

Los Angeles Times

Dance review: Grupo de Rua comes to Southern California

By Laura Bleiberg
January 18, 2010



Grupo de Rua. Credit: Ringo H.W. Chiu / for The Times

I saw only one upside-down dancer spinning on his head -- just one -- in Saturday's performance in Irvine of "H3," the new work from Brazil's experimental hip-hop company Grupo de Rua, making its inaugural U.S. tour.

The head spin is to hip-hop what the pirouette is to ballet: a feat both impressive and bizarre. What made it notable in "H3" was that it was one of the few "normal" moments in an abstract but suggestive piece that reconfigured the elements of hip-hop and our expectations of its possibilities. Choreographer and artistic director Bruno Beltrão founded Grupo de Rua -- "street group" in Portuguese -- when he was only 16. Five years later, after expanding his dance training, he embarked on a mission of hip-hop deconstruction, taking apart the dance vocabulary, the music, and the overall macho attitude.

Bringing any vernacular dance form onto the stage requires a process of rethinking and representation, whether it's Argentine tango or Ukrainian folk.

But what Beltrão has come up with, as demonstrated at the Irvine Barclay Theatre, was a refreshing and challenging prism through which to view this evolving form. He is not the only one to push the boundaries of hip-hop dance and culture. But in stripping so much away, he has enhanced its performance possibilities and opened it up to our imaginations and varied interpretations. (Grupo de Rua performs for five days at REDCAT beginning Wednesday and in Santa Barbara Jan. 26.)

In “H3,” Beltrão has pared down to essentials, and he is a disciplined editor. He has done away with the backdrops, ditto the wings. Renato Machado’s lighting design left portions of the stage dim, like the dark spots between street lamps. Much of “H3” was performed with only the squeaking of sneakers against the stage as accompaniment, or with an annoying and percussive score by Lucas Marcier and Rodrigo Marçal.

The first third consisted of slow, quiet duets for the all-male company. Their sculptural postures were punctuated by unanticipated explosions of energy, a stop-start rhythm that permeated the 55-minute work. By the piece’s end, the energy level was on high, and all nine dancers ran headlong into one another or raced backward about the stage.

Beltrão has pulled apart the complex preparations, acrobatic moves, body isolations and poses of hip-hop and reassembled the fragments to create a dancer without swagger. Bodies shook with weird spasms, or resembled broken marionettes whose strings were being pulled by some mad puppet master. The men walked backward, heads and shoulders jerked into an unnatural backbend, pulled by an unseen force.

Wearing different colored T-shirts, they assumed the quiet intensity of a cat that is outwardly restrained but always ready for some mighty physical display. Speed became an essential element – the men twirled low, rocketing across the stage on all fours like crazed tumbleweeds. But we were mesmerized, too, by the low-key intensity of dancers Augusta Eduardo Hermanson, nicknamed “Willow,” (in blue), Danilo Pereira (in green), Bruno Duarte (in black) and Fiilipi de Morais (in yellow).

Stripping away hip-hop’s “easy” virtuosity is a risky venture. Audiences crave physical feats; such fireworks make us feel we’ve gotten our money’s worth. But if that’s all there is, even the head spin can become routine. In doing away with the expected, Beltrão increased the possibilities. We never knew precisely what was going to happen next. “H3” filled one with unease. We felt on the verge of something ominous, and that kept the brain, as well as our eyes, alert and poised.