

Review: Brazil's Grupo Corpo and its inimitable dance

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"God bless the child that's got his own," Billie Holiday sang. And fortunate are the artists who have a distinctive style that's instantly recognizable, something archetypal that others may attempt to copy, but remains singular.

While writers and musicians might pop to mind, it's more rare to find a dance company that speaks a language all its own. But Brazil's Grupo Corpo is such a company. As it demonstrated at Minneapolis' Orpheum Theatre on Tuesday night, March 5 -- in a program presented by the Northrop Dance Season -- this troupe from Brazil's third largest metropolitan area, Belo Horizonte, has fashioned a fascinating hybrid of movement styles, blending ballet with elements of salsa, samba, Celtic, jazz and African influences. Sometimes exuberant and exhilarating, other times haunting and hypnotic, Grupo Corpo proved that it inhabits a category all its own.



Brazil's Grupo Corpo (Courtesy photo)

For that, one can largely thank choreographer Rodrigo Pederneiras. He developed much of his style on the street and it showed in the urban collage that was "Ima," the first of the two works on Tuesday's program. Performed to a score by the trio +2 that proved a whirlwind international journey (bossa nova to Afropop to Irish folk and points elsewhere), it felt like a colorful, ebullient celebration at the dance club of your dreams, where spectacular solos full of spins and leaps suddenly synchronize with a cluster of kindred spirits.

It began as a kind of crab-crawling tango, shirtless men interlocked with

women in white T-shirts, but soon became something like dance for the Twitter age, its multiple vignettes brief and to the point. Each displayed the dancers' awe-inspiring grace and eye-popping athleticism, but employed a movement vocabulary that relied upon lifts, leaps and throws, bodies twisting and uncoiling, frequently changing directions in mid-turn. The color of the lights that bathed the stage changed with the mood of each dance, as did the color of the women's shirts, each hue more vibrant than the last.

A greater contrast in pace was found within "Sem Mim," which was as meditative in mood as the opening work was electrifying. "Sem Mim" used Martin Codax's 13th-century songs of women waiting for their men to return from the sea as the basis for a deeply involving series of dances and a score by Carlos Nunez and Jose Miguel Wisnik that taps into the Celtic strand of the songs' DNA.

Clad in form-fitting unitards adorned with ancient symbols, the dancers began with slow, lilting movements that gradually became more martial and staccato before cutting loose on high-flying jig variations. And those longing for something more long-form than the brief exchanges of "Ima" found it in the intricate, interweaving patterns that eventually became primal and thunderous. It was powerful dancing of a type entirely its own.

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