

Rasta Thomas's Bad Boys of Dance at the Annenberg Center **Like a night at the Trocadero**

Gary L. Day

February 25, 2014 in [Dance](#)

High-decibel music with a rhythm section you can feel in your chest, flashing lights that saturate the room in a quick succession of scarlet, green, violet, yellow, and indigo leaving you giddy; a group of young, lithe male figures on the floor, impressing all concerned with their athleticism and abs; a packed house clapping and swaying and shouting their fun — my god, I felt like it was 1983 at the DCA. (Historical note: the DCA was one of *the* hot Philly gay dance clubs of that era — yes, I'm *that* old.)



Rasta Thomas's Bad Boys of Dance: male pulchritude performing exuberantly.

What was amazing was that I was in the Zellerbach Theatre of the staid Annenberg Center, and the near-capacity crowd was at least 60 percent well into their 50s and 60s. It was a sea of gray and blue hair, and they were making noise like it was a night at the Trocadero. That was the effect Rasta Thomas's Bad Boys of Dance had on this audience. And yes, it carried me away, too.

Rasta Thomas, who founded the Bad Boys of Dance in 2007, clearly knows how to get an audience on its feet: in a word, music. Thomas's program uses music to capture his audience's attention, leaning heavily on radio-friendly, beat-heavy, contemporary rock/pop artists such as Kanye West, Coldplay, Aerosmith, Michael Jackson, Usher, Queen, Journey, and George Michael. His canny musical selections, played at dance club levels, instantly sparks a crowd's party spirit, creating a raucous concert atmosphere not often

found at modern dance performances.

When the mostly male troupe took to the stage, the audience was ready from the start to welcome them like rock stars, and the boys gave that energy back in full measure from the first beat.

Skill and artistry

Rasta Thomas specializes in high-energy jazz- and hip-hop-infused dance, heavy on rhythm and athleticism. The highly charismatic group of young men executed the physically demanding choreography with a gymnastic poise and strength usually seen at the Olympics. More impressively, the Boys also proved themselves to be serious dancers, skillfully executing leaps and pirouettes and other classical dance moves one would expect to see in a typical Balanchine piece in the Pennsylvania Ballet.

The program was planned in a way that a DJ might structure an evening's music list. In fact, the music was often mixed DJ-fashion, with the different dance segments segueing seamlessly from one short piece to the next. Intensity built from segment to segment, with music and dance in perfect sync, until the audience was on its feet by intermission.

In addition to the main troupe of six men, all skilled and all immensely appealing, the company included one woman, who had to compete with all that masculine energy. While it was obvious that she was included in the troupe and in the choreography to bolster the Boys' heterosexual cred, she admirably held her own in terms of skill, athleticism, strength, and charisma.

Speaking of sexuality, with all that male pulchritude performing so exuberantly onstage, it was almost a given that the choreography would draw attention to the Boys' sex appeal, and as the program edged toward its finish, shirts started flying open, eventually disappearing entirely. The audience responded favorably to the display of impressively chiseled pecs and abs, and the Boys in turn flirted shamelessly with the appreciative crowd, almost as if we were at a Chippendales show, except that it is highly unlikely that Chippendales performers can dance this well.

There was a brief change of pace, evidence that Rasta Thomas and his Bad Boys are more than merely effective showmen. In the first segment of Act 2, an unusual, noncommercial piece of music was played by an artist unknown to me, Ólafur Arnalds. The piece can only be described as a cross between Philip Glass and Dead Can Dance, very ethereal and otherworldly. For this segment, the choreography dispensed with hip-hop moves and gymnastic somersaults, as the six men shifted moods into a graceful pattern of mathematical precision. Thomas was giving us evidence that he also possesses modern dance chops in the realm of Paul Taylor, essentially saying, "Don't underestimate me."

Nor should one. Work such as this that plays so blatantly with mainstream pop sensibilities is often dismissed as "mere" entertainment. That would be unfair. It takes skill and artistry to bring down the house — and Rasta Thomas' Bad Boys of Dance displayed both in abundance.



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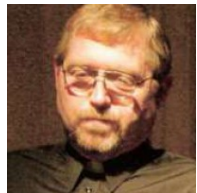
ARTICLE OVERVIEW

Rasta Thomas specializes in high-energy jazz- and hip-hop-infused dance, heavy on rhythm and athleticism. The highly charismatic group of "Bad Boys" executed the physically demanding choreography with a gymnastic poise and strength as well as polished balletic technique.

WHAT, WHEN, WHERE

Rasta Thomas's Bad Boys of Dance, February 20-22 at the Annenberg Center, 37th & Walnut Streets, Philadelphia. A Dance Celebration presentation. 215-898-3900 or annenbergcenter.org.

ABOUT [GARY L. DAY](#)



Gary L. Day is a produced playwright who lives in Center City Philadelphia.