

Brazilian fireworks explode at the Pillow

By Richard Houdek

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BECKET — Jacob's Pillow did not have the rockets' red glare of Tanglewood, but America's shrine of dance had plenty of fireworks to offer Tuesday evening, reflected in explosively bright costumes, arresting stage settings, and some fiery dancing from its visiting ensemble. Grupo Corpo, the modern-dance troupe from Brazil, returned this week following its debut engagement last year at the Pillow, and it was immediately obvious why the 19-member aggregation was invited back.

Hailing from Belo Horizonte, a remote eastern city away from either Rio or Sao Paulo, Grupo Corpo, nevertheless produces dance sophisticated enough to stimulate passions for movement in the world's most discriminating centers of urban culture.

The occasion yields an American premiere, "Benguele." The work exemplifies the major credo of resident choreographer, Rodrigo Pederneiras, that Brazilian

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dance constantly is evolving while still mindful of the country's diverse ethnic population, including a large African contingent.

Like Alvin Ailey and Garth Fagan, Pederneiras does not compartmentalize the vocabularies of classical ballet and the modern idiom, but uses elements of each to strengthen the fabric and thrust of his dances. Long pieces such as "Benguele" are laced with native sensuality and spirit, yet such elements as *echappes* and *jetes* are integral to the texture.

Precision is the watchword of Grupo Corpo — which will be in the Pillow's Ted Shawn Theatre through Sunday — yet members are not reduced to mere automatons, and clearly they love what they do. Joao Bosco's recorded score for "Benguele" is multi-layered, so that two or more ideas often are explored simultaneously. In one sequence, for example, three men skip rapidly across stage right to the beat of a samba

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as two women emerge from the left wing with slow deliberation to a Bantu-like chorus chanting solemn harmonies.

Bosco is relentless and Pederneiras responds with choreography that alternates soloists and groups to continue the momentum. Transitions between sequences are virtually seamless. Dancers moving onto the stage often pick up phrasing by a departing group for further development.

Sets and costumes are crucial elements in the spectacle. For "Benguele," Fernando Velloso and Paulo Pederneiras have created a second performing area elevated behind a rear-stage scrim. With Pederneiras' sensitive lighting the image appears to be a projection

on a very wide screen. The effect is stunning, as the upstage group, crouching, then erect, moves slowly from right to left as those downstage march to a different beat in the opposite direction. Later, the upstage vision is reduced to a thin strip of amber light in which silhouetted dancers crawl about in spidery fashion while their colleagues below effect a four-legged gait resembling that of massed elephants in the jungle.

Freusa Zechmeister's costumes are brightly accented and composed often of disparate elements. In "Benguele," Zechmeister combines frilly white pantaloons with plain jersey tops and neon colored suspenders, alternating with tight black Spandex pants topped by

colored halters for the women, bare chests for the men. Ballet slippers and Capezio dance shoes are exchanged during the piece.

Created two years ago, "Benguele" proceeds crisply until the last few minutes, when some repetition evokes a bit of ennui, perhaps only because proceedings up to then have been so charged with new ideas.

"Parabelo," by the same team and repeated from last year's program, is the more interesting composition, filled with many surprises as Pederneiras moves his dancers in unexpected ways to Tom Ze's and Ze Miguel Wisnik's versatile score. Velloso and Paulo Pederneiras back the action with a huge digital photograph of five iconic heads resembling sculp-

tures, and Zechmeister provides a fashion show of costume changes. "Parabelo," made in 1997, may well be Pederneiras' masterpiece.

Much is made of the ensemble character of Grupo Corp, and indeed the troupe has uniformly strong dancers, no weak links. Still Pederneiras' choreography affords individual opportunities to shine, if only briefly. An exquisite pas de deux involving Ricardo de Paul and Ines Bogea in "Parabelo" exude a couple's uncertainty about the future in its tentative movement rendered even more doubtful by flickering light. An exuberant pas de deux in "Benguele" finds Bogea and Diogo de Lima repeatedly interrupted by sprightly ensemble intrusions.