



Los Angeles Dance Review: STARDUST (David Roussève / REALITY at REDCAT)

by Tony Frankel on September 25, 2013 in Theater-Los Angeles

STARRY STARRY NIGHT

David Roussève's full-length dance piece that opened at REDCAT last night is something of a miracle. Choreographed, written, and directed by Roussève, *Stardust* effectively amalgamates so many elements of multi-disciplinary performing arts—theater, story, dance, multi-media—that it should be a template for any dance company that desires to move, touch and inspire their audience.

It begins with a narrative. An African American gay urban teenager struggles to find a way to express himself amongst the turmoil of inner-city life. He is clearly a sensitive soul trapped in the body of a societal misfit. As much as he wants to love and embrace his fellow man, he finds himself becoming as much of a bully as those who beat him up in the school hallways. He asks God why He made him a faggot, black and a “dumb-ass.” Even with two loving supporters—his grandfather and a school therapist—the unnamed protagonist consistently finds himself at odds with his brutal reality.

Yet for all of the empathy we have for this troubled adolescent, we never see him on stage. This coming of age tale is told via his unanswered emotional tweets and text messages sent to a receiver he doesn't know. In his search for God, the “innernet” is his connection to the universe. Rarely has any dance piece—or play for that matter—so efficiently commented on the paradox of communication in the electronic age: For all of the tools we have to connect, we are more disconnected than ever.

The texted dialogue projected on the back wall is insightful, authentic, poignant and surprisingly humorous (terrific dramaturgical work by Lucy Burns). When the therapist recommends that the teen get a pet, he downloads an app of a hamster, texting that he must be careful when snuggling his new pet as there is a crack in the glass of his old iPhone. The Alice Walker-like texts (“feel good her call me child”) are infectious. I simply cannot remember a time when I felt so connected to a character that I never see. Plus, by chronicling the journey of this despairing but eternally hopeful student, *Stardust* will no doubt foster a much-needed public conversation on teen-bullying, at-risk youth, promiscuity versus the need to love and be loved, and the correlation between gayness, spirituality and religion.

The boy also uses art as a portal for discovering God. On a museum trip, he abhors the naturalism of Rembrandt but comprehends the impressionism of Van Gogh. His grandfather's recordings of Nat King Cole feed his imagination, and while songs such as “Nature Boy” perfectly elucidate the boy's state of mind, sound designer d. Sabela grimes' hip-hop-infused original compositions add a layer of danger and anger so prevalent in inner-city life.

Movement is as crucial to this work as the monologue. Working with REALITY, his 10-member, multiethnic, transnational L.A.-based company, Roussève incorporates a series of fervid and emotional jazz-infused dance pieces that highlight the boy's sporadic experiences. As modern dance goes, his movement vocabulary is truly accessible because it is used to tell a story. Whether as solos, duets or a unified ensemble, this isn't just dance for the sake of dance, it intensifies the narrative. The artists, all of whom master ballet, jazz and modern dance, are Charisse Skye Aguirre, Emily Beattie, Leanne Iacovetta, Jasmine Jawato, Nehara Kalev, Michel Kouakou, Kevin Le, Nguyen Nguyễn, Taisha Paggett and Kevin Williamson. Roussève, who normally makes a bigger appearance in his works, appears for a brief period, but it is an impressive cameo.

The only misstep occurs when a video monitor displays the boy's grandfather as he communicates via Skype in the boy's dreams. Roussève plays the grandfather and, clearly made-up to be older, his folksy interpretation of the character rings false. This may have been intentional as a way of exhibiting the old man through a dream, but within such a flawless show, the result is jarring.

This illuminative, captivating and surreal work may be rife with modern references—the older generation may be stymied by symbols such as <3 and :-(- in the texts—but the themes are timeless. After a gorgeous pas de trois is executed in front of Cari Ann Shim Sham's video of a shimmering star-pocked sky while Cole croons “When I Fall in Love,” you may be inspired to shut off your mobile devices in the future and hug someone instead.

See more at: <http://www.stageandcinema.com/2013/09/25/stardust-rousseve-reality-redcat/#sthash.5i3aPITd.dpuf>