

DANCE IN LA

Making the Familiar Foreign: Hip-Hop Displaced in H3

Friday, January 22, 2010

Posted by Anna Reed at 4:13 PM

Bruno Beltrão takes hip-hop out of its natural habitat. He transplants street dance to contemporary dance stages around the world, stripping the movement of its defining music and driving beat, and abandoning its cool attitude in favor of openness and vulnerability. He stages battles and undermines them to reveal nuanced physical relationships, and he exaggerates, repeats and abstracts the movements of krumping, popping and breaking dance styles until they take on new expressive power. By making hip-hop strange, he allows us to see it anew and hear it speak.

I first experienced this revelatory work Tuesday night, when Beltrão's all-male, nine-member Grupo de Rua brought their US debut tour to REDCAT with *H3*, but the Brazilian choreographer's been at it for over a decade now - busting open street and contemporary dance conventions to international acclaim.

Two men in loose T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers stand at the edge of the stage space and look out at us. As they search our faces, eyes lingering where interest leads, they invite us to see them at their most vulnerable - in stillness and silence. The faint hum of a passing car reminds us of the dance we came to see, but like the shiny black floor that suggests wet pavement, or the exposed back wall that evokes an alley when the dancers lean against it, this passing reference to the street only makes us feel our distance from that environment. But I have a feeling this is part of Beltrão's plan; contrast brings all elements into truer focus.

Except for another car or two, it's quiet as one of the men begins to move - his limbs sliding along invisible surfaces until they click gently into unexpected places or catch in sideways suspensions. His focus is down and in, and without music to drive or dictate action, we see the halting flow of movement as manifestation of a stuttering stream of thoughts. So when, with birdlike head bobbing and insistent stomps, a knee pop throws his arms into wild circles, the intimacy of the silence intensifies the abandon and reveals reckless desire within the fierce krumping.

While sneaker squeaks and techie beeps are eventually sampled in a soundscape that supports the movement, sound never drives the action. Instead of relying on music to shift the mood or speed the pace, the dancers move us to new states by sweeping the space, sprinting backwards in intersecting curves, or spinning out in compact balls like tumbleweeds - head over hands over heels. One such exhilarating wave of receding runs leaves Filipi de Morais (in yellow) and Bruno Duarte (in black) alone on stage, and we feel a rumble coming on.

Duarte issues a challenge by hurling himself through the air past de Moraes, who lunges after him in a falling, flying, horizontal counterattack. But when they come within striking distance, they stand close and still – sensing and observing each other with calm and inviting interest – and then flip into a seated freeze in sudden unison. Labored breathing intensifies the interplay, but it doesn't seem like a fight anymore. And later on, when collisions fire them into awe-inspiring jumps and diving rolls, focus is on the interaction instead of individual prowess, so it doesn't feel much like a battle either.

When the two group up with a third, a few exchanged glances morph into a bizarre dance of heads snapping, turning, tilting in intent and urgent conversation. Without the wry smiles or humorously vacant expressions that might cue a hip-hop audience to laugh, these strange actions live as committed behaviors. And without the reassurance of cool comment or joking, the untamed energy leaves us a little uneasy. But I think this is right where Beltrão wants us; from uncertainty and unfamiliarity we see more clearly with less assumption.

Throughout *H3*, fully embodied actions like these boldly convey candid interest, struggle or desire. And in the vocabulary of hip-hop – a language known for its displays of strength, virility, control and humor – these honest statements seem particularly striking and brave. Such is the case in an extended duet that develops between Augusta Eduardo Hermanson and Danilo Pereira toward the end of the piece. We've seen Hermanson sidle up to Pereira earlier with his tiny steps and quick, quirky ticks, and we've seen Pereira flop into Hermanson's space, but here the two traverse the stage in determined, committed, complementary relationship.

To the sound of digital dings and bleeps, they adjust and calibrate, stepping their limbs in calculated, mechanical action – each jab of Hermanson's elbow or flop of his wrist causing a distinct reaction in Pereira's hip or shoulder or foot. And even when they flap their hands and peck at each other with almost ridiculous insistence, their sincere effort makes these actions part of a moving companionship.

Of course, Beltrão's nine phenomena are remarkable virtuosos – pulling off dizzying head spins, impossibly sustained handstands, and downrock that would floor any b-boy. But it's because these men also reveal themselves in moments of quiet, or in awkward, earnest action, that their feats become life-affirming and their physical range approaches the scope of human experience.