

Los Angeles Times, 4/3/09

REVIEW

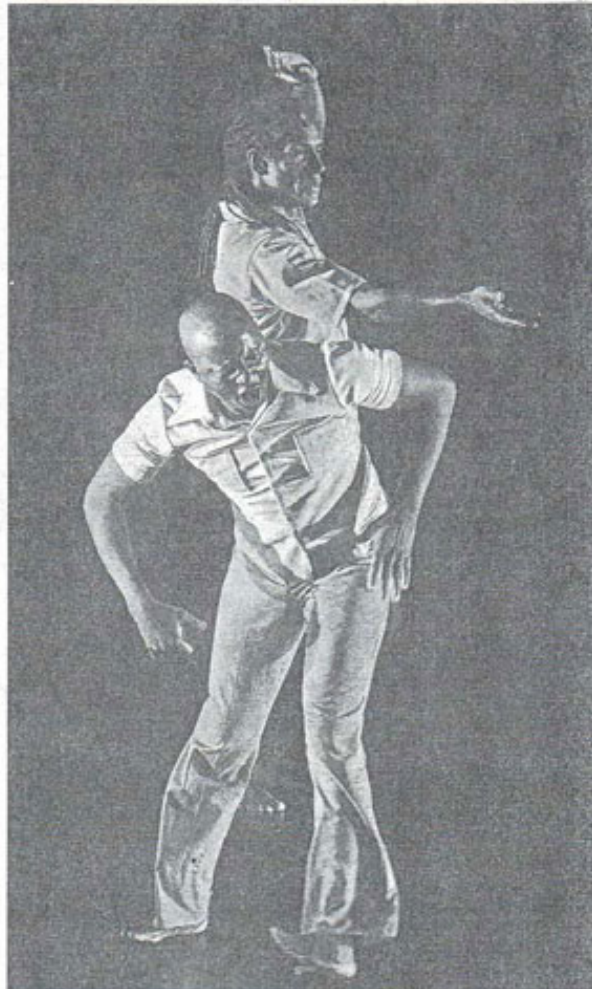
Spoken words, flowing limbs

David Roussève's 'Saudade' weaves a bittersweet African American tale.

HARLES McNULTY
THEATER CRITIC

"Saudade," the untranslatable title of David Roussève's dance-theater piece, which runs through Sunday at the Freud Playhouse courtesy of UCLA Live, is a Portuguese word encompassing longing for what has been lost and hope for its unlikely return. The meaning is as emotionally rich as it is elusive — qualities that fit this meditative collage, which is suffused with mourning, mystery and more than a little head-scratching mayhem.

Working again with Reality, his multiethnic, transnational L.A.-based company, Roussève narrates a series of slippery, highly subjective explorations into the "bittersweet" experience of being. The monologues he delivers, spoken in the Southern cadences of African American characters (including a former slave girl who has learned to write and a mother trying to rescue her babies in Katrina-flooded New Orleans), are incorporated in a kaleidoscope of video projections, eclectic world dance selections and bursts of movement theater that often seem uncorked from improvisational games. Fado, a folksy Portuguese blues, provides musical ballast



KEN HIVELEY Los Angeles Times

BODILY NARRATIVE: Movement and monologue propel David Roussève, background, and Olivier Tarpaga.

David Roussève/ Reality

Where: Freud Playhouse, UCLA, Westwood

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 7 p.m. Sunday. Ends Sunday.

Price: \$34 and \$46

Contact: (310) 825-2101 or www.uclalive.org

Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes

Moving incrementally and at times sluggishly across the stage — the passage is made deliberately epic — Roussève appears in no hurry to get to his final destination. Dreadlocks going gray cap a graceful, not-yet-old frame. Yet the past weighs down the present. The struggles of black Americans — oppression and abuse, poverty and neglect, AIDS and alienation — register in the body of this dancer-choreographer, whose death-haunted imagination is drawn to the polarity and paradox of bondage and antic freedom.

There's mention early on of a woods, and it's hard not to hear echoes of Dante's opening to "Inferno": "When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray." Dante's collective notion of "our life" is particularly apt, as Roussève moves from the personal to the historical and on to the universal.

Circulating around our storyteller, guide and existential conduit is a frenzy of physical activity. The seven performers in Roussève's orbit — many of them former graduate students from UCLA's world arts and cultures de-

(cont'd on back)

partment, where he's a professor of choreography — press upon us an awareness of their corporeal life. We hear their breath rumble through their throats and chests. We see their vulnerability as they fall to the ground or get beaten. We gape as they descend into the adrenaline-infused throes of whatever mood has overtaken them, aggressive one minute, silly the next.

The canvas is hectic, but the overall look of the production has a remarkable integrity. A scenic backdrop, designed by Peter Melville, resembles a crossword puzzle that seems undestined to be filled in. David Ferri's lighting adds hallucinatory luster. Ashley Hunt's video effects are most effective when most subliminal.

If some of the images seem overwrought— (a woman on film crying as she stuffs chili peppers into her mouth) or jejune (routine explosions of wearying horseplay), the piece ultimately attains that philosophical state, in which after an episode of grief, a glint of sunlight or a fragrant breeze can simultaneously moisten your eyes and leave you smiling in gratitude.

charles.mcNulty@latimes.
com