



BY JORGE VESMARA

David Roussève, center, works with Olivier Tarpaga and Esther Baker-Tarpaga, who perform with the choreographer in "Saudade."

## *Walking a Timeline in Other People's Shoes*

### David Roussève's 'Saudade' Hits Home

By RACHEL SASLOW  
*Washington Post Staff Writer*

David Roussève says that performing his new dance-theater piece, "Saudade," is "the hardest thing I've ever done."

He's being dramatic, especially considering that the 49-year-old has built his career on choreographing emotionally wrenching pieces about the African American experience. But in "Saudade" — making its world premiere tonight at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center — his challenge is entirely different: To walk in slow motion, in one diagonal line, across the stage for 90 minutes.

On his trek across the stage, Roussève pauses to deliver six monologues as five different African American characters at different points in U.S. history. As he inches along, his toes feel for little pieces of tape that mark where he needs stand for each monologue.

"The whole piece became this ... journey of introspection," he says. "And then I finish the piece at the end of what you could interpret as a lifeline." He laughs, loudly, throwing back his black-and-gray dreadlocks. "This sounds so bogus!" Roussève tries not to take himself too seriously, even when his work deals with such tough issues as HIV, Hurricane Katrina and slavery. Those topics are linked by an element of bittersweetness ("Saudade" is Portuguese for "bittersweet") in the piece, which the center co-commissioned with UCLA Live and San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. "These characters are all fiction," he says. "After I wrote them, a light bulb went off and I was very surprised to realize that, very clearly to me, these characters are all autobiographical, actually." Roussève, who is of Creole heritage, grew up in Houston. As a kid, he was lousy at sports and a self-professed "wimp;" his elder sister Laura had to stand up for him. His school was being integrated, and he was one of 11 African American students in a school of 717 kids. He was nicknamed "Bushtop" because of his huge Afro.

That experience informed "Saudade's" slave character, Sally, who learns to read and write at great personal sacrifice. She repeats the sentence "My name is Sally" as a grasp for dignity. Recalls Roussève: "Oh my God, that's how I was feeling as 'Bushtop.'" "In retrospect," the performer continues, "why did I not, in that moment, have enough confidence to realize it's a degrading nickname?" Roussève is chatting in the center's darkened Kay Theatre while on dinner break from a recent rehearsal. His seven dancers are working on a scene where they lay on their sides, convulsing in unison with their right arms in the air. Then, they loudly exhale, drop their arms

and roll onto their bellies. Roussève's direction: "Your arm already wants to be dead — or in a deep sleep, depending on your interpretation." The performance is set to a stirring soundtrack of Portuguese music, which Roussève chose after a friend invited him to a fado concert and he "fell in love" with the style.

Like most of his earlier works, "Saudade" includes comedy. His brand of silly humor still runs through his work, a holdover from his musical comedy days at Princeton University. He was pre-law back then until he realized he could have a social impact with dance and theater. He spent the '80s in New York City, acting in soap operas and commercials by day and performing avant-garde theater and dance by night. He started choreographing out of frustration.

"No one was saying the things I wanted to say, so I started choreographing as a way to perform work I wanted to perform." He started the dance company Reality in 1989 with a strong emphasis on multiculturalism.

The Reality dancers in "Saudade" are all either professors or graduates from the UCLA Department of World Arts and Cultures, where he has taught choreography since 1996. His dancers helped him choreograph "Saudade," drawing from their expertise in dance forms from all over the world, including India, Indonesia and West Africa.

"He wanted the piece to be diverse, and I'm straight from Africa!" says "Saudade" dancer Olivier Tarpaga, 30, who grew up in Burkina Faso and teaches African dance at UCLA. In his classes, he tries to unite disparate forms of dance. Or, as he puts it: "Instead of jumping from A to C, how can you transition in B and have it be easy to watch?"

Tarpaga says he gets very emotional during the hospital scene in "Saudade." Roussève plays a character who is sick with HIV-related pneumonia. Tarpaga, who had malaria as a child, tries to hold back tears when he hears Roussève's character say, "How can I describe to you what being really sick is like?"

Roussève also addressed AIDS in such works as 1995's "Whispers of Angels," about a young gay man dying of the disease, and with his choreography for the 1997 PBS television series "Positive: Life With HIV." In 2005, he also took on the issue of same-sex marriage, in "Jumping the Broom." "Maybe my work used to be more glaringly political," he says, "but to me, this is actually the most political it's ever been because it's so personal."

*Saudade, tonight and tomorrow night at 8 at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, Route 193 and Stadium Drive, College Park. \$35; students \$7. 301-405-2787 or visit [www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu](http://www.claricesmithcenter.umd.edu).*



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Roussève's latest work is partly autobiographical. He sees himself in the characters, including Sally, the slave who learns to read and write.