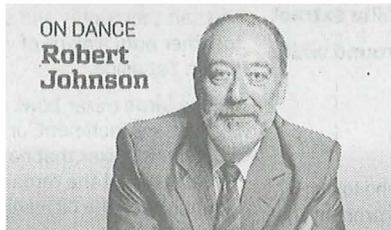


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Dance inspired by texting may get you talking

ON DANCE
**Robert
Johnson**



David Roussève admits he was annoyed. The choreographer of “Stardust,” which his REALITY company brings to Montclair State University tomorrow through Sunday, doubles as a teacher in World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, where, he says, he couldn’t get his students to put down their iPhones.

Roussève, 54, is Old School enough to have been taught to shake hands and look people in the eye. As a dance-maker, his work depends upon an intimacy that’s only possible when living, breathing individuals share the same physical space. To him, the new social media seemed like a barrier to genuine communication, and the sight of young people continually thumbing text messages grated on his nerves.

“What does that say, when you can’t put your technology down?” Roussève says he asked himself. “And what does it say when that’s how you primarily know people?”

As he worked on “Stardust,” however, Roussève says his feelings began to change. The hard-hitting dance theater piece, which began as a riposte to the habits of the digital age, evolved into something far more ambitious. Roussève says he found himself texting his partner as he traveled, and the contact was



JORGE VISMARA

David Roussève's REALITY company performs his “Stardust,” about an ostracized teen, in Montclair tomorrow through Sunday.

meaningful. Then, as he shaped “Stardust’s” central character — a black, gay teen named Junior who sends distress signals to the outside world in the form of text messages — Roussève began to recall his own difficult coming-of-age in Houston.

“The emotional through-lines are 100 percent personal,” he says. “We all know and hope that this is changing radically, but there are still a lot of gay teens, and particularly teens of color, who feel ostracized from their communities of color because they’re queer. I certainly did when I was growing up.”

Today’s national debate over gay marriage reminded Roussève of

the role the church has played in promoting prejudice.

“There’s no affront to me greater than saying you’re so worthless that even God doesn’t love you,” he says. “So that became the impassioned dialogue at the core of the piece.”

Daringly, Roussève decided that he would make the protagonist of “Stardust” both literally and symbolically invisible. The audience never sees him, and only learns his story through the desperately lonely texts that appear onscreen, along with occasional Skype calls from Junior’s grandfather and animations by Cari Ann Shim Sham visualizing Junior’s fantasies.

Stardust

Where: Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair

When: Tomorrow at 7:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m.

How much: \$20; call (973) 655-5112 or visit peakperfs.org.

Ten dancers compensate for Junior’s absence, symbolizing the community he yearns for and lending him their bodies, to give “Stardust” its emotional wallop. They’re a diverse, multi-generational group that can make Junior’s story universal. “With all different colors, gay and straight, all jumping in and out of celebrating this marginalized and invisible character,” Roussève says, “it transcends the boundary of his identity.”

Despite the lyricism of Nat King Cole’s “When I Fall in Love,” a favorite of Junior’s grandfather, and despite the drive of original music by d. Sabela grimes, whose urban funk occasions “some gorgeous, up-tempo dancing,” Roussève says “Stardust’s” resolution is bitter-sweet, combining exhilaration, joy and tragedy.

“I’m into the challenge of a nuanced and provocative ending,” Roussève says. He hopes the piece will spark debate as audience members ask, “Did it need to end that way?”

Robert Johnson:
rjohnson76@nyc.rr.com