

# LA STAGE TIMES

## Roussève and grimes Reach for the *Stardust* at REDCAT

by Jessica Koslow | September 23, 2013

David Roussève is in a particularly good mood, sitting in his office in UCLA's Glorya Kaufman Hall about 10 days before his latest work, *Stardust*, has its very first viewing at REDCAT as part of the Radar L.A. festival. Or maybe he always begins his sentences with a joyful burst of laughter.

The 53-year-old, Alpert Award-winning director-choreographer is speaking about d. Sabela grimes, who not only composed original music but also crafted an ongoing layer of sound design for the entire work. "He's one of my favorite people on the planet," Roussève says. "He's so talented, and what a nice and incredibly evolved guy."

"This is a really heady piece in its own way," says Roussève. "I'm trying to conduct a social and intellectual conversation, but also it's meant to communicate with you on the level of the heart. Sabela takes in both of those dialogues...It's very hard to describe what he does. It's so idiosyncratic and unique to him."

*Stardust* is a coming-of-age story for the electronic age about a 16-year-old gay, African-American boy who, according to Roussève, "is trying to find something more than the violence and chaos he's facing." The main character never appears onstage. Instead, his voice is projected via videos of tweets and text messages. It's Roussève's most interdisciplinary piece ever — not in the number of elements he uses, but in how intimately and deeply woven together they are. Cari Ann Shim Sham designed the video imagery, grimes the sound and Roussève the movement.

Roussève and grimes met in the UCLA department of world arts and cultures/dance, where Roussève is still a professor of choreography and grimes was, at the time, a returning professional graduate student. Roussève became one of grimes' advisors on *Bulletproof Deli*, a solo piece grimes premiered in 2008 at Highways Performance Space.

"Sabela is one of the few people who share..." Roussève begins, before switching his train of thought. "I love using really accessible African-American pop culture. But the work is out there, experimental, challenging in its shape. *Bulletproof Deli* is a perfect example. Really accessible. I love that sense of people grounded in African-American pop culture who are also pushing boundaries and exploring new forms. In many ways, he's just the perfect viewer for this piece. Because it's trying to do that."

grimes is equally as effusive when asked about Roussève. He speaks of Roussève's talent as both a writer/storyteller and choreographer, and his genius when it comes to "knowing how to make them work with each other and work with overall themes, concepts and narratives" in whatever piece he's working on. grimes admires Roussève's ability and vision to select the perfect ensembles for his works.

Everyone involved in *Stardust* is UCLA-affiliated, from the 10 members in his dance company Reality to grimes and Shim Sham. Filling out the list are an undergraduate, a few BAs, one current and several former MFAs, and alumni, all ranging from age 19 to 53. Roussève joined UCLA's department of world arts and cultures/dance in 1996, and is now one of the highest-ranking choreography professors.

"Several of us are from the East Village, '80s and '90s New York, that community of alternative dance makers," says Roussève. "UCLA has become a mini-East Village. Smart people making work who want to talk about it, driven but humble, hardworking. UCLA has been an indispensable part of being in LA for me."

Just as the creative community at UCLA has supported Roussève, the university has benefited from the progressive choreographer's work and ideas.

In the last four years, starting with *Stardust*, in every UCLA spring quarter four choreographers make new work in a course, and students can get credit.

"We have a lot of working choreographers on faculty here," Roussève says. "Academia and art-making can be a challenging blend. As a working artist, you can make it work, feed your process, work with younger artists and get health insurance. Art-making is what we bring to the table. How can we make room within an academic curriculum for the actual process of art-

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making? It feels like the first time we've been able to successfully do that. One of the best parts of *Stardust* has been redefining the role of art-making within the academic curriculum."

By the time the 85-minute piece has its official premiere in January 2014 at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, it will have been a four-year project, which has changed every year — not surprisingly, as tweets and texts are the foundation of *Stardust*'s dialogue. For example, with the invention of iPhone's Autocorrect, misspelled words are not as prevalent. Roussève also says that at the beginning of the process, the piece was totally in textspeak, but that is no longer true.

"People were like, huh?" says Roussève. "We have to communicate with the [age] 15s and 75s."

Roussève uses many adjectives to describe his work: schmaltzy, romantic, New Agey, postmodern spirituality. All of this finds a home in *Stardust* alongside grit, ghetto wit and violence as experienced in the Third Ward neighborhood in Houston, where Roussève was born and raised. It's also the first piece in which he specifically references Christianity. And he's afraid his message will be misunderstood.

"I fear people will think it's a retreat as opposed to an opening. They'll think, 'He's turning into a Bible thumper.' I'm not saying the return to religion is how we'll save ourselves. But I *am* saying acts of kindness is how we're going to save ourselves."

grimes also wants to clear up any misrepresentation of the music he contributes, which complements the Nat King Cole songs Roussève uses in *Stardust*. His is not hip-hop music. It's "soul music that is digital funk with an analog heart," says grimes via phone a couple of weeks before the LA unveiling. "Hip-hop is too narrow. It's inspired by hip-hop, specifically the Bomb Squad, the producers for Public Enemy. People think electronic music has no soul, but the soul and heart come from supporting the narrative, wanting to be in conversation with the Nat King Cole music and that era of music."

Being in the business as long as he has, Roussève knows there's only one way to address both artists' concerns about being misinterpreted. "In the end, art-making is such an abstraction," he says, "and the hardest thing is to let it go."

Regardless of how their work is digested, both artists are deeply moved by *Stardust*.

"There hasn't been a time throughout the development of *Stardust* that I have not laughed or cried," says grimes. "Yesterday, I was trying to keep it together, but there's this idea that we tell narratives through art to humanize people or groups of people. In David's case, he's not humanizing the main character. He reminds us in a very particular way that in general African Americans are people. That this young man is human. We're reminded in a way because we connect. It's such a human story."



David Roussève



D. Sabela Grimes