

DANCE

Moving to different rhythms

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Rubberbandance Group and Kaha:wi Dance Theatre

At Enwave Theatre

In Toronto on Thursday

The latest DanceWorks double bill is cutting edge contemporary dance. Both Rubberbandance Group and Kaha:wi Dance Theatre have artistic directors who are developing new choreographic languages, and it makes for a compelling concert.

Montreal's Rubberbandance is the new breakout Canadian sweetheart on the international scene. The repertoire is audience friendly because choreographer Victor Quijada cleverly uses urban dance forms like hip hop as the major ingredient in a postmodern/ballet stew pot. Eye-catching is almost too lame a word to describe Quijada's output.

Santee Smith of Kaha:wi is also winning recognition on both sides of the border. A Mohawk by birth, her dance works are firmly anchored in aboriginal sensibility. That being said, her highly charged, traditional/contemporary/ballet fusion eats up the stage.

Quijada's *Elastic Perspective* is in two parts. The first is made up of six episodes that are audacious settings of hip hop to mostly classical music.

In deliciously clever ways, Quijada renders the music into streetwise movement.

For example *Libiamo*, the brindisi or drinking song from Verdi's *La traviata* is a duet for Joe Danny Aurélien and Anne Plamondon which Quijada calls *The Traviattle*. The bodies of the two dancers mirror the vocal virtuosity of the tenor and the soprano in intricate physical movement. If there is a slow slide on a note, for example, the body arcs gracefully in space. When the pace becomes faster, the poppin' and lockin' becomes more frenetic. The stirring finale of the opera duet is miraculously captured in the dance by Aurélien swinging Plamondon in that famous pairs skating hold of one leg and one arm.

Similarly, *Secret Service*, set to the ball scene from Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* takes the Capulet's stately and pompous music and turns it into a hip-hop *West Side Story* filled with both watchful nervousness and one-upmanship. Propelled by the relentless beat, Quijada, Aurélien, Plamondon, Jayko Eloi and Julia Gutsik are both punks and danseurs nobles at the same time.

The second part of *Elastic Perspective* is called *Hasta La Proxima* and is set to mostly Latin rhythms. If the strange bedfellows of hip hop and classical music of the first part are bonbons of droll humour, *Hasta La Proxima* has real substance.

It begins as a game as Lila-Mae Talbot physically manipulates Eloi's body in amusing fashion to the exact beat of the Latin rhythms. When Quijada and Plamondon take over, it is no longer a joke. They engage in soul-searing, emotional game playing rendered in physicality that, despite being part urban dance, part martial arts, speaks volumes about relationships.

For *A Constellation of Bones*, Smith has collaborated with Anishnaabe word artist Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm and Maori composer Dean Hapeta to produce a powerful work. Her company of dancers is stunning, it includes herself, fellow Canadian Ceinwen Gobert, Colombian John Henry Gerena and American Alex Meraz.

Akiwenzie-Damm's voiceover text, merged with Hapeta's evocative soundtrack fusion that runs the gamut from traditional rhythms, to rap and electronica, is a poetic paean to the mythologies of creation, in which humankind is both at harmony and in conflict with the earth and the sky.

It is a metaphysical dance piece that creates symbolic images that burrow deeply into our primal psyche. The dance raises philosophical questions about our individual roles within human existence as a whole. Within Santee's choreography we recognize actual steps from the *Grass Dance*, for example, that are then riffed into a whirlwind of movement.

One couple -- Smith and Meraz -- are in conflict with the life force, and their choreography is violent and restless. Dancers Gobert and Gerena are smooth as silk, almost like tango dancers in their symbiosis.

Nonetheless, the negative influence of Smith and Meraz spreads, enveloping the others in their miasma. All four must struggle to find their place as individuals.

The piece is optimistic and pessimistic at the same time, but there is no denying that Smith's pounding footwork, her unpredictable spins, her virtuoso gymnastics and her eloquent hand and arm gestures, all build to a work of strength and beauty.

The double bill of Rubberbandance Group and Kaha:wi Dance Theatre continues at Harbourfront's Enwave Theatre through today.