

The New York Times

Adversity, Relayed in Emoticons by a Troubled Gay Teenager In 'Stardust,' a Vortex Depicted via Text and Skype

By SIOBHAN BURKE FEB. 7, 2014



Stardust with, from left, Charisse Skye Aguirre, Kevin Williamson and Michel Kouakou at Montclair State. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

MONTCLAIR, N.J. — The first thing to know about David Roussève's "Stardust" is that you never actually see its protagonist, a black gay urban teenager named Junior. The voice at the heart of this 80-minute dance-theater piece, which had its regional premiere on Thursday in Montclair State University's Peak Performances series, speaks to us via text messages, projected on the back wall of the theater.

"Dear person who b at this #: Sup?" Junior writes by way of introduction, as the 10 distinctive dancers of Mr. Roussève's

company, from Los Angeles, Reality, sway through a gentle opening phrase. "I don't know u. But I text u my biggest secrets. Plz read, k?"

Junior faces a lot of adversity, its severity only intensified by the tossed-off medium of vowel-less words and emoticons: the death of his grandfather, who is his closest and perhaps only friend; rape by his foster dad; getting beat up by the boy he likes; and most pervasively, wondering if he is worthy of being loved, by others and by God. ("Stardust" has a strong biblical undercurrent.)

His life is not devoid of joy, which he finds in the music of Nat King Cole, in van Gogh's "Starry Night," in a digital hamster he acquires when his school therapist, Miss Thelma, prescribes a pet for his emotional well-being. He wants to be able to fly — like the pigeons, or "ghetto angels," in his neighborhood — and to cry. By the end, for better or worse, he has managed to do both.

If it sounds unnuanced, bordering dangerously on a caricature of inner-city hardship, that's because it is. Mr. Roussève wants so badly, it seems, for us to feel for this character — to really see this person, despite his absence — that he comes on far too strong, making it difficult to feel anything at all.

Mr. Roussève's lush, circular movement physicalizes the sparring dimensions of Junior's psyche. At any point, any one of his appealing dancers could be our protagonist. (So could Mr. Roussève, who dances briefly, a master of his own voluminous choreography.) They course between extremes of acting tough (thrusting out their chests, grabbing their crotches) and softening; a hand fluttering over the heart appears repeatedly. Emily Beattie and Taisha Paggett (whose elegant solo, later, is a highlight) come face-to-face in a combination of screaming match and laughing fit. Love songs by Cole, Johnny Mathis and Ella Fitzgerald alternate with D. Sabela Grimes's bass-heavy score.

The program notes for "Stardust" describe it as "a coming-of-age story for the Twitter generation." More often, it seems like a coming-of-age story for a generation trying to understand the Twitter generation. There is something decidedly retro, a little bit high-school-play, about a mock iPhone trundling onstage for a simulated Skype conversation. (Junior's inspirational creaky-voiced grandpa, who urges, "You got to believe who you are inside, boy!", is on the other end of the line.)

But "Stardust," evidently, is not incapable of casting a spell. Exiting the theater, I overheard two young men from the audience saying that they almost cried.

"Stardust" runs through Sunday at the Alexander Kasser Theater at Montclair State University in New Jersey; peakperfs.org.