

## Shining display of unity, honesty

By Michael Crabb

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There is a reason why the much-travelled dancers of Grupo Corpo routinely earn standing ovations. They're irresistible. At a time when contemporary dance is too often mired in po-faced seriousness or obscure expressionism, the 20 well-trained members of Brazil's Grupo Corpo luxuriate unashamedly in the sensuous, seductive extravagance of the body in motion. They strut and sashay with loose-hipped nonchalance, jump and turn with razor-edged precision and let music flow through them with a rhythmic intuition that animates every cell.

There's also a reason for the name which, rudely translated, means Body Group. Although there are brief solos and duets, for the most part Grupo Corpo performs with charming camaraderie as a company. When nobody is a star everyone shines.

After an almost sold-out show on Saturday at the big National Arts Centre opera house in Ottawa, Grupo Corpo has this week settled into Toronto's more intimate Premiere Dance Theatre with a two-part program by its long-time resident choreographer and former company dancer, Rodrigo Pederneiras.

Grupo Corpo, based in Belo Horizonte in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, is very much a family affair. Rodrigo's brother, Paulo, is the artistic director and also has a hand in the design department. Two other Pederneiras clan members, Miriam and Pedro, function respectively as choreographic assistant and technical director.

It is Rodrigo, however, who has put Grupo Corpo on the international map. Since his 1985 breakthrough work, *Prehúdes*, it is Rodrigo Pederneiras's work that has defined the troupe's identity. His own diverse influences in classical ballet, African, Brazilian folk and Western modern dance have been fused into a distinctive jazzy, loose-limbed style that honours the ethnic diversity, historic tribulations and celebratory vigour of Brazilian society. There's also a showbiz sensibility about Pederneiras's work. The dividing line between real choreography and mere dance routines is very narrow and he walks it like a master.

The evening stars mysteriously in dim light and to a slow but insistent beat with the dancers, costumed in iridescent scarlet body tights, with their backs to the audience. Leaning back on their arms they look more like giant insects than humans. Legs just caustically skyward. They begin to move in a crab walk, turning toward the audience. There's an almost ritual solemnity to the opening of Pederneiras's 1997, 45-minute work, *Parabelo*, that gives little hint of the exuberance to come.

Driven by Tom Ze and Ze Miguel Wisnik's eclectic score, *Parabelo* unfolds as a series of connected dance vignettes that showcase the company's technical virtuosity and Pederneiras's gift for layered movement. He exults in texture, mining the music to create dynamic contrasts within the group. He plays with different combinations of men and women but generally avoids phony romanticism and tedious boy-meets-girl clichés. There's a wonderful simple yet inventive segment involving three mixed trios where Pederneiras plays with interlocking arms in almost contrapuntal fashion. The only exception to the general mood of gender neutrality is a strange pas de deux in which the man seems to treat his female partner more as a burden than a mate. He's the rock-solid pillar, she the mobile pendant. He swirls and upends her and finally carries her off like a collectible rather than a trophy.

The set for *Parabelo*, by Fernando Velloso and Paulo Pederneiras, is also curious. First there's a sinister, dimly lit row of large carved heads that glower down on the free-spirited dancers like disapproving ancestors. This later gives way to a peeling mural of family photo portrait. Their significance is unclear, but they contrast with the almost carnival-like atmosphere of the dancing.

*Benguêlo*, the other work in the program, despite its obvious Latin references, mostly taps into Brazil's African heritage. Joao Bosco's score, with its mix of drumming and vocals, provides the appropriate musical propellant. Generally, *Benguêlo* is a spirited celebration but there are darker inferences. Africans after all did not arrive in Brazil as colonizers. In a visually striking sequence, the dancers process in orderly lines across a raised platform and then across the stage. Later, a line of silhouetted dancers crosses the platform. Their bodies move in deep, lunging sideways steps, shaping an abstract, pre-historic frieze. Other choreographic references suggest the back-breaking burden of forced labour but are balanced by happier moments.

It is to the credit of Grupo Corpo's attractive, agile dancers that they never lard the choreography. The last thing it needs is embellishment.

There's an innocent directness and lack of affectation about them that is utterly beguiling. The applause is won honestly.