

OLD AND NEW

In part three of her series on Brazil, **Fátima Nollén** looks at Grupo Corpo and the São Paulo Companhia de Dança

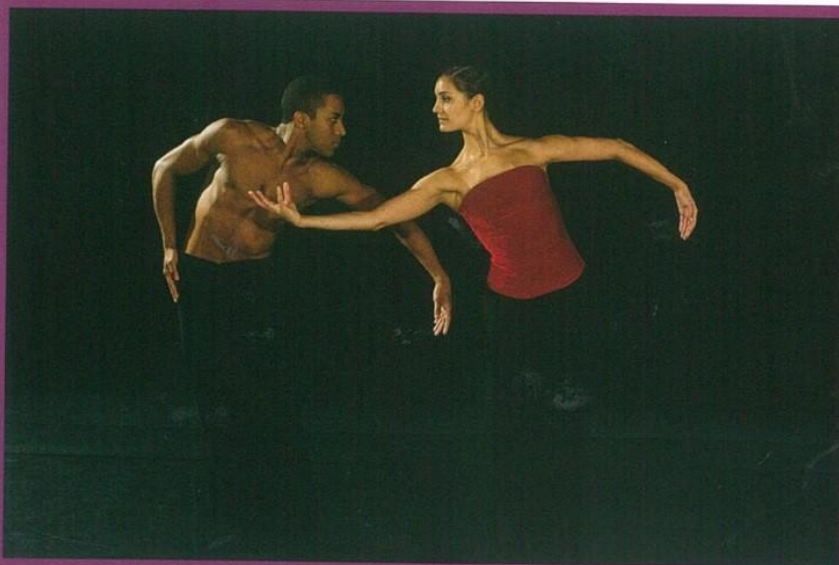
Contemporary dance companies populate the cultural universe of Brazil, some of which helped pioneer a Brazilian language such as Balé Stagium, now “a mere historical footnote”, according to Ivan Grandi editor of *Dança Brasil*. Some did not survive without sponsorship and closed, like Quasar Cia de Dança in 2017 after 28 years, or attempted reinvention, like Cisne Negro.

If there is a dance company that defines Brazil in movement, has proved consistently creative over 43 years, and is still going strong, it is Grupo Corpo, which literally translates as “body group”. A dance institution with an international profile, Grupo Corpo, as well as its school, is funded privately by long-term sponsors. Interestingly enough, it is also run as a family business.

All the Pederneiras siblings, and some of their children, are involved. Paulo is founder, general and artistic director, and set and lighting designer; Pedro is technical director; Miriam, assistant choreographer; and Rodrigo resident choreographer since 1978. Gabriel, Rodrigo’s son, is technical coordinator. It is a tight body in which each individual organ plays its part, all working in unison but also interdependently. Grupo Corpo creates works in collective fashion using Brazilian composers from all musical genres, and the 21 technically-strong dancers perform like a well-oiled machine that is also passionate about artistry. “Each dance is for the whole, for the body”, Paulo says, “but it’s as a group that we achieve our identity”.

Founded in 1975, Grupo Corpo is based in Belo Horizonte, the state capital of Minas Gerais, and in many ways it has best incorporated all of Brazil’s cultures into a contemporary dance language that is distinctively its own. Happy, humorous and contagious, the works are fascinating because of the stamina they require from the dancers, although it’s not everyone’s cup of tea.

Grupo Corpo has inspired other companies in Brazil and remains a top



São Paulo Companhia de Dança's Ana Paula Camargo and Nielson Sousa in *The Firebird*.

destination for many of the country’s professional dancers. The last time it held a general audition, 480 candidates registered to fill the two vacant places. “We can’t do that anymore, it was crazy”, choreographer Rodrigo tells me in his beautiful “mineiro” accent. “Now we just ask our dancers if they know someone interested when we need another, and invite them to class; a formal ballet class is the most important base for us. We then work together for a few days on some of our repertoire to see how they manage our language.”

Can he explain Grupo Corpo’s language? “It has native, Afro and contemporary influences, of course, but we have developed it progressively, in phases. In the beginning we mainly performed neoclassical works. We always took care of the quality of the classical technique in our dancers, but towards the end of the 1980s we started to think about what Brazilian contemporary dance could be. We looked into elements of popular dances, street dance and folk-fests and transformed them by pushing them through a contemporary sieve. We mixed movements that almost always start from the hips. It’s naturally sensual, but with a classical technique. With time, those classical lines and arabesques started to blur, while the Brazilian side became stronger and more evident.

The mix of European, native and African cultures is what identifies us as a nation; it shows in our way of walking and thinking, and we wanted to reflect that mix in dance.

What themes do Grupo Corpo want to share with audiences? “The themes are varied and depend really on the music”, Rodrigo replies. “Since 1992, with the exception of *Lecuona*, all the choreography has had specially created music. We invited important musicians [such as Tom Zé or Lenine] and gave them total freedom to do what they wanted. So, at times they just came up with music, as happened during our 40th anniversary, when Marco Antonio Guimarães created a score for an orchestra, and we thought it appropriate to create something that paid homage to the people who had worked with us. *Dança Sinfônica* was a moving piece”, he remembers. “Other musicians give us a theme with the music, and we start from there”.

In a way you are taking risks and challenging yourselves, I interrupt. “Yes, exactly”, he answers. “For our last work, *Gira*, Paulo invited Metá Metá [who, according to *The Guardian*, mixes punk, free-form jazz and samba with the religious sounds of Bahia into an extraordinary fusion], and when it arrived, the theme was Exú, of which I knew nothing because I had a very Catholic upbringing and had never entered a terreiro.” Exú is one of the entities or deities of ➤

Dance in Brazil

Umbanda and Candomblé, a popular Brazilian religion born from a mix of beliefs that recognise sources in native shamanistic rituals, as well as African and Catholic traditions. The rituals take place in a space at the centre of a construction, where people dance in circles and where the entities manifest themselves through the bodies of mediums.

Rodrigo Pederneiras says that for *Gira* ("turn" or "gyrate" in English), he started to attend these terreiros with dancers in order to learn more about each of the entities' "specific physical posture and movement". On stage, the dancers perform *Gira* in big white skirts, their torsos and necks painted red. "Creating *Gira* changed my life because I discovered something new. I still go to terreiros," he admits.

It pays to have an open mind, I venture. "Paulo always says that at Grupo Corpo we are prepared to be influenced, rather than wanting to influence others", he throws back quickly. "This openness allows Grupo Corpo's works to be fresh. We are open to everything new," he concludes.

Although Rodrigo Pederneiras has mostly choreographed for Grupo Corpo, his works can also be seen danced by the Deutsche Oper Berlin, the Opera du Rhin, Les Ballets Jazz de Montréal, and other Brazilian companies such as the Ballet do Teatro Municipal, the Ballet do Teatro Guaíra, and the São Paulo Companhia de Dança.

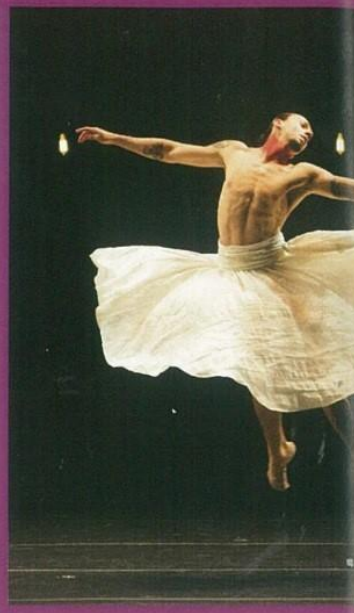
It's also worth mentioning here that for its 40th anniversary, Grupo Corpo invited former dancer Cassi Abranches to create *Suite Branca*. I'm

interested to know if this means Rodrigo is thinking about retiring. "At 63 I'm getting old and it's time to bring in new blood", he replies. "Cassi was a test to see how it would work. Paulo and I will not stop working if we can continue, but we all need renewal, bringing in new people and introducing new names to the audience. That way we can pass on the baton without any stress in the not so distant future," he admits.

Despite Brazil's financial crisis, a new dance company has emerged in the past decade that has garnered praise for quality, its diverse repertoire, its community outreach and international acclaim: São Paulo Companhia de Dança (SPCD). It has toured to 16 countries and been seen by more than 600,000 people since it was set up by the government of the State of São Paulo in 2008. Directed by the multi-talented Inês Bogéa, a former Grupo Corpo dancer who is also an arts professor, film-maker and writer, the 30-strong company is based in the rich financial-industrial city of São Paulo.

For its tenth anniversary, celebrations commenced with a tour of festivals in Germany, Austria, France and Luxembourg. Reviews ranged from "seductive" after an appearance in Lyon, to "an inspiring and dedicated temperament" after a performance of Marcia Haydée's suite from *Don Quixote* at Baden-Baden, as well as leaving the "audience electrified with enthusiasm" in Linz.

It is SPCD's work in Brazil, however, that makes it so relevant. Ivan Grandi thinks "SPCD is one of the most solid companies in Brazil because it offers classical and contemporary works to the audience, and a broad field

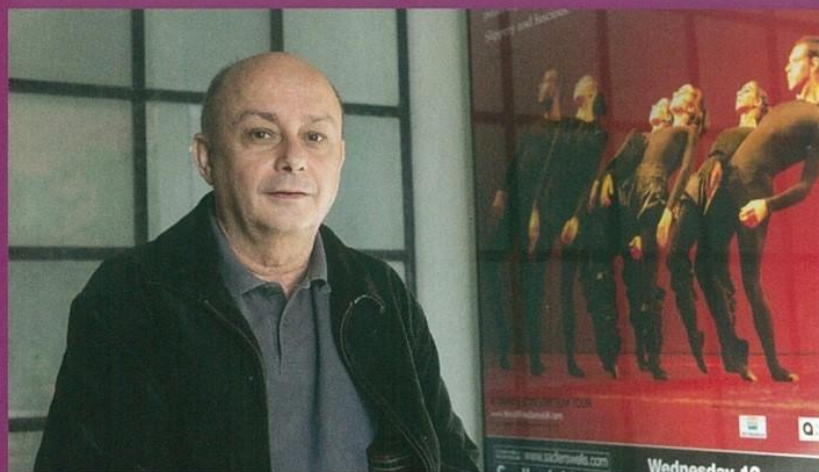


for choreographers and dancers in different styles and genres". Large numbers of Brazilian dancers need a place to work, and Rodrigo Pederneiras thinks, "SPCD is fundamental for dance in Brazil. If there were more companies like it, things would be much better".

Mario Galizzi, ballet master, répétiteur and director of Mexico's Compañía Nacional de Danza, goes further by saying, "SPCD is the best dance company in Brazil; its eclectic repertoire, all the activity with different choreographers, plus the rich educational work it develops make it a leader among its peers." Galizzi, a well-respected name in Latin American ballet, works regularly with SPCD at auditions, and teaches or stages classics such as *La Sylphide*. He will mount a full-length production of *Swan Lake* for the company this November.

On a practical note, Galizzi points out that Inês Bogéa is a wonderful example of an arts administrator, too, because, "she finds sponsors, organises tours and conferences and receives plenty of invitations to perform all over Brazil and abroad; it makes her a great director". Marcia Haydée also spoke to me about Bogéa in similar terms.

What goes through the mind of SPCD's artistic director, and what are her objectives? Bogéa seems determined, energetic and wise, connected to the reality of her country today, but without turning





Bottom left: Grupo Corpo's Rodrigo Pederneiras.
Above left and right: Grupo Corpo in *Gira*.

on internationally. She wants SPCD "to show different ways of looking at dance and movement through the works of different artists whilst also trying to maintain balance and variety." The company invites international and Brazilian choreographers to work with it, emphasising "creations by well known national artists as well as young ones". In ten years, SPCD has staged 26 new pieces by Brazilian choreographers such as Jomar Mesquita, Rodrigo Pederneiras, Thiago Bordin, Cassi Abranches, Clébio Oliveira, Henrique Rodovalho, Luis Fernando Bongiovani, Daniela Cardim, Alex Neoral and Ana Vitória among others. In addition, 12 new works were created by international choreographers of the calibre of Edouard Lock, Nacho Duato, Jiri Kylián, Mauricio Wainrot, Marco Goecke, Giovanni di Palma, Marcia Haydée, Mario Galizzi, Richard Siegal and Alessio Silvestrin. These are complemented by "classics" from George Balanchine, William Forsythe, Pablo Aharonian, Marie Chouinard, Uwe Scholz, Eric Gauthier and Bronislava Nijinska.

Bogéa tells me a company objective is to perform "on all kinds of stages", and is keen to preserve dance within archives and make film documentaries about the history of dance in Brazil (34 have been completed so far). Above all, she wants to "conquer new audiences, of all types". The company is driven by a desire to "descentralise

cultural goods, and educate through performances, workshops and seminars in as many cities and towns as possible. It can change people's perceptions about dance" on one hand, and on the other provide "a professional workplace for Brazilian dancers and choreographers wishing to remain in their home country."

I note the high turnover of dancers, which could lead to a potential lack of uniformity. "In general, dancers stay with us for five years, but we have seven still with us since 2008", she explains. "We do hire dancers per programme with short contracts, but we seek out uniformity first because we look for people with a solid classical technique that unites the baseline. They then spend two or three months rehearsing a particular ballet, so there is time to find cohesion. With some contemporary works, we tend to hire dancers with more experience in that field, as it can be a struggle for those who have only done classical ballet. I look for artists capable of revealing their identities in motion. Musicality, and a capacity to absorb repertoire are very important elements, too, but the rest is hard work and dedication", justifies Bogéa.

As for the mixture of classical and contemporary works, Bogéa explains that SPCD's programmes allow the audience "to experience intensely the present of dance by understanding its past, and we also seek to build for the future." She also admits

SPCD has "more contemporary pieces than classics," but tries to "include works that have an immediate message, along with more challenging pieces that show the best in Brazilian and world dance.

During its anniversary performances in June and July, SPCD offered three programmes that included past works such as *Peekaboo*, *Firebird Pas de Deux* and *Supernova* by Marco Goecke, Jiri Kylián's *14'20"*, Nacho Duato's *Gnawa*, *Raymonda Suite* by Guivalde de Almeida and Clébio Oliveira's *Primavera Fria* (Cold Spring), and three new works – *Petrichor* by Thiago Bordin, *Instante* by Lucas Lima and *Melhor Único Dia* by Henrique Rodovalho.

Dance critic Wagner Correa de Araújo think "SPCD reveals its serious intentions on stage, and the stylistic improvements instigate a solid cohabitation between classical traditions and modernity". He writes in *Escrituras Cénicas*: "Bogéa is a strong commander with intelligence and daring" and "after all, it was because of SPCD that Goecke's emblematic aesthetic inventory reached Brazil".

SPCD's director tells me she has been moved by the generous reception the company has received from artists, critics and audiences, and believes the success is "the result of everyone's passionate daily work. We are moving forward and finding answers each day, as well as new ways of playing out the art of dance".

SPCD toured to Mexico last month, and will be visiting cities in Brazil before returning for 15 performances of Galizzi's *Swan Lake* in November and December at São Paulo's Teatro Sérgio Cardoso. ■

For further information on Grupo Corpo, visit grupocorpo.com.br/en, and for the São Paulo Companhia de Dança, see spcd.com.br.

NOTE

The Ballet do Teatro Municipal do Rio de Janeiro opened its season in late June with the programme *Jóias do Ballet* that included *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la rose* and *Raymonda Suite*. It replaced the previously announced *Coppélia*, which will now be performed later in the year.