

From slums of rio to the world stage: The iconoclastic all-male Brazilian dance ensemble Grupo de Rua dissected Latin hip-hop Tuesday night at Campbell Hall

By Daniel Kepl News-Press correspondent

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Bruno Beltrão founded his Grupo de Rua, an all-male Brazilian hip-hop dance company, in Rio de Janeiro in 1996, at the age of 16. Satisfying his obsession from the age of 9, when he started out as a street performer in A Cidade Maravilhosa (The Marvelous City), he has since elevated the urban contemporary street dance forms of his fellow Cariocas to high art.

Beltrão's muse has served him well and Grupo de Rua is now performing throughout the world, deconstructing the public's generic understanding of hip-hop – jettisoning most of its pre-conceived musical vocabulary and giving the form itself a new and intriguing aesthetic.

Maestro Beltrão's new piece "H3" opened in silence – a delicious shock to audience expectation. Two men, reeking of macho defiance and testosterone, confront each other, as well as the audience; their bodies still, their faces speak the hard story of their lives. The lighting is dark, shadowy; the aura is dangerous, sexy and irresistibly enticing, encouraged by a discreet soundscape of street noise. First one, then the other begins to move: twitch would be the active noun – and the astonishing miracle begins. By the time the first segment goes black, the audience has seen tense quietude become human hurricane as the company introduces itself – piecemeal at first, but steadily, stealthily increasing the body count onstage, interactions between the men increasingly frenetic as space becomes tighter: a metaphor for the ghetto environment these dancers know all too well.

The nine young men of Grupo de Rua have, under Mr. Beltrão's driven training and precise choreographic vocabulary, refined a panoply of recognizable hip-hop movements, wedded them to the contemporary dance aesthetic and created a hybrid that is wildly athletic, technically complex, visually compelling and astonishingly virtuosic. In the course of "H3," the audience is privy to several all-male pas de deux disguised as variations on make rutting ritual; corps de ballet feats of amazing syncopation that released energy into the hall in waves of machismo – leaps and twirls, lifts and holds that would have given pause if not flight, to the corps of the Ballets Russes.

As the evening progressed – "H3" is performed without intermission – the segments became even more fascinating as each of the dancers revealed themselves, carefully, as human beings; their interactions, while overtly aggressive, were more intimate. Complex gesture duels between the men – executed with the precision of sword play (actual blow staved off by millimeters) – have visual proof of Bruno Beltrão's masterful choreography.

Lighting throughout "H3" was appropriately minimal – reminding the audience that street dancers work by streetlight. Yet minimalism is an art unto itself and Lighting Designer Renato Machado created stunning effects with literally black and white light. Visual illusions reminiscent of film noir, mixed with a fusion of electronic and percussive music, sharpened the evening's edge.

e-mail: life@newspress.com