

DANCE REVIEW

Grupo Corpo both exciting, flat

By Thea Singer | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | MARCH 02, 2013



ANDREA MOHIN/THE NEW YORK TIMES/FILE 2012

Grupo Corpo dancers performed “Sem Mim” at a New York venue.

The virtuosic dancers of the Brazilian troupe Grupo Corpo carry fire in their veins and history in their muscles. They bring to life — with undulating hips and slip-sliding joints, jittering or stomping feet, and roiling shoulders — the works of house choreographer Rodrigo Pederneiras. His aesthetic commingles Afro-Brazilian forms such as samba, bossa nova, and capoeira with classical ballet and modern dance in pieces inspired by sources as varied as a medieval Galician-Portuguese songbook and Brazil’s arid, scorching Northeast.

That some succeed better than others is no surprise given Pederneiras’s reach. Thursday night’s performance at the Schubert was no exception, with the rousing “Parabelo” (1997) rocking me out of my seat and the repetitive “Sem Mim (Without Me)” (2011) nearly lulling me to sleep.

I expected so much more from “Sem Mim.” With an original score by Carlos Nunes and Jose Miguel Wisnik and based on the “sea of Vigo song cycle,” as the program note put it, by Martin Codax, “Sem Mim” promised both poetry and verve. The theme was oceanic: Women waiting by the sea for their lovers to return. The songs intoned: “Have you seen my friend,/The man for whom I yearn?/O God, if only he’d come soon!”

A billowing expanse of translucent fabric hovered suspended — rife with peaks and valleys — over the action and at one point descended to become a tent housing a languid duet. Freusa Zechmeister’s costumes were intricate and exquisite: “tattoos” of inscriptions from the Middle Ages swirled and dove on the dancers’ knit unitards.

Pederneiras’s dances traditionally spring from the music. But in this case the dancers seemed to be dancing to the music. There was a flatness to the proceedings: The dancers amazed with their technical prowess and rich delivery. But neither the activity nor the tension ever built. What was meant to communicate an ebb and flow came across as static — despite the nonstop movement.

“Parabelo,” however, operated on an whole different plane — several planes, as a matter of fact. Set to a score full of drumming and chanting and buzzing by Wisnik and Tom Ze, the piece was full of stark tableaux punctuated by a leg thrust skyward here, a body as bridge there, buttery spins against floating arms, and riveting partnering.

The juxtaposition of elements continually surprised: Arms akimbo, dancers high-stepped in varying permutations. Women, each in their own circle of light, sank from a deep plie to a squat, to a frog-like pose that came out of nowhere but made ultimate kinesthetic sense. Forearms spun from the elbow, pelvises gyrated, feet pawed the ground. The backdrop changed from a series of large heads and faces to a wall full of family pictures. The costumes, again by Zechmeister, shifted into a hot zone: vibrant oranges, yellows, reds.

As the action accelerated, the dancers’ exuberance became our own.

GRUPO CORPO

Citi Shubert Theatre, Boston

Presenting organizations: Celebrity Series of Boston

Date of first performance: Thursday, Feb. 28

Date closing: Program featuring the works “Ima” and “Parabelo” through Saturday, March 1