

Grupo de Rua at UCSB's Campbell Hall

Brazilian Street Dance Troupe at UCSB's Campbell Hall, Tuesday, January 26

Thursday, January 28, 2010

By definition, street dance is a challenge. It's a countercultural art form, an in-your-face statement of power and skill, and a competitive sport played out in cities and ghettos around the world. So when Brazilian choreographer Bruno Beltrão takes street dance off the street and places it on the stage, something is bound to shift.

At 70 minutes long, Beltrão's *h3* is a music-free marathon of abstracted, hip-hop-inspired movement. To an urban soundscape of passing traffic and squeaking sneakers composed by electronica duo ARPX, eight male dancers enter and exit a dimly lit space. Sometimes their movements are almost imperceptibly slow. Sometimes they erupt in a flurry of energy, rolling across the stage like tumbleweeds, running backward at break-neck pace, leaping into the air only to be brought back forcefully to ground. Never do they smile.



By David Bazemore

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This is not street dance exactly, but a distillation of it: less potent than what you might see on the street, more meditative, containing the same explosive harshness, but lacking the message. It is street dance abstracted and rarified: no b-boy battle, no fuck you lyrics, no brand-name shoes or hats or baggy, low-slung jeans. Instead, there are extended studies on the movement qualities of break dance: popping and locking, top-rocking, freezes, inversions. One man watches unmoving as another twitches and jerks like a fish on a hook. Then the quality changes subtly and he becomes a marionette bobbing on strings, manipulated by some unseen, external force. When the observer begins to move, he is fierce, slashing through space, kicking as if he aims to do damage, his head swinging side to side like a predator sniffing the air.



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Often, there is someone watching: standing with arms at his sides, sitting with legs crossed, or crouched upstage, catching his breath. With the wings removed and the light stands visible at the sides of the stage, the space becomes a kind of industrial no-man's zone. At one point, fluorescent lights wink on overhead, making the audience flinch.

Without musical cues, some of the more sensational acrobatics come as delicious surprises: a hollowback handstand suspended for a few achingly beautiful seconds, a quick headspin resolving into a sideways slither.

A few blackouts break this formless work into sections—one is most memorable for its soundtrack of high-pitched electronic buzzes and loud, cacophonous crashes. For the most part, though, *h3* washes over the viewer in a wave of abstraction, as far removed from entertainment industry hip hop as ARPX is from Missy Elliot.

Beltrão's street dance is a challenge, alright; just not the kind you might have expected.