

[Piccolo/Spoleto 2022](#)

REVIEW: Malpaso Dance Company sways and leaps with expertise and vibrancy

by [Ellen E. Mintzer](#) June 11, 2022



Photo by David Altschul

With a nuanced blend of looseness and precision, of uneasy struggle and explosive joy, Malpaso Dance Company brings a stirring and electric program to Spoleto Festival USA.

The Cuban troupe, which focuses on collaborating with international choreographers and emerging Cuban artists, brought four pieces to Charleston. “Lullaby for Insomnia,” choreographed by company co-founder Daileidys Carrazana, begins the program as Heriberto Maneses strides onto the stage to a jaunty piano tune, striking a leonine pose. The graceful, sinuous lines of his body are liquid smooth, the movement of his limbs elegant and eloquent. He drew the audience in with his agile technique, and at times pushed them away, covering his face with his hands. The charismatic Maneses easily carries the solo number.

The second piece, “woman with water,” is an unsettling meditation on control. Created by Swedish choreographer Mats Ek, it began with crew members dragging out a lime green table and dancer Dunia Acosta gliding onstage, winsome in a fluttering orange dress. To the scratching beat and ringing triangle of Fleshquartet’s music, Acosta slinked around the table, caressing it and dragging it across the stage.

When her duet partner, Malpaso artistic director Osnel Delgado, stalked out and poured her a glass of water, Acosta broadcasted tension with her stiffening body. The music tinged sinister as Delgado lifted her rigid form, almost tossing her around like a doll. He was providing her with life-giving water, yet he treated her like an object. At one point, Acosta shrunk into a ball and crawled under the table while Delgado stalked her. It's a disconcerting piece on love and care gone sour, which the dancers skillfully conveyed.

A confusingly long moment of silence followed, creating a sensation of tension before the third piece, "Tabula Rasa," an ensemble number that Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin originally produced as a ballet arrangement and reimagined for Malpaso. The prolonged stillness was broken by the dancers swaying in unison like reeds in a field, sidling onto the stage to screeching strings. Their languid movements were hypnotic, a comment on the seductiveness of conformity. The dancers created an eerie tableau of sameness.

Pairs broke off, one lifting the other, grasping and clutching at one another. A trio clasped each other tightly, desperately, while the rest of the ensemble undulated in sync. The shimmering unity was broken by a moment of frantic energy, dancers dashing around in chaos, spasming limbs and frenzied leaps. In the end, the group returned to a spellbinding unity of movement while one member of the trio lay prostrate on the floor.

After intermission, the company returned with "Why You Follow," a joyful and kinetic celebration of Afro-Cuban identity choreographed by Ronald K. Brown. It featured a medley of uptempo African songs such as "Look at Africa" by Zap Mama and "Yoruba Road" by the Allenko Brotherhood, and influences of Latin dance such as salsa. The beats were throbbing and percussive, ringing like a heartbeat.

The dancers leapt and frolicked across the stage and struck poses with biceps flexed, a vibrant celebration of strength. Their movement, swiveling hips and popping shoulders punctuated by sharp handclaps, was lively and fresh. The company danced in patterns, with one phalanx of dancers striding onto the stage to perform a sequence followed by another and another performing the same sequence. They used repetition to eerie effect in "Tabula Rasa" and to create a sense of exultant community here. The performances throughout, technically masterful and heavy with emotion or buoyant with joy, created a dynamic and sensational program.

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