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Comedy carries 'Rhythm and Soul' lineup

DANCE REVIEW: Stella Maris turns in outrageously funny antics in TBAAL show

12:00 AM CDT on Sunday, March 18, 2007

By MARGARET PUTNAM / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

Friday night's show "Rhythm and Soul of a People" crackled, fizzed and popped at the Naomi Bruton Main Stage. The crackle came from two dynamic dance companies, the local Happy Nia Dance Theatre with Cure Contemporary Ballet and Stella Maris Jamaican Dance Company. While Amazones Women Master Drummers and Dance Company of Guinea contributed its share of energy, it hogged the spotlight far too long.

Out of the blue came the unknown troupe Happy Nia Dance Theatre with Cure Contemporary Ballet, and did it ever pack a wallop. Composed of dancers from age 10 to about 40, the troupe opened the show with artistic director and choreographer Dereque Whiturs' *My Language*. (Some will remember Mr. Whiturs as a star with Dallas Black Dance Theatre in the early '80s.)

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DARNELL RENEE/Special Contributor
'Rhythm and Soul of a People' offered a spirited set of performances at the Naomi Bruton Main Stage on Friday.

In *My Language* just a walk or an uplifted arm resonated with the fierce pride and determination of black Americans as they honored their past. There was nothing subtle about the text – "I dance to a new place," "Dance is my language" – or the delivery by Cheryl Tyre. Moreover, it was extraneous, for the dancers delivered all the nuances and power necessary.

The company's other work was a sizzling *Old School*

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Soul Limbo, with 50 years' worth of soul music from Stax Records. Preening, flirting and fancy maneuvering made for sexy encounters. The men – Harry Feril, 16; Taylor Knight, 17; and Kerry Sneed, 25 – brought shrieks of laughter for their outrageous fanny wags.

It is impossible not to love Stella Maris. This is the third time the company has appeared under the auspices of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, and it was even more outrageously funny and exuberant than in the past. *Ridim's* flew by, shifting gears from huge leaps to sultry shimmies. Outfitted in outrageous get-ups – sparkling bras and shiny leggings for the women – dancers took the zany mix of hip-hop, jazz and samba into a new realm of exuberance.

And then there was the company's comic masterpiece, *Liza*, set to jaunty Jamaican rhythms and blessed with dancers who could express jealousy, surprise, temptation and determination with exaggerated strokes. The story is simple: A village girl (Monique Spence) leaves for the big city and has her suitcase stolen, is taunted by street-smart vixens and catches the eye of Mr. McDreamy (André Hinds). She returns to her village only to have her suitor follow and her mother (Wendi Hoo Fatt) intervene. The mother pats the suitor down, and lo, he has money.

A hilarious wedding ensues. The groom's old girlfriend (Felice Mah-Leung) and her pals invade the event, and chaos erupts. Groom, bride, mother, pastor and guests tumble and slide like dominos and only right themselves when the girlfriend snags a new beau and prances off in triumph.

Can it get any better than *Liza*? Not in a lifetime.

Margaret Putnam is a Richardson-based writer who covers dance.

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