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WITH PROVOCATIVE MOVES, BATTLE ENGAGES

By Karen Campbell

Robert Battle's dances are as confounding as they are riveting. The choreographer seems to delight in defying expectations. A woman in a red ball gown sucks her thumb. Dancers in genteel garb devolve into scabbling animals. Contextually, his works are not just puzzling, but provocative, using gesture to agitate and shock - hands claw at the face, mouths gape in mimed screams.

Battle's dances rarely involve steps that actually move to the music. Often he deliberately works against the mood and pulse of the score, and he seems to have two speeds, slow motion and manic. However, his movement aesthetic is charged with a raw, visceral physicality you can't take your eyes off. And the performers of his New York-based Battleworks Dance

Company are magnificent, flinging themselves into movement phrases with the frenzied energy of someone having a seizure. Spins and jumps crash to the floor; these dancers seem to spend as much time on their backs and knees as on their feet. (What can this company's ibuprofen bill look like?)

Sometimes, as in the bizarre "Open the Door," which features a sextet with stockinged faces moving to Steve Reich's looped and layered preacher's rant of the same name, the effect can be just jarringly odd, numbing. The opening "Overture," with its elegant teal gowns and elegant music by Bach, resembled nothing so much as a prolonged acid trip. It started with wonder, the dancers marveling at specks on the floor, dust motes in the air, their own splayed fingers. Then came the ecstasy and frenzy followed by the tortured withdrawal, the writhing and retching.

But at its best, when context and quirky movement persuasively join forces, Battle's choreography is dazzling. The 2005 "Promenade," set to a playfully dissonant score by John Mackey, is a wickedly delightful

deconstruction of manners, as four couples in white - the men in suits, the women in slip dresses with abbreviated bustles - mime the formal pleasantries and patterns of polite social dance. However, the civilized behavior is only a thin veneer over primal underpinnings, as courtly partnering is subverted by all manner of feral accents - the dancers lick themselves, heads peck like chickens, feet paw the ground. Samuel Roberts dives into extraordinary full body rotations mid-air, nearly parallel to the ground.

Roberts also dances a breathtaking solo, set to the soulful crooning of Nina Simone. Clad only in dark skivvies, he seems possessed, flopping to the floor, contorting until his back seemed to almost fold in on itself, limbs askew, quivering as great waves undulate through his

muscular body. Then just as quickly, he shakes it off in movements evoking African dance, arms pumping, legs kicking. At the end, he simply struts away.

The evening's other solo, "Ella," was given a charming performance by Marlana Wolfe. A tribute to the great Ella Fitzgerald and set to a recording of her "Air Mail Special," the dance matched the singer's quicksilver scat phrases with jazzy, mercurial moves that sent Wolfe skittering, jiggling, and sliding.

The evening's most thrilling dance was the 2001 "The Hunt." To the thundering drums of Les Tambours du Bronx, Roberts, Kanji Segawa, George Smallwood, and Derrick Yanford, costumed in long black skirts with underlayers of red, threw themselves into a kind of fevered, pre-hunt ritual, rousing each other to the blood fervor of the kill. With a manic intensity, the four stomped and pounded with a propulsive power that evoked the brutality of the hunters, the fear of the prey, and the exhaustion of the chase.

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