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For dance with a difference, bring on the boys from Brazil. Page 37

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DANCE REVIEW



Tiago Sousa, left, and Gustavo Americo of the Companhia Urbana de Dança/Sonia Destri, in "Chapa Quente."

Without elaborate costumes or sets, Brazilian troupe revels in pure motion

By Robert Johnson
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Every once in awhile, it feels good to be reminded of the things that make us human.

Brazilian choreographer Sonia Destri can help with that.

Her Companhia Urbana de Dança — which appeared throughout the weekend in the Peak Performances series at Montclair State University — recalls what people in a consumer society often forget: The ability to express ourselves comes hard-wired in our dancing bodies. We don't need to covet or acquire anything to spark our creativity.

Destri's group, eight young men from the slums of Rio, define themselves without making a fuss. No computer graphics obscure the eloquence of these bodies that emerge from shadow to dance in bare patches of light. A script would seem superfluous: These men tell their stories just by being there.

In sneakers and T-shirts, they could not be further from the pomp and sequin-encrusted fantasies of Carnival in Rio. The materialistic bling of hip-hop culture is foreign to them, too. Destri has removed her dancers from the clamorous "favelas," paring away the dangerous circumstances that might cut short their lives and eliminating any external objects that might distract them from focusing on their work. The space she carves for her dancers is spare, but calm and meditative. Safety is their only luxury.

The men bring their own fluid vocabulary to the stage, and audiences will recognize the shoulder spins, the waves and pops of music video. Missing from the usual b-boy scene, however, is the tense atmosphere of suspicion and bluster. These men are not competing, they're sharing. Patiently, they sit with arms around their knees, watching one another's danced confessions with an interest

that seems personal. When wiry André "Feijao" Virgilio stands isolated and frozen, having gotten lost in a maze invisible to the rest, Gustavo Americo appears suddenly from the wings to reclaim him with an embrace.

POIGNANT MOMENT

The single most poignant moment in "ID:ENTIDADES," the first of two pieces on the program, this incident not only illustrates the tenderness that unexpectedly unites members of this masculine community, but also the choreographer's subtlety. Destri began to choreograph for television, so while one might expect her to goose the ensembles that blend and morph into one another in smooth succession, the way she leads Virgilio to the edge of drama and then pulls him back is something else.

Indeed, there is nothing commercial about this contemporary dance company, which exposes itself

in monastic silence, grooves to electronica, and for the briefest moment, surrenders to sentiment dancing to the chords of a Brazilian guitar known as the "violão."

The second piece on the program, "Chapa Quente," is more consistently energetic, without departing from the established atmosphere. Samba rhythms and swaying hips provide a splash of local color, and the dance's principal movement theme — running backward — makes a point about the absurd challenges and futility of life in the slums. Yet the performers are still just being themselves.

Destri's challenge going forward will be to develop her material, supplying greater theatrical variety without losing the purity of direct address. This choreographer will need to keep it real.

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