the historic dance enclave Jacob’s Pillow in Becket, Massachusetts, this summer. The quartet *Mi Verano*, set to “Summer” from Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons,” arose out of Quijada’s early experiments applying choreographic composition techniques to hip-hop.

They’ll also perform *Ship Shop Shapeshifting*, accompanied by myriad tunes by musicians from Mos Def to Bach. “My objective was to try to make the first hip-hop love duet. That might sound cakey and cheesy, but it’s kind of an introspective work for two,” he says, adding that it’s roughly inspired by his experience of first rejecting and then making peace with hip-hop. “This life teacher that I had in hip-hop, I began to see it as so small and so ignorant when I started learning about other art forms and other ways of thinking about them.”

And as for the wacky name, Quijada’s hip-hop buds pegged him “Rubberband” years ago, after his fluid movement quality. “Now I think [the company name] has more to do with the different [dance] forms that have been bundled together and the flexibility in the way that we see them. We’re really stretching the way that people lock down things into boxes, put labels onto them and categorize everything. Everybody’s trying to break things up—you’re this; I’m that. That’s ballet; that’s breaking. You’re black; I’m white. This is good; that’s bad,” he says. “Man, it’s just one thing.”

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