

Contemporary Cuba

Dancers explore world's beauty and brutality

By Janine Parker / July 16, 2011

BECKET - In the past decade-plus, audiences worldwide have stood in awe as a tidal wave of prodigiously talented ballet dancers has streamed from Cuba. This week, with the US debut of DanzAbierta at Jacob's Pillow, we get a glimpse of Cuba's contemporary dance scene.

The very good news is that the DanzAbierta dancers, like their classical brethren, are skilled, fluid, and daring performers, and - unlike the Soviet-era choreographers, with their famously dreary propaganda ballets - it seems that Cuban dancemakers are free not only to comment upon, but also to question their status quo, albeit obliquely.

"MalSon," choreographed by Susana Pous, uses Cuba as its background (literally, as footage of buildings and busy streets is projected onto a backdrop throughout the dance) to explore the intimacy and anonymity, hustle and humanity, beauty and brutality of big cities everywhere. But it also hints at the contradictions that are unique to a cosmopolitan though still communist society. Like the dance's three women wearing fabulously sexy heels, as individuals, Cubans are both liberated and shackled.

The dance is like a stream-of-consciousness chapter wandering between surreality and sharp imagery but perfectly illustrating a larger story. The five dancers - Abel Berenguer, Mailyn Castillo, Yaima Cruz, Yoan Matos, and Saro Silva - swoop and flock like swallows, or traverse the stage with mechanic purpose, arms pumping and feet just shy of stomping, or form two tensely spar-dancing couples with a fifth wheel who hovers around or in between the scuffling lovers.

Indeed, the only friction is the unnamed struggle with which the dancers grapple; the technical parts that make up the whole of "MalSon" are expertly crafted and melded. The "son" of the title refers to a Cuban musical rhythm that composer and videographer X Alfonso employs, the score a mix of driving techno-beat compositions that fluctuate smoothly with wistful, ambient sections. Alfonso's projections deftly frame these changes of mood: Sped-up footage shows streets teeming with frenetic citizens or the dancers in a claustrophobic cluster in an elevator; conversely, clouds float through a wide expanse of sky.

The movement phrases are vivid and reflect Pous's training in Graham and Limon styles - limbs and torsos slice and plane dramatically or curve and undulate caressingly - and the floorwork hints at street dance, as a fall and roll morphs into a spin on the back before the recovery.

A large rectangular box acts as both set piece and prop. Sometimes it is a building in whose shadows the dancers cower, or whose heights they scale to gaze out at the world or, in one breath-stopping moment, jump off of. An exhilarating section has the dancers moving the box

around the stage at various angles while one dancer clings precariously before sliding off. The metaphor shifts from towering oppression to willful protest to dreamlike submission.

There's a wonderful sense of surprise when the dance is over, and suddenly you see it's only five dancers and a big box up there onstage. How could this be? For one hour Pous and her dancers have held us rapt in another world. This complete immersion is the true sign of a work of art.

http://archive.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/07/16/danzabierta_explore_the_worlds_beauty_and_brutality/