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Dance Review

Brazilian Street Meets the Stage

By CLAUDIA LA ROCCO

If there is a heaven for b-boys, it must look something like Bruno Beltrão's "H3."

This hourlong work, which had its New York premiere at Dance Theater Workshop on Saturday as part of Grupo de Rua's debut American tour, is remarkably free of the forced swagger and showy stunts that characterize so many hip-hop productions. Nor is it watered-down, domesticated street dance made pretty and accessible for ballet or modern troupes. (Forget about that dreaded word fusion.)

Instead, though recontextualized within a contemporary dance sensibility, the austere yet beautiful "H3" captures something of hip-hop's essential nature: its aggressive yet oddly tender relationships (the all-male cast of nine is superb); its strict behavioral codes offered in defiance of a larger culture; its inward-boring, almost ritualistic intensity.

The company hails from Brazil, but during the performance I kept thinking of an afternoon spent in a small playground in the Bronx, watching local boys dance not for pocket change but for themselves; the energy, the poetry, was the same, and it's fitting, as Dance Theater Workshop's artistic director, Carla Peterson, said on Saturday, that Grupo de Rua's debut national tour should end in the city where hip-hop began.

Renato Machado's pitch-perfect lighting (sometimes stark, sometimes mellow) alternately floods the stage or isolates smaller sections, evoking the idea of a hip-hop circle, or cipher. The men, dressed in roomy jeans or shorts and various T-shirts, peel out in duos or larger groupings. In one of the most memorable sections two men slingshot their fellows onto the floor, where they run rapidly backward in intersecting arcs, limbs furiously pumping.

At other times the performers face off in pairs, surging toward each other like jousts and catching each other midleap in muscular holds that quickly reverse their trajectories. Discrete power moves like handstands punctuate fluid, rapidly hinging phrases.

The performers' brawny virtuosity is a pleasure throughout. But the work's quieter stretches are just as effective. The percussive, understated score by Lucas Marcier and Rodrigo Marçal of ARPX is in keeping with the choreography's sense of coiled readiness and meditative stillness. Stretches of silence, soft ambient traffic noises, the squeal of sneaker soles and electronic pulses both urgent and gentle form an abstracted urban landscape. These men careen, stalk and creep through it like a tribe of lost boys, touchingly vulnerable for all their fierceness.