

The Seattle Times

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The Arts

Originally published January 24, 2014 at 10:57 AM | Page modified January 24, 2014 at 6:20 PM

Grupo Corpo: Troubadour tunes to techno trance | Dance review

Brazilian dance troupe Grupo Corpo brings two big, contrasting, complementary pieces to Seattle: “Sem Mim,” which draws inspiration from medieval Portuguese song, and “O Corpo,” which takes a techno turn. Through Jan. 25, 2014.

By Michael Upchurch

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Brazil’s Grupo Corpo has brought many beguiling works to Seattle in the dozen-odd years since the troupe started making tour stops here — but never anything as gorgeous as “Sem Mim.”

Inspired by a medieval Portuguese song cycle about the yearnings of women whose men are out at sea, “Sem Mim” (“Without Me”) unfolds under a huge, hanging, shape-changing net that serves

as backdrop, canopy or, in its most magical transformation, an opulent diaphanous tent enclosing two lovers.

The score, by Carlos Nunes and Jose Miguel Wisnik, is just as enchanting: a suite of sometimes mournful, sometimes joyful tunes that use guitar, percussion and haunting voices to create a sound that feels both modern and centuries old. The music’s folk-lilt and rhythmic verve are reflected in the dance itself, which ranges from striking solos and rapturous duets to jaunty trios and energetic group revelries.

The “narrative” consists simply of ever-changing tugs of affection and attraction between men and women, with male-male and female-female camaraderie filling in when the sexes are separated. Moments of solitude alternate with immersions in the crowd. The steps that take you from one phase or mood to another couldn’t be more organic in feel.

And that’s the wizardry of Grupo Corpo. Choreographer Rodrigo Pederneiras and his virtuosic dancers have a way of making difficult, intricate, turn-on-a-dime moves look colloquial and impromptu.

While “Sem Mim” is mostly an ensemble piece, certain dancers have stunning stand-alone moments. Janaina Castro, for instance, while following the path of a bladelike spotlight

across the stage, twists, turns, twitches, imbuing her progress with flickering weight shifts and darting looks toward the darkness behind her. In those shadows, so dimly lit you're unsure at times if anything's there, is a pale figure, mimicking her steps, though always a phrase or two behind her. It's an amazing sequence.

Just as dazzling is Filipe Bruschi and Andressa Corso's duet under that cavernous tent. The seamless way he lets her circle and soar from his hips and shoulders, then settle around his neck or into the cradle of his arms, is sinuous acrobatics made into art.

The lighting and set design of Paulo Pederneiras (artistic director of the company) and the form-fitting costumes by Freusa Zechmeister (flower-colored for the women, tattoo-hued for the men) complete the visual richness of the whole effect.

"Sem Mim," from 2011, is paired with Rodrigo Pederneiras' "O Corpo," from 2000.

No troubadour lyricism here. Instead, "O Corpo" pulls you into a minimalist techno-trance where robotic moves keep shading toward sensuality. It thrives on group dynamics, as its dancers draw from a menu of mechanical rolls, soft-shoe shuffles, gravity-defying frog-leaps and every kind of elastic undulation imaginable. Together they serve as pieces in a pattern — a pattern that closely follows the startling score of Arnaldo Antunes as it blends electronica with primal grunts, guitar squalls and seductive snippets of melody.

"Sem Mim" and "O Corpo," with their bold contrasts in character, complement each other perfectly, making this program an ideal introduction to this astonishing troupe.

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