



Photographs by GARY FRIEDMAN *Los Angeles Times*

THE RIGHT MOVES: *Victor Quijada's signature choreography is a fusion of hip-hop, ballet and contemporary movement.*

Rubberband man

L.A.-born Victor Quijada's dance troupe brings street moves to the stage. He's ready for a hometown debut.

By VICTORIA LOOSELEAF
Special to The Times

PEERING into a photographer's lens, Los Angeles-born Victor Quijada, with his dark eyes, chiseled cheekbones and stylish black hair, could be posing for a Versace ad. Until he starts to move, that is, and his sinewy, streetwise popping and locking flow into impossibly high leg extensions, tossed-off pliés and handstands -- all exploding from a torso-torquing body built for speed.

Quijada, the son of Mexican

immigrants, was nicknamed "Rubberband" after he hit the pavement of his Baldwin Hills neighborhood as a pretzel-like break dancer at age 8, and he's come full circle. In 2002, he founded the Montreal-based Rubberbandance Group. Now the 32-year-old impresario has brought the six-member troupe to his hometown, where it will make its Los Angeles debut this weekend with performances at two local stages, the Irvine Barclay Theatre and Cal State L.A.'s Luckman Theatre.

With "Elastic Perspective Redux," a collection of works commissioned by an assortment of dance festivals, the company will showcase Quijada's signature choreography: a fusion of hip-hop, ballet and contemporary movement. That his journey has been an inspiring one -- from street kid to diligent student at L.A. County High School for the Arts to dancer with Twyla Tharp and others -- makes his homecoming that much more significant.

"I left here as I turned 20," the

soft-spoken Quijada recalled this week as he sat in the Luckman auditorium clad in fraying jeans, Nikes and a form-fitting black polo. "Visiting my family as part of this debut makes me very excited. We've done so much around the world, and I had wanted to come back, but this was the right time."

INDEED, Quijada, the recipient of a number of choreography awards, says that good timing has helped him seize each opportunity life has presented him -- something he ascribes to his parents' immigrant status.

"There's a sense of pride and hard work -- not giving up -- even if it wasn't talked about in my family," he said. "This is how it was for me with Twyla, because I don't think I knew what I was getting into. I was the only dancer without classical training, so I took as many ballet classes as I could. There was no turning back."

Rudy Perez, part of the New York-based experimental Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s and an L.A. dance fixture since 1979, agrees about Quijada's commitment. After teaching Quijada in high school, Perez invited him to join his postmodern troupe. Two years later, Tharp beckoned.

"Victor had a presence -- it wasn't so much technique or ability -- but there was something deep, an inner soul. He's Latino, and I think that has a lot to do with it," says Perez, who set his classic 1964 work "Countdown" on Quijada several years ago and incorporated that process into a documentary film of the same name.

"He was like a sponge," the older choreographer says. "Open and receptive. Evidently Twyla saw the same thing -- that he had great promise and the ability to command the stage and to grow. I was happy when he got into Twyla's company."

After three years with Tharp, Quijada went on to work with choreographer Eliot Feld. But in 2000, he moved to Canada and joined Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montréal, where he even managed to master choreography by ballet great George Balanchine.

"I felt I had done the New York thing," he explained. "But I still

had a lot to prove. I had a chip on my shoulder and, coupled with the desire to choreograph, I auditioned for Les Grands Ballets, which also has a choreography workshop. I let hip-hop go and fell in love with Montreal."

But once a B-boy, it seems, always a B-boy. Two years later, Quijada abandoned the rarefied world of ballet and returned -- after a fashion -- to his roots: "I had no plans. I just trusted the universe that I would create my own work and a dance group. I reconnected with hip-hop in Montreal. It was in the air, in the city, in the clubs."

Quijada credits hip-hop with giving him a sense of urgency and the confidence he could create something out of nothing. It is, he believes, as integral to his character as being Chicano.

"You do it -- it's now," he said. "Being in those circles in the early '90s gave me the courage to take risks, to push forward. I feel that was my coming into manhood."

Quijada also continued to take risks. As part of his crash course in classical training, for example, he explored composers such as Prokofiev and Verdi, and he has set several works to excerpts from "Romeo and Juliet" and "La Traviata." (One is on this weekend's programs.) What on paper might have sounded strange came electrifyingly alive onstage. A Boston Globe critic praised Rubberbandance Group as having "the formal clarity and controlled elegance of ballet [and] the raw, athletic exuberance of street dance."

In 2006, Quijada made



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— VICTOR QUIJADA
Rubberbandance Group

Rubberbandance Group

Where: Irvine Barclay Theatre, 4242 Campus Drive, Irvine

When: 8 tonight

Price: \$33-\$38

Contact: (949) 854-4646 or www.thebarclay.org

ALSO

Where: Luckman Theatre, Cal State L.A., 5151 State University Drive

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Contact: (323) 343-6600

"Suspension of Disbelief," a commission from former New York City Ballet dancer Peter Boal, now artistic director of Seattle-based Pacific Northwest Ballet. Boal says that "as a choreographer, Victor gives of himself completely and is eager to adjust to individual ability. The classical repertoire is broadening to such an extent that Victor's choreography, though still a stretch for a classical company, is not out of place."

THESE days, riding high along with Quijada is Anne Plamondon, Rubberbandance's co-artistic director since 2005. A member of the troupe since its early days, she had previously danced with Les Grands Ballet Canadiens and Netherlands Dance Theater II. She is also Quijada's life partner.

"We were both searching when we met," Plamondon said at the Luckman rehearsal. "I had stopped doing pointe work and wanted to do more contemporary dance. Victor wanted to create. He has a unique vision, and we both share ambition. The idea was to take break dance and hip-hop roots and see how far it could go."

Although Quijada no longer haunts the clubs (nor does he miss wearing tights), he said he was looking forward to expanding his company and "disseminating this information" that is his choreographic trademark.

"It's obvious to me," he said, "that this is the next wave of contemporary dance -- borrowing from the streets and putting hip-hop on stage. It's a source of energy, and what we're doing, I think, can have a big impact."