

GRUPO DYNAMICS

*By Sarah Kaufman
The Washington Post
June 23, 1999*

A sparse crowd braved cool temperatures Monday at Wolf Trap to see Brazil's Grupo Corpo, and was rewarded with a performance of uncommon cohesiveness, impeccable precision and musical complexity. But formal qualities aside, it was the dancers' immediate and delirious abandon - their unhinged hips and high-flung arms - that truly captivated.

The company, nearly 25 years in existence, has created his own hybrid dance form, drawing on the numerous social dances of its native land and stylizing them with touches of classical ballet. That translates to the dancers' sensitivity to an elongated line and crisp form, as well as a giddy, loose-jointed snap. The choreography - by Rodrigo Pederneiras, brother of artistic director and lighting designer Paulo Pederneiras - is streamlined yet lyrical, sending the dancers into rippling currents that follow the music's syncopated pulse.

In "Nazareth", Old World formality is juxtaposed with contemporary chic. A jovial atmosphere erupts improbably from a black and gray palette, seen in the costumes and the set design by Fernando Velloso.

The music, by José Miguel Wisnik, pays homage to Brazilian Ernesto Nazareth, whose intricate piano compositions bridged European classical music and the popular music of his homeland. The dancers match these with quick footwork and upswept arms that carry groups of them into cascading movement sequences until suddenly you realize their steps have all aligned and they move as one body.

At one point, a slow waltz with an off-kilter overlay sounds like a carousel whirling off its base, and accordingly the couples dancing in this section deconstruct. One woman slumps to the floor in her partner's arms; the other is whirled high - alarmingly, crazily high - in the air.

The group's second and final work, "Parabelo", celebrates what the company describes as a uniquely Brazilian spirit of dancing and "magical experimentation". There's a sad and beautiful duet between a man and the woman draped lifelessly in his arms; she revolves against him dreamily like a stream in the wind. An odd section has the women crouching like frogs, pairs of them erupting briefly in slow waves. At another moment, the insistent electronic sounds of composers Tom Zé and Wisnik seem to envelope the dancers like a force field, in which they pop and whirl like electric sparks.

Unlike many dance groups that aim to show off their native club styles, Grupo Corpo doesn't stage mass house parties. The steps recall the bossa nova and the baião, but they're arranged with an eye to structure and unfolding rhythmic patterns. So one set of dancers performs a straightforward sequence while another executes it backward, or a few counts late, or along a diagonal path. There's a mathematical working out of the music, a splintering of the sound into tonal strands, and the result is bracingly unpredictable.

And jus to underscore the fun of it all, "Parabelo" ended in an effeverscent shower of motion, as if cork had been popped on a bottle of champagne.