

The Washington Post

Performance

A Worthwhile Emotional Roller Coaster

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Saturday, February 7, 2009; Page C08

One day, some breakthrough string-theory of the heart is sure to explain why beauty and damnation can be perceived at the same moment, why grief and joy can hit you at once. Until then, David Roussève's dance-theater work "Saudade," which had its world premiere Thursday at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, offers a succinct and lyrical look at how the highs and lows of life collide.

For example: You fall in love with a nasty, mangy alley cat with breath like rotten tuna and paws as soft and caressing as the kiss you're not getting from anyone else. Or: You're languishing near death in a hospital bed, clicking through reruns of "I Love Lucy," ready to give up when the one person you long for walks through the door, bringing you flowers and a reason to live.

These are some of the stories Roussève tells in a series of witty and wrenching monologues, and they bring us to the heart of his argument with the human condition. His beef: Life is complicated, a mystery that can't be solved. It's hardly a new discovery, but to say his lament is shared by anyone who breathes is to take nothing away from Roussève's fierce, poetic journey to explore it.

Roussève is one of the modern dance world's great stage personalities. Tall and lean, with a cascade of graying dreadlocks and the taut, commanding profile of a Cherokee chief, he combines a powerful physical presence with an uncanny ability to channel the experiences of the weakest and most marginalized among us. He inhabits characters with an eerily convincing depth of feeling. If you had seen him in 1994 in "Urban Scenes/Creole Dreams" at Lisner Auditorium, you would not forget how, his voice rising to a falsetto, he brought forth the story of his Creole grandmother -- a tale layered in loss, pain and undying will.



"Saudade" intersperses tales of the odd places of love lost and found with moves inspired by Portuguese Fado music. (Photos By Jorge Vismara)

"Saudade" brings Roussève, a choreography professor at UCLA, back to the Washington area for the first time in nearly a decade. The 90-minute piece, which closed last night, takes its title from a Portuguese word roughly translated as bittersweet or nostalgia, but the experience of it isn't always wistful or melancholic; in fact, it's often funny. In its best moments, "Saudade" is disarmingly blunt. Take the beginning: Roussève ambles downstage to declare, "This is the story of me, searching desperately for the meaning of life."

The work proceeds as a surreal flashback to moments that defy comprehension. Some are autobiographical (the cat, the hospital). In other moments Roussève gives voice to others. One forms the blistering narrative spine of "Saudade": a teenage slave named Sally, whose brutal memories Roussève unspools in a high, rasping voice. Detailing the horror of being raped by her master, Sally describes how she was able to reach a hand through a hole in the wall and touch her sister on the other side, whose tears of helplessness filled Sally's palm. "At the exact same moment when my body found out how much I could be hated," she tells us, "my heart found out how much I could be loved."

It was moments like this that caught the heart. Less effective were the scenes involving eight other performers. To them Roussève left the difficult work of expanding on his themes with expressionistic movement and verbal play. These episodes lacked the urgency and revelation of Roussève's stories, however, and one felt impatient for him to break in with another tale. That is, except for any moment, brief as they were, when Taisha Paggett, Anjali Tata-Hudson or Olivier Tarpaga shivered and stamped to Portuguese Fado songs. These sweet-sour musical offerings, with their tremulous vocals and high, mandolin-like notes, brought all the beauty and pain of "Saudade" into shimmering focus. Roussève let loose at the end, and the musical flight of his arms soaring outward from his unburdened breast was just the glorious synthesis of delicacy and strength of spirit we'd been waiting for.

In the end, "Saudade" comes close to the same kind of colliding extremes that sparked its creation. Only Roussève could layer Fado music, a dead cat and a young girl's simultaneous discovery of evil and redemption into a narrative as tender as it is tough-minded. Here's hoping he doesn't wait another decade to return.