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Rennie Harris's 'Reign' Rains on China

Debra Levine · Thursday, July 7th, 2011

A woman stands at stage center, her knee-length black dress draping loosely over trousers. She's trembling. Flashing lights — a disco? faux lightening? — cut the stage's darkness. The sound of thunder, then rain, pours from the speakers. It's loud, overpowering. The woman suffers, she's convulsing; her corn-rowed hair flies in the syncopated rhythm.

A man rambles through, his footwork kicking. He's pounding the floor; it's demonic but beautiful. Later, the same man will soar in high jagged leaps. Three others join in, handsome tidy men dressed in church attire; their white shirts gleam against black skin. Seven church-going ladies strut on stage, beauties all, garbed in red Sunday best. Using hands to fan sweaty faces, they absorb the troubled woman in their swaggering, gospel-soaked parade.

In no time, the choreographer has introduced twelve bodies on stage and it's pulsating, rocking, and coming at you so hard you have to stop breathing to take it all in.

? ? ?

This blistering master work, "Reign" choreographed by hip-hop guy Rennie Harris, rained down on Henan Province in June, performed by Lula Washington Dance Theatre during the Los Angeles-based modern dance company's three-week tour of the China.

I saw it perhaps eight times and never failed to be mesmerized by its syncopated, aerobic body logic. And the Washington dancers, on whom Harris created the ecstatic "Reign," own it, work it so hard; they kill in this piece.

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