

DANCE: Rousseve considers human condition

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David Rousseve is one of the most provocative figures on the modern dance scene: a multitasking artist, a low-key but incisively compelling performer eloquent in both words and movement, and a choreographer of wide-ranging imagination. His vibrant theater pieces tend toward the surreal with occasionally a non-sequitur dadaist touch.

All this is present in vivid detail in David Rousseve/Reality's "Saudade," which had its world premiere Thursday in the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center's Kay Theatre at the University of Maryland. His palette includes wordy ruminations, hysterical outbursts, screaming fits, vocal ululations and a fetching woman in a brief pink bikini who strolls around the stage holding up a sign.

The pain and cruelty of slavery is a recurrent theme in Mr. Rousseve's work. A decade and a half ago, he brought a work here, "Urban Scenes, Creole Dreams," in which the focus was on the rape of a slave. This time, the beating of a slave, Sally, is a haunting centerpiece of "Saudade."

In a high, scratchy voice, Mr. Rousseve, as Sally, recounts being taught to write by her sister and the slave owner's reaction: "The day after I turned nine, he found out I could write and, more important, who done taught me. He strung my sister up by her hands and beat her hisself. I had never seen him whip a slave hisself."

He goes on, "After ten or so licks, my sister black out. The weight of her body pulled one of her arm bones out of her shoulder part. But the joke was on him, because with jest one good arm, she was never so good at picking again.

"I do not know if she felt my tears as they fell onto her back and ran into the tracks made by the whip. I do not know if she heard my whisper, 'I would give my life so that you not suffer this way.' And I do not know if it would have helped if she had."

The collagelike elements of the work cover a bittersweet, wide-ranging look at the human condition. "Saudade" has no exact English translation but suggests longing or nostalgia.



Members of the David Rousseve/Reality troupe (from left) Olivier Tarpaga, David Rousseve and Esther Baker-Tarpaga perform "Saudade." The work incorporates contemporary and traditional Portuguese fado music and stories of slaves in the American South.

Among the many disparate elements adding to the work's richness: the haunting Portuguese fado music, David Ferri's lighting design, Peter Melville's set design, Ashley Hunt's video design and, most of all, the remarkable talents of Mr. Rousseve's seven-member dance group. The troupe brings remarkable, full-throated strength to the stage, from djembe drummer Olivier Tarpaga's wildly exuberant dancing to a woman gamely chewing on, then spitting out, red hot peppers, seen on video as tears stream down her cheeks.

Through it all, the exuberant humanity, flashes of wit and sadness shining through this provocative work give it a surprising and haunting afterlife. Mr. Rousseve's work needs to be seen here more often. How about the Kennedy Center next time?

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MAXIMUM RATING: FOUR STARS