



Exquisite Distraction: David Roussève's *Saudade*

Ariel Osterweis Scott | University of California, Berkeley

Saudade. Written, choreographed, and directed by David Roussève. Performed by David Roussève/REALITY. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA. 7 March 2009.

Sandwiched between performances by Jérôme Bel and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, David Roussève/REALITY's San Francisco premiere of *Saudade* issued a corrective for anyone who has imagined that performance can only and inevitably represent itself. Roussève's latest work bridges the seemingly irreconcilable distance separating Bel's contemporary theater—which is also its own critique—from the Ailey institution's compulsion toward over-rehearsed, highly kinetic, rather conservative representations of "the African American experience." (Without *Saudade* as a point of reference, the quotation marks might not seem as necessary). Emerging through a masterful (not a master) narrative of personal illness that confronts collective trauma, *Saudade* embraces a collage of global dance forms while mining black cultural memory, feminist autobiographical traditions, and the possibilities of communal choreography. Set to fado, a genre of Portuguese music closely associated with

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longing and the bittersweet, *Saudade* endeavors to capture the curious collaborations that suffering and love conspire to produce despite devastating personal, political, and historical circumstances.

Fado's nineteenth-century beginnings combine West African dance rhythms, the sailor's melancholia, and the rough edges of urban Portuguese working class concerns, a complex blend of influences that nonetheless might be distinguished in any given composition. The form thus proves apt for Roussève's piece, in which five personal narratives contributed by African American characters are interwoven amidst choreographic performances by African, Indian, Korean, and Indonesian dancers Roussève met in the uniquely Pacific metropolis of Los Angeles that he calls home. The performance presents a series of nonlinear distillations, from the global to the local, the communal to the individual, and from history to the present, that neither appear randomly selected nor pedantically chosen to sermonize in the manner too often associated with self-conscious political art.



David Roussève in *Saudade*.

What ties the piece together is the masterful yet restrained, poetic yet self-effacing autobiographical frame supplied by Roussève himself. The piece opens with his first-person address to the audience: himself, David, as himself, David-that is, he explains, so long as he occupies a one particular spot downstage and to the left. As he abandons this spot (moving upstage right and slowly progressing back to the downstage left position during the performance), he abandons references to David, moving diagonally across space while conjuring characters: his grandmother in the black South of his youth, a hospitalized urban black man dying of a chronic illness, a young slave woman named Sally, a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, and an older man who longs for his former wife by treasuring the sensation of the cushioned paws of his pet cat, whose mauled body turns up on the side of the street. Without resorting to melodramatic angst, Roussève peppers these carefully-wrought characters with moments of everyday humor, minute yet crucial distractions that become the foundations of emotional survival. One character-a Hurricane Katrina victim who witnesses her children suffer during the Bush administration's failed response-ponders her inability to remember the "big

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things," lingering on "little things" like her inability to wipe her infant's nose for fear of dropping her other two children while escaping the flood.



David Roussève, Nehara Kalev (shadow), and Taisha Paggett in *Saudade*.

These tiny distractions have choreographic (and textual) correlations in *Saudade*. The incredibly individualistic yet cohesive cast of dancers maintains a kinetic vocabulary comprised of West African jumps, Indonesian hand gestures, and an amalgamation of contemporary dance falls, rolls, shouts, and scoots. With the exception of a lyrical passage connoting a commitment to life at the piece's culmination, Roussève limits his own physical lexis to a prolonged, durational walk from the upstage right corner toward "his spot" on the downstage left corner, and back again. Performing longing amidst nostalgia's nonlinear temporality, unrequited returns, enlightening glimpses, and slippery futures, Roussève is surrounded by images of unexpected synchronicity. This is a dance that celebrates commonality through difference.



Nehara Kalev, Anjali Tata-Hudson, Sri Susilowati, Taisha Paggett, Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Olivier Tarpaga, and Marianne Kim in *Saudade*.

As Roussève travels the distance that separates Bel from Ailey, he does not provide simple answers. His is a fragmented exercise in storytelling with no beginning, middle,

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or end. Among other things, *Saudade* presents the story of race without mentioning its name; humorous detours interrupt excruciating tales (nay, retellings) of slave beatings and other sufferings. Thus, during a bitterly funny section on joy, a bikini-clad hostess (think boxing) crosses the stage with signs that announce rounds and that comment sarcastically on the enactments that follow ("they're faking it," reads one such sign). Elsewhere, an Indonesian trickster harasses her fellow dancers, offering to pay them one dollar to eat the "hottest pepper on earth." Sally, the slave, encapsulates *Saudade's* overarching sentiment when she muses that, "The same moment I discovered how much my body could be hated is the same moment my heart discovered how much I could be loved. This was a life that I could never understand." The backdrop, an uneven black and white grid, alternatively reflects the imposing outline of a metal gate with the illumination of a stained glass window. Across this scrim-and later on a panel framed by crutches-play videos in which, among various images, black scribbles efface a white background, and vice-versa. In the final video, the trickster eats the chili pepper she has been unable to peddle. Within a matter of seconds, her eyes capture a range of emotions reflecting the mysterious contradictions at the heart of the piece: elation becomes surprise, laughter becomes fear, fear becomes pain, pain becomes disgust; as the audience laughs and cries with her, the trickster bitterly consumes her own joke.

Ariel Osterweis Scott é estudante em PhD em Estudos Performáticos pela University of California, Berkeley e possui um mestrado em antropologia pela Columbia University. Sua pesquisa se encontra na interseção da raça, gênero, virtuosidade e temporalidade na dança contemporânea na América e na África. Seus trabalhos escritos foram publicados nas revistas *Women and Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, *In Dance*, e *Dancer Magazine*. Tendo dançado com as companhias de Mia Michaels, Heidi Latsky, Dwight Rhoden e Desmond Richardson (Complexions), Scott coreografou trabalhos que exploram a duplicação, a gravidez, a tradução e os poemas de Robert Grenier. Pode ser contatada pelo e-mail aos@berkeley.edu.