



Street Dance With A Drastic Twist

Hip-hop is deconstructed in Grupo de Rua's 'H3' at Mandeville

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If the radical choreographer Merce Cunningham rose from the grave to create a hip-hop troupe, it might be similar to Grupo de Rua. This Rio-based dance company led by Bruno Baltrao pounded the Mandeville stage last night. More art than entertainment, the all-male group squeezes and twists street dance until it is barely recognizable.

Instead of rapping rhyme in 4/4 time, the hour-long dance "H3" is set to city sounds, pulsing electronic tinks and percussion with hints of piano. The dancers' shoes squeaking on the vinyl floor become a sound score in real time and return in a recording.

Spastic isolations known as Krumping are fun to watch and usually improvised, but this program is highly choreographed. The group pushes the limits of the human body with hyperactive twitches that become unsettling. Unexpected silence and stillness also marks the opening sequence. The men gently coil hands and touch fingers, which softens the tough-guy notion of hip-hop. Baggy but short jeans make them seem very short, and those moments of tenderness further suggests they are young innocent boys. The image is brief; they bend backwards, craning their necks back until their chests are almost deformed.

Like Cunningham, Baltrao has rejected nearly all of the conventional structures. The eight male dancers rarely march forward in a straight line. They run backwards in circles at warp speed, propelled by muscled arms chugging like pistons. Try to do it when nobody's watching to see how difficult it is. Acrobatics on the floor known as B-boying are equally mind-boggling. In a tight crouched position, they tumble across the stage so quickly they lose their humanness, looking more like blurred animated robots than young men from Brazil.

The dancers are physically thrilling in weaving footwork, handstands and explosive jumps when two collide midair. They could be street fighters, ancient warriors or boxers, but in reality, they are just being themselves, street performers. Channeling Cunningham again, Baltrao is not interested in narrative. His dances don't have a resolution or climax. There is intense physicality and drama that speaks to the human condition, yet his dancers are not pretending to be anything.

A memorable section - set to a high pitch that would make my dog howl - has two men cruising in circles with arms outstretched. They look like two old men out for a drive, and they seem almost happy. That image feels good. We can't help but insert a little story. But Beltrao maintains abstraction. One man bites the other's arm, a hand flops and they twitch their heads wildly.

The dancing is athletic and provocative, yet this new breed of hip-hop isn't for everyone. Some will reject the idea of hip-hop without rap beats and lyrics. Others may dislike the stillness. But Grupo de Rua has taken a once predictable genre into new territory. At the very least, you have to admire the company's technical skill and innovation.