

# Onstage Fighting

BY JOANNA ROTTÉ

**R**ENNIE HARRIS PUREMOVEMENT (RHPM) Dance Theatre Company produced a retrospective last summer, marking 15 years of performance activity. Born and based in Philadelphia, Puremovement has over the years toured their hip-hop productions to New York and the Kennedy Center as well as abroad. RHPM

specializes in techniques of break dancing, house dancing, stepping and other styles that have emerged spontaneously from urban street life. It has been the mission of artistic director/choreographer Rennie Harris to bring what he calls inner city social dances to the stage, situating himself atop the hip hop heap – its self-proclaimed leading ambassador.

The focal presentation of RHPM's recent retrospective was "Rome and Jewels," a revival from the year 2000 that borrows from "West Side Story" to retell "Romeo and Juliet." RHPM's "Rome and Jewels," rather than a story of young love, is a study in male competition. Juliet (or Jewels) never appears except as a light from above as if from a balcony. The key relationship is between Rome and Tibault, both enamored of Jewels. Rome belongs to the Capulets (the Caps) and Tibault to the Montagues (Monster Qs). They are not from rival families but rival dance gangs. As Rome's gang-brother Mercutio engages in answering the aggression of Tibault, the choreography reaches ever-escalating expressions of antagonism. After all, in Shakespeare, Tybalt is the rat catcher, king of cats, and Mercutio courts madness. The dance competition culminates in a raucous rumble: a display of breakneck break-dancing and acrobatic hip-hop featuring one-armed handsprings and lightning speed back flips, all leading to knives and guns and ending with everyone dead with Rome being the last to die.

I had the pleasure of working with Rennie Harris in 1996 when I was directing a production of Sam Shepard's rock 'n' roll play, "Tooth of Crime," at Villanova University. We hired Rennie to choreograph the fight scenes between Hoss, the reigning king of rock 'n' roll, and his challenger Crow, who in our production showed up as a pierced and tattooed, cool and heartless punk rocker in the vein of Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious. Harris's choreography wasn't actually hip-hop (Crow and Hoss are white men), but it was an evocation of cold machismo versus hot. It was as if the devil had invaded the ring to take out Elvis.

Fight scenes ask a lot of the actor: physical fitness (strength and flexibility), grace (not clumsiness), on-the-dot timing, and an ability to fulfill choreography. It's a lot to master. A stage actor, unlike a film actor, can't depend on a stuntman to take the hits for him. He has to develop his own confidence and agility. It's rare to find a master actor and master fighter/dancer combined in one person. RHPM boasts exceptional dancers who are not exceptional actors. This imbalance diminishes the impact of "Rome and Jewels." Since the piece features lines from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" plus original text, its

success is somewhat dependent on the spoken word.

One place in the world where acting and fighting/dancing skills can be commensurate in a leading performer is in the Kabuki Theatre of Japan. I visited the age-old Kabuki-za when I was in Tokyo in May. The theatre program on any given day begins at 11:00 am and runs until 9:00 pm or so. Rather than performing a traditional full-length play of five acts over the course of a day, the current Kabuki-za custom is to offer a series of excerpts from a variety of plays. I arrived at the doors of the Kabuki-za on a weekday around 5:30 without a reservation. As a walk-in, I was able to purchase a seat in the upper balcony for the 6:00 show. I rented a headset that thankfully offered a synopsis of the action rather than simultaneous translation. The headset intermittently voiced what was going on onstage and gave snippets of who was saying what to whom. I appreciated that my ears were free to listen to the Japanese dialog and chanting as well as the music accompaniment of drums, samisen, bells, gongs, and wooden clappers. Also, I could take in the cries of those members of the audience, who shouted out phrases of encouragement to their favorite actors at moments of expert acting, as in the *mie* (pose) of crossing not two eyes but one in a show of triumph.

I so enjoyed the 6:00 program – a series of three kabuki dances – that I stayed to buy a ticket for the 7:00. It was a ninety minute production of an atypically short kabuki play, set like almost all kabuki plays in the Edo period (1603-1868) of political stability during which a small middle class slowly rose and discretely developed. The dramatic situation is that a sumo wrestler insults a firefighter. Fire fighting was a cherished profession in the Edo period where middle class people resided in houses of wood with roofs of thatch and used hibachis for cooking and fire for heating. The chief firefighter, as the guardian of the town and townspeople, would have been a model of respectability. On the other hand, the sumo wrestlers enjoyed the patronage and protection of the samurai class. So it is in the play, that when the head of the firefighters, played by kabuki master Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, is called upon to answer the insult but is instead unresponsive, confusion ensues. We see him at home shirking his responsibility, lounging around, drinking heavily and going out to carouse. His wife is ashamed of his cowardice and announces her intention to divorce him. Eventually we see that all the while, the chief firefighter

has been strategizing the best ways and means for seeking restitution from the sumo wrestlers. He assembles his crew and picks a fight with the sumo wrestlers. What transpires is an astonishing spectacle of firefighters scaling rooftops via ladders and ropes, jumping from roof to roof, leaping down and leaping up, somersaulting and flip-flopping, displaying all the ingenuity of a super SWAT team taking on a wrestling team. The sumo wrestlers, meanwhile, who enter the fray one by one, stay pretty much grounded and stationary, making the circular arm moves and rotund leg lifts that sumo wrestlers make. Every move of the firefighters, group or solo, is theatrical, sometimes funny, sometimes breathtaking, always awesome. In the end nobody is dead and the sumo wrestlers apologize to the firefighters. The firefighters return the compliment. Together they restore peace.

A friend of mine who also attended the Kabuki-za when visiting Japan a year ago told of how he had not rented a headset. (He is a priest with a limited budget.) Before the performance started, the person seated next to him got up, went out, and returned with a headset for my friend, who tried to say, "No thank you, I'll manage without," but the stranger just extended the headset without a word (they had no common language) and my friend accepted. There was no money exchanged or expected. It was an act of generosity from a Japanese theatergoer to an American visitor.

That's the kind of basic friendliness that unifies people in real life, the kind of basic gentleness that disarms people from creating conflict. It's the kind of compassionate human interaction fundamental in taking the hostility out of daily life and relegating it to the stage where it belongs, where aggression, anger, hatred and fighting can ultimately be seen as ultimately senseless. ♦2007

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