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RUBBERBANDance at the Annenberg

Hip-hop grows up

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America is unique in that each succeeding generation seems to invent its own form of artistic expression at the street or grassroots level, which eventually gets adopted by the culture-at-large as a serious art form. This has happened with jazz, movies, bluegrass, comic books, and rock and roll — now, it seems, it's hip-hop dance's turn.



Skill, energy, and charisma: RUBBERBANDance. (photo by Michael Slobodian)

RUBBERBANDance Group derives much of its choreographic inspiration and vocabulary from the world of hip-hop dance, with its high-energy twists and twirls and somersaults. Artistic director and choreographer Victor Quijada takes that dance language, with all the athletic

expressiveness of urban youth culture, and injects it into a formal modern dance structure. The result is fresh, engaging, and, at times, exciting.

The troupe's most recent creation is *Empirical Quotient*, a full-length piece choreographed by Quijada to original music by Jasper Gahunia. It has a traditional three-act structure, which gives each of the six members of the troupe (three men, three women) plenty of opportunities to show off their skill, energy, and charisma in every possible combination. The choreography meshed well with the music, which thankfully did not take its inspiration from hip-hop music, but from modern classicism (think Bizet or Glass) or more abstract synth-pop (think early Pink Floyd).

Quijada's choreography is very much in the modern dance vernacular, as he attempts to express certain ideas or to deconstruct certain tropes. That's all well and good for the academics to analyze, but average audience members like me respond more personally to the dance and the music. Whatever his process or intentions, the finished result, though abstract, remains accessible enough to inspire a personal narrative in our heads to interpret what we're seeing. That is one of the hallmarks of truly successful artistic expression: It inspires a unique personal response from each person exposed to it.

Quijada's use of hip-hop dance moves is kept under strict control. While he uses them to enhance the piece's contemporary urban sensibility, he doesn't allow the style to dominate the narrative. A lesser choreographer might have pandered to a lucrative demographic, but Quijada showed that, with the proper skill and discipline, hip-hop dance can be successfully integrated into serious works, thus helping legitimize hip-hop as a serious art form in and of itself.

Also notable was Yan Lee Chan's effective lighting design, a too-often neglected element. Chan's kinetic lights added emotional impact, highlighting and flattering the skilled and attractive dancers.

The audience was treated to a few minutes of post-curtain call pure hip-hop dance, with the energy and enthusiasm bringing us to our feet. It was a nice, populist capstone to a successful evening of serious modern dance.

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