

# Longing

## The Global Postmodern Poetics of David Rousseve's "Saudade"

By Ariel Osterweis Scott

*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.*

— Sally, slave character from "Saudade"

The nationalistic posturing and Olympic score-keeping of NBC's televised "Superstars of Dance" could not be further from choreographer David Rousseve's current fascination with the "global." Rousseve's intervention into global representation relies upon a commitment to combining postmodern and regionally-specific dance, memory, autobiographical theater, black feminist experience, and his own queer identity and sensibility. Admitting a "utopian element—being part of a broader global community" in his newest evening-length piece, Rousseve lingers on the theme of "saudade" ("longing" in Portuguese), the driving sentiment of fado music. As an exploration of shared emotion, "Saudade" weaves a series of character monologues through choreographed vignettes performed by Los Angeles-based artists versed in dances from India, Indonesia, Burkina Faso, and Senegal. "Saudade" represents the "culmination [of] three pieces," Rousseve tells me, "about the word 'bittersweet.'" The first was Rousseve's film, "Bittersweet." "Years ago someone told me about this form called fado—Portuguese blues—and once I heard it ... on the core emotional level, it was so akin to what I thought was the African American experience, which is having these highs of joy and angst and grief at the same moment." Fado's longing thus resonates with Rousseve's interpretation of African American culture's "bittersweet" taste. Drawing from cultures beyond the scope of African American life, Rousseve's project locates commonality through difference, employing a varied palette to explore particular and historically-laden emotions and sensations.

### Difference

"I've always been inspired by difference," Rousseve says, "growing up black in the South, then going to Princeton, and then being black in the downtown dance scene." Until recently, "downtown" Manhattan provided the site for the majority of his work. Now a professor in the department he once chaired, UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures, Rousseve explains that "Saudade" is "the first larger full-length piece" that he has made in Los Angeles. "One of the best things about being in Los Angeles," he continues, "is that we're right on the Pacific Rim, and there's a huge conglomeration of cultures. My interest in global forms seemed like a natural extension of my interest in difference. I had previously worked with a lot of race, gender, sexuality—a range of all of the above—and it seemed like a natural outgrowth that, as we enter a global era, the boundaries of difference have been expanded and we can appear onstage and explore not only black America and white America, but also someone who was born in Indonesia or someone who was born in Burkina Faso." For Rousseve, the multiplication of difference goes hand in hand with the recognition of commonality. "To me...[it] was hugely inspiring to figure out how to have a development process with that range of difference represented onstage. Thematically, the initial impulse [of the piece] was to explore world forms and to explore difference beyond the boundaries that I previously knew. We started making it during the Bush era. We had this huge conglomeration of cultures represented in the studio, and yet it seemed that our country was more determined than ever not to be part of a global community." In this context "difference" represents possibility and community, not borders and

antagonism. Rousseve says of “Saudade,” “There’s definitely a utopian element to the piece, or a dream of what might be. This range of difference is what it’s all about: this is a community to which we should indeed belong.” Premiering at the dawn of the Obama era, the piece acknowledges and embraces otherness within one’s own space, both choreographically and metaphorically.

### **The Autobiographical Feminine**

Upon first glance, one notices a predominantly female cast, with the exception of one dancer and Rousseve himself, who portrays five different characters. However, these characters, too, are female—both imagined and autobiographical figures. “My company originally was all female,” explains Rousseve. “Years ago I started doing a series of pieces on my grandmother and I wanted to keep the focus on the female body and my grandmother as [a] hero[ine]. For the first few years, the company was all women, and that started happening again with this piece.” Even though the feminine component has remained constant in Rousseve’s work, it has never been entirely intentional. In this piece, which began with a Rockefeller Foundation-supported residency in Bellagio, Italy, casting developed without conscious design. “Once the text was written and we had just started rehearsals,” Rousseve says, “was when I discovered, oh boy, it’s really all women, and I spent a really long time trying to figure that one out.... All the dancers at that point were female (because Olivier came in midway through the process).... I want to do a lot of thinking around this issue because it’s also potentially really sexist....Is this some kind of male choreographer power trip? If I saw a piece by a white choreographer, and all the performers were African American, I wonder what the statement there would be.” Thus, for Rousseve, “Saudade” is just as much an exercise in personal exploration as it is a meditation on societal commonality.

Rousseve locates the predominance of female cast members and components in his work in his own personal history. “The work usually celebrates women of color as the center of gravity for the cultures in which I belong.... When I was growing up, my entire community was actually female. I didn’t like to hang out with the boys. I don’t think it was a question of sexuality because I was very, very young. I liked the discourses [women and girls] were having. Everything I learned about how you view life, how you participate in community, how you succeed, how you express emotion, came from growing up in a community of women.” The influence of feminine culture comes through in his writing process: “I do not see myself as a woman, but certainly when I write, for example, characters that come easiest and seem the most natural for me are almost without exception always female characters.” Nevertheless, Rousseve makes clear that it was mainly his choice to spend time with women, having grown up in a family of both men and women: “I grew up in Houston, Texas with my family being from Louisiana. I had a mom and a dad. I wasn’t completely surrounded by women, but I made the choice to hang out with them.” The text of “Saudade” is a “series of character monologues.” If Rousseve’s earlier work typically followed “one person’s story from beginning to end, this is more a collection of characters” arranged in a “fragmented narrative.” The characters include “a slave woman from the ‘50s in the South.” All the characters are “Southern, but from different time periods, and what I discovered was that ... what I was doing all along was projecting my own ... emotional autobiography onto these characters.” Because the narrative occurs in a different spatio-temporal location from Rousseve’s current life, “it never occurred” to him that it included autobiographical elements: “About three quarters about the way through, I decided, well, I’m actually going to point that out at the end of this piece.”

### **Distilling Memory**

Memory factors into “Saudade” in multiple ways, “whether that’s cultural memory or familial memory or personal memory or ... purely factual memory.” Rousseve says, “I’m always dealing with, if not my own personal memories,

certainly the memories of my people, which would be Southern African Americans, and then trying to find a way to try to distill those memories through a narrative to make them accessible to people.” As ephemeral or alienating such conceptions of memory might seem to audiences, Rousseve is committed to its deliberate display, thereby making the otherwise inaccessible accessible. For Rousseve, memory is as much public as it is private, externalized through speech and choreography, music and spatiality.

Nevertheless, Rousseve is careful not to assume an explicit connection between the varied cultural forms represented in “Saudade.” Though in communication with each other, postmodern dance does not equal Bharata Natyam does not equal fado music: “All the elements of the piece—the postmodern dance, the fado music, the text [are] actually only connected on the subtextual level.” When different dances are employed in “Saudade,” their differences are respected yet working in service “of very specific Southern—not empowered—people from the South ... to find something that’s shared at the core.” Rousseve places central importance on one particular character: “There’s one character named Sally who is a slave woman, and she is the core of the piece for me. At the end of a gruesome scene where she describes being physically abused by the master, while at the same moment, unbeknownst to the master, she’s catching her sister’s tears in the palm of her hand, Sally has this line where she says, ‘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.’ That’s kind of what the whole piece is about. Of course, the next thing Sally says is ‘that was the exact moment that I realized that this was a life that I could never understand.’ ... In the end, this amalgam of cultures and disparate elements is a deeply personal effort to try and understand the larger journey.... Trying to understand bittersweetness is part of a larger attempt to understand contemporary life as a series of colliding extremes that ultimately can’t be understood so much as just lived.”

### **Emoting the Postmodern**

Rousseve is not afraid of an unspoken taboo in postmodern dance that casts emotion as a dangerous territory into which choreographers shall not venture. If much postmodern dance privileges the minimal, the fragmented, or the critical, Rousseve expands its borders to include global dance forms as well as the push and pull of emotions—the combination of joy and angst in bittersweet, for example. If, in the tradition of Western dance, emotion is typically reserved for modernist or classical dance, Rousseve’s project brings together emotion—even expression!—and postmodern dance’s abstract movement, non-linear textual elements, and institutional criticism. He also makes space for African American experience in the postmodern, which has historically had trouble reconciling its aesthetics and community with blackness. Rousseve elaborates by stating, “A lot of postmodern dance really avoids emotion; and, likewise, a lot of really emotionally potent work (to me) can have a lot of emotional force but a little bit less of [something else]. For me it’s really about making work that’s available and accessible to people [and to] combine it with a really strong sense of composition.”

Nevertheless, Rousseve’s fidelity to accessibility should not be mistaken with an easy viewing experience. On the contrary, audiences of “Saudade” audiences should be prepared for a tumultuous ride: “We really do plumb the depths at some points with ... violence and loneliness.” Though difficult to endure at times, Rousseve’s depths are offset by fits of humor: “[Humor] was very much intentional.... It became really important to balance ... out [the darkness] thematically with as much of the joy as we could find. Compositionally, if I ask the audiences to go to these really dark places from time to time in the piece, I feel like the way to keep them on that journey is to balance that out.... We did an excerpt of it in New York a while ago and I was just so happy that people were laughing a lot.”

### **Sharing Individualities: Don't Call It "Fusion"**

It was important to Rousseve to find the best possible Los Angeles-based dancers for "Saudade": "Coincidentally, all but one performer are actually grads of our program." UCLA's Department of World Arts and Cultures is known for attracting artists and scholars with an interest in the transnational and the global, and it was really no accident that Rousseve turned to some of his own past students to form the choreographic community of "Saudade." However, Rousseve eschews the notion of fusion, stating, "The idea of fusing movement is really complicated and challenging, and I knew that, for example, I didn't want technically to have this mixture of Bharata Natyam and modern dance—that's not something that I can do well. So what we ended up doing is that I worked on giving them choreographic ideas, and then people worked to develop their own material. In the end, I stitched all the work together, and it seemed important that—rather than mixing vocabularies—that we had distinct vocabularies that we each used to tell the story in differing ways. It became a little bit less, 'here's a phrase to learn,' but more, 'can you develop a phrase that communicates this?' " Aside from a section such as a group passage toward the end of "Saudade," in which the entire cast "[tries] to capture the essence of Esther's phrase" (as opposed to executing it precisely the way Esther would), each dancer adheres to her own particular movement vocabulary.

"Saudade" marks a departure for Rousseve, both thematically and choreographically: "I made a conscious choice to stop (for three years) making long full-length works, and when I came back to it I wanted to come back from a different place. A couple things that were different were: I usually know where a piece is going; I usually have the text all written, and that's not what happened this time. I decided to reverse that process, and consciously try not to think about where the piece was going, and become one of those we'll-just-go-in-the-studio-and-see-what-happens choreographers. In other words, I decided to let the process push me instead of me pushing the process in making this one. Part of that is that we didn't know where the piece was going thematically, and then the other part is that I knew it would be very complicated to work with so many world forms and I wasn't sure how we would end up using all those forms on the stage at the same time."

To allow each performer her individuality is just as important to Rousseve as staging a global community. The spirit of sharing in "Saudade" is best communicated, however, via difference: "Even though I practice a totally different form [from the dancers of the cast], the core of these forms, culturally, artistically, and spiritually, feels very familiar to me. In fact, in the course of making this piece, one of the performers [with whom] I probably have the least in common is named Sri. She's from Indonesia, so what would I possibly know about Sri's life in Indonesia? We all told stories from our childhood, and she told one about a kid in her family having to choose between having a big Christmas dinner or having toys on Christmas, and how the kids were fine, but the parents were broken-hearted, and there was something about the story that I related to the most out of all the autobiographical stories we heard, and for me that was very inspiring. That was the story I felt the most attached to, that I could see myself in, even though the particulars of her life are so different from [mine]. What that typifies for me is that there's something in that case that transcended the particulars of place and time and culture. There's something that me and Sri have in common emotionally that was the core of her story." That emotional commonality can be discerned via formal disjuncture forms the paradoxical foundation of Rousseve's work in "Saudade": "It doesn't matter if you are from Indonesia or Burkina Faso or first generation Indian American; there's something at the core of those stories about survival ... that is at the core of the stories of the Southern African American people that I write about."

### **Conjuring**

If it would be inaccurate to label choreography of "Saudade" "fusion," it would also be amiss to label it

“ethnographic.” Rousseve asserts, “I think the statement would be more choreographic than ethnographic.” In other words, in staging global dance forms, Rousseve is not claiming anthropological expertise in certain cultures. Instead, his exploration of personal and cultural memory in the South is augmented by the skills of others—some from distant countries, others from the U.S. Though consciously not claiming ethnographic methods, Rousseve does work with memory in a mode that draws upon a favorite topic of anthropology, that of the conjuring of spirits. Rousseve did not immediately realize that he was lingering in the realm of ancestral liveness until he began working with a recent student: “One of my favorite students from Indonesia: what do I ultimately have in common with him and his father? I don’t even understand the form that well [but] I understood the intention behind why [he is] dancing. [He told me] ‘I want to make a piece about contacting my grandfather and standing on a mountain top and talking to him.’ So I thought, that’s great, but then I came to realize he literally wanted to try to talk to his grandfather onstage. He was trying to make a postmodern piece, and he was literally trying to conjure his ancestors. I thought, that’s why I’m working with him, because that made sense to me.” Rousseve realized that in bringing memory and performance together, he was actively conjuring all along, surely upsetting postmodern dance’s preferred mode of detachment. He continues, “When I’m onstage performing a monologue, when it goes to a deep place, it just means that you’re accessing a little bit more of the subconscious. Whatever one’s beliefs are, that place beyond what we can see is what one can access. That’s what [my student] was saying—that’s where his ancestors live, deep in his subconscious mind.”

And so, “Saudade”: be prepared for the internal to seep into the external, the joy to upset the pain, the grandmother to overtake the choreographer, and the world to inch up to your seat ... even into your heart.. David Rousseve/REALITY performs “Saudade” March 5-7, 2009 in the Novellus Theater at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. All performances are at 8pm. See calendar for details.

*All David Rousseve quotations are from an interview with Ariel Osterweis Scott on January 14th, 2009.*

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