

Chicago Tribune

3/06/09

## Tracking David Rousseve's dance roots

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Special to the Tribune

March 6, 2009

As with so many other tales in his highly original dance theater works, the roots of David Rousseve's "Saudade" can be traced back to the South—to Houston, in fact, where he grew up and where, not so long ago, he returned for his father's funeral.

He noticed a profound paradox.

"It's part of the Southern African-American legacy that funerals are joyous, that someone is crossing over to a better place, part of it is a legacy of slavery," Rousseve explained.

"But there are also people in grief and agony. These things always existed together, not even colliding, really, but just existing in this same feverish moment. A bell went off in my head. That is exactly what it was like to grow up in the South, particularly in the '70s. So I decided to launch a series exploring that notion."

None of this should surprise longtime fans of Rousseve, whose masterful, postmodern mini-dramas over the years tartly mingle narrative, reminiscence, poetic choreography, searing history and bits of autobiography. But the direction the series took is something of a surprise.

An interest in Portuguese *fado* music led Rousseve this time to look across the Atlantic for some of the content.

"Besides being really beautiful, *fado* is like a Portuguese blues," Rousseve said. "It doesn't sound very much like our blues. But thematically it deals with the highs and lows of life. The word '*saudade*' is Portuguese for the emotional core of *fado*, and, though it's really untranslatable, the closest definition would be 'longing.' This led me to believe that something at the heart of Portuguese culture is high-pitched like African-American culture."

Rousseve, whose troupe REALITY will be on hand to perform "Saudade" with him altered his way of working in other ways with this piece. "We shift the dance vocabulary and include world dances now," Rousseve said.

Rousseve also initially crafted "Saudade" with purely fictional tales in mind, unlike the biography and history of past works. He didn't quite succeed in that mission, however. "I wanted to take a break from the long pieces I'd been doing and explore a new way of creating work, so I sought to leave autobiography behind," he said. "I went into the studio and wrote fictional stories with the broad theme of the bittersweet in mind. But once the stories were in front of me, I found I had these monologues in which I projected autobiographical details onto another character."

"Saudade" is peppered with the kind of gut-wrenching stories of African-American experience that have always distinguished his work: slavery, a woman surviving Katrina, a man who endures hardships by dreaming of his lost cat. Rousseve, whose father was from New Orleans, lost an aunt in a nursing home flooded by Katrina. But, like all his work, "Saudade" is not without hope.

"Ultimately, these characters share the fact that they survive," Rousseve said. "Life is hard for some of us, but the piece seeks in some ways for the meaning of life, and life's just meant to be lived."

His own physical presence in the piece embodies that idea. Now 49, survivor of two hip replacements, Rousseve spends most of "Saudade" ever so slowly moving across stage. Then, he erupts in a killer, go-for-broke solo. "You could call it temporary insanity," he said of choreographing the sequence for himself.