



Jacob's Pillow

Passion for dance

Dance Review, By Allison Tracy Special to The Eagle
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BECKET — Remember June, 2006? Whew, such a vertigo spurt-ago, the opening gala of the Jacob's Pillow Festival season, which took as its theme, "Passion for Dance."

That night offered a tantalizing, 10-minute glimpse of Rubberbandance Group founder and choreographer Victor Quijada with partner Anne Plamondon.

Their elastic blend of street hip-hop and lyric partnering captivated the donor audience, and ever after, the troupe has prompted the hottest box office sales, exceeding Mark Morris. Even extra shows were sold out with no options. What explains it?

Unquestionably, a passion for dance. Though they purvey what's known in breakdance circles as "battle," out there, male and female with aggression, they are also young, winsome and fragile — taking on something that has not quite been done before. The whole audience gets behind them.

Rubberbandance is made up of six movers, three of whom are mostly ballet-trained (including Quijada himself); and three cross-trained with heavy hip-hop specialty (including Quijada himself). They met through Quijada's various travels across dance lines from streets to studios to the proscenium stages and clubs.

Quijada's passion, work ethic, intense vision and determination stitches them together, creating a brother/sisterhood — a "circle" pledged to prove themselves as something "not" — neither breakdance nor ballet; not postmodern or improvisation; not "stage" (what Quijada dubs, "frontal play," so limiting and ingratiating); not rap; not classical; not stereotype male or female; not war and not love.

That refusal to engage circumscribed knowns, and Quijada's preference for taking on contradictions, makes for a raw, somewhat rag-tag dance style at this stage. If we're looking for "pretty," Rubberbandance is not it. And that's exactly how Quijada wants it. In the program notes, he has called what he's attempting, "a bastard reflection" that's going for "unrefinedness."

The two acts of this program are anthologies. "Elastic Perspective," commissioned for a contemporary/hip hop festival dubbed "War," tests movement ideas and contemporary issues against an array of musical works — Prokofiev's "Romeo and Juliet," Vivaldi's "Four Seasons," Verdi's "La Traviata, Latin salsa and hard rap with the angst of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl." "Hasta La Proxima" offers multiple views on contemporary relationships, and serves as a more unified work reflecting both philosophy and evolving style.

Contradictions do abound. Yes, "Elastic's" Romeo and Juliet sequence is predictably one of gangsta war; but the women are equal partners to it, giving back what they get with chick-flips and windmilling legs.

In Vivaldi's "Spring," ("Mi Verano") the gradual budding of the season takes the form of slow-mo breakdance as tenderness. But in answer to one swain's beseeching arabesque, the object of his yearning bites the hand that's offered. In "The Traviattle," B-boy Dingo (Joe Danny Aurelien) and the exquisitely flexible Anne Plamondon positively explode through the singer's tremolo.

Similarly, "La Proxima" is a world in which men are cast as "fragile;" women make the rules of the game and decide when it starts and stops; comfort is spurned when it's most needed, and twitching human wreckage is respectfully released, to heal itself.

"Live strong," these works proclaim. Only pride and self-proving win on the streets. But winning earns respect. It generates playfulness and excitement, breaks down the estrangement of ghetto barriers. For awhile.

Ultimately, Quijada and his movers seem to say, we're on our own and we better stay vigilant, ready, defensive.

Clearly Rubberbandance is a troupe evolving, as well as ideas evolving. The range of technique we expected — hip-hop en pointe, for example — seemed, in these works to be reined in, perhaps because they were created for the breaker scene.

The slippery, sinuous partnering we saw on June's Gala stage, in this program seemed more emphatically about power. Quijada seemed to emphasize the difficulties of the form, the awkwardness of fitting together these puzzle pieces. We saw no pretense at transcendence.

But this man bears watching, and rewards it. Indeed, the promised "Passion for Dance" reigns, this week, on both stages at Jacob's Pillow, a rousing finale to Festival 2006.