

## FALL ARTS: DANCE



Photographs by ANNE CUSAOK Los Angeles Times

**CHOREOGRAPHER** David Rousseve, whose Reality troupe will perform at Radar L.A., is known for his dance-theater hybrids. Here he's with dancer Taisha Paggett.

# Spreading 'Stardust'

David Rousseve offers a coming-of-age tale, complete with text messages

By SUSAN JOSEPH

As a child growing up in Houston, David Rousseve spent most of his Sundays attending an African American Roman Catholic church. Though determined to be a model altar boy, he questioned the definition of sin.

"I certainly wasn't in touch then with my own sexuality," says the now 53-year-old choreographer, who came out as a gay man in his mid-20s to his family. "But I knew for a fact there were people in that congregation who were having sex and who weren't married, and it didn't seem right that all these people were going to hell."

Decades later, Rousseve says he felt "like a child again sitting in my church" after Congress passed the



Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, which allowed states the right not to recognize same-sex marriage and which the Supreme Court overturned in June.

"For me, DOMA was basically saying you can't get married because you are not a child of God," he says.

So the choreographer, who first rose to prominence in the 1990s for his autobiographical, politically driven dance-theater hybrids, decided to create his own child of God.

He's an ostracized, gay black teenager of the 21st century and the invisible yet highly expressive main character of "Stardust," Roussève's latest and arguably most personal and complex work to date. One of 18 productions that will be presented next week at Radar L.A., the citywide theater festival now in its second edition, "Stardust" juxtaposes a virtuosic jazz and hip-hop-influenced movement vocabulary with the teen's coming-of-age story that's communicated entirely through video projected text messages.

Performed by the choreographer's 10-member company Reality and set to a musical soundscape of Nat King Cole songs and original hip-hop-based compositions by d. Sabela grimes, the multilayered narrative revolves around a tormented boy who seeks secret redemption from outside forces, including his grandfather's love, the music of Cole and the paintings of Van Gogh. The dancers, with their emotionally charged movement, seek to capture the boy's alternating states of despair, anger, hope and romantic yearning as a unified ensemble and in a series of duets and solos.

And though not directly autobiographical, the dance is also Roussève's response "to this idea that I don't belong to God, and it captures the truth of my childhood more than pieces that were about the facts of my childhood," he says.

Scheduled to receive its official world premiere in January at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland, "Stardust" will embark on a national tour through 2015, including a stint next summer at the Jacob's Pillow festival in Massachusetts. Radar L.A. audiences will be the first to see it as a finished work, Sept. 24 to 29.

Presented by REDCAT in association with Center Theatre Group, Radar L.A. has selected local and international artists this year whose works highlight the interdisciplinary nature that defines much of cutting-edge contemporary performance. Including Roussève's company in this lineup made perfect sense, says Mark Murphy, REDCAT's executive director and one of the festival's chief curators.

"This increasing interdisciplinary approach has become essential to finding new forms of expression, and David is someone who has existed both in the worlds of dance and theater since the beginning of his career," says Murphy. "He is a master storyteller who's always used a combination of movement, text and images to evoke very powerful themes and



**KEVIN WILLIAMSON**, right, at a rehearsal of "Stardust," which features Nat King Cole songs and hip-hop-based compositions by d. Sabela grimes.

emotions."

Sitting in his office for a recent pre-rehearsal interview at UCLA, where he's a choreography professor, Roussève displays both a sharp sense of humor and an unmitigated sincerity when discussing his work.

The inspiration for "Stardust," he says, came from a desire to explore the relationship between technology and intimacy after years of observing his students' inability to disconnect from their mobile devices. "Then one time I was out of town, and I was texting my partner, and I found the experience to be more intimate than talking. And I thought, 'This is a complicated thing.'"

But once Roussève started developing a movement vocabulary for the piece, he found himself mining his own childhood experiences and realized that what he wanted to create had deeper, more spiritual dimensions.

"This was my time to make a loving, compassionate statement about a boy being dehumanized by his community and about his absolute need to find some shred of humanity in a world that seems hopeless," he says.

Roussève spent about three years crafting the work, collaborating with members of his company and experimenting with new material in a class he created at UCLA for students to gain professional-level experience working with faculty and visiting choreographers.

"I have a different perception of what time does to choreography from working with David," says Kevin Williamson, a 31-year-old member of Roussève's company and a master of fine arts student at UCLA. "David allows time to hone his process,

and this piece may have been three years in the making, but it's been 50 years in his psyche."

For Roussève, the process allowed him to rediscover his passion for the "kick-ass dancing" and the jazz-inflected, Bob Fosse-style choreography that he studied in his youth, in addition to mastering the medium of text messaging to reveal the heart and soul of his invisible teenager.

"I had first tried to do this in tweets, but I couldn't get the messages down to 140 characters," he says, laughing. "But with texting, I found there was something about being restricted in this medium that really brought out the directness of my writing."

While the text marks a departure for Roussève as it's projected rather than spoken by himself or his dancers, "the journey you go on in his work remains the same," says Taisha Paggett, a 36-year-old dancer who has collaborated with Roussève for the past decade.

"In all his works, David has cycled through these different personalities and voices, but it's always his voice. He really puts himself into his characters, and the results are always deeply emotional, with as much joy as there is pain."

Personally, Roussève feels "more moved by this piece than any other piece I've ever made. I hope it translates for the audience," he says, noting his biggest phobia lies in people finding the work unabashedly religious and "saying, 'Oh, he's going back to his Catholic roots.' But what I'm really doing is confronting those roots. This idea that God doesn't approve of who I am? That's been my driving force."

calendar@latimes.com