

Rousseve asks ultimate question with mesmerizing style

by Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger
Friday February 13, 2009, 1:18 PM.

David Rousseve /Reality. Where: Alexander Kasser Theatre, Montclair State University, One Normal Ave., Montclair. When: 8 p.m. Saturday; 3 p.m. Sunday. How much: \$15. Call (973) 655-5112 or visit peakperfs.org.



ARISTIDE ECONOMOPOULOS/THE STAR-LEDGER

David Rousseve's dance-theater piece "Saudade" made its local debut on Thursday at the Alexander Kasser Theatre in Montclair

headed on a journey deep into that forest where the imagination runs free in dreams. The choreographer introduces himself as our guide, a man on a quest for the meaning of life. As he repeats his first sentence, however, it grows shorter and shorter until the words vanish in a gasp of air and a cursive gesture.

Only by abandoning words and entering the body, its breath labored and rattling as it shivers and contracts, its movements quick and spontaneously evasive, will we get where we are going. Even so, the meaning of life remains hard to grasp.

In "Saudade," the body asserts itself suddenly and emotionally. Its struggles are unexpected and inexplicable. Rousseve concludes the twin experiences of living ourselves and caring for those we love, and the certainty that we must continue, are what really matter in the end.

This is heady stuff, and "Saudade" makes it beautiful, with its twinkling digital backdrop, its multiple plots knit together by Rousseve's magnetic presence. Seven dancers surround him as he walks slowly across the stage following a diagonal path beside milestones that accumulate, pausing by these markers to tell his tales.

The other cast members, an international community, have brought their own dances from far-flung homes in Asia and Africa. Transplanted to the American South, these movement vocabularies point to the universality of human experience as a bittersweet, Roussevian party-mix of tears and joy. Portuguese fado music, itself a jumble of heartache and ecstasy, supplies transitions, and strumming guitars lighten the mood when it threatens to turn grim.

As a group, the dancers slide and drag themselves across the stage, undertaking effortful journeys that parallel Rousseve's own. Skits and childlike games, which can be humorous or disturbing, seem to echo the content of the stories. They also add their own themes as dancers fight or try to prevent individuals from expressing themselves.

Boldly employing a Thai chili pepper with incendiary powers, Rousseve invites the audience to question his stories' truthfulness. Are the performers "faking it," as one of them suggests? Maybe so, but fans of author Toni Morrison especially will recognize the hallucinatory dilemmas of Rousseve's characters. Contradictory, perverse, uplifting -- his theater distills the essence of truth, and it is potent.

Words alone cannot satisfy David Rousseve, a storyteller turned choreographer whose magical dance-theater piece "Saudade" made its local debut on Thursday at the Alexander Kasser Theatre in Montclair. The evening is packed with stories -- engrossing tales of love and hardship, cliffhanging adventures within the heart's interior.

Rousseve's stories, melding African-American history and his own experiences, are of a kind to leave listeners wide-eyed. They take us from slavery to Hurricane Katrina, calamities rendered immediate by the drawling voices of his protagonists: Sally, a former slave who treasures her halting literacy; a lonely man who falls in love with a stray cat; another man on the brink of death in the hospital; a woman who saves her children but loses parts of her memory during the family's hellish escape from New Orleans.

By themselves, however, these stories are not enough. Rousseve signals early on that we are

headed on a journey deep into that forest where the imagination runs free in dreams.