

# *Broad Street Review*

*where art and ideas meet*

**Annenberg Center presents Raphael Xavier's 'Point of Interest'**

## **Something old, something new**

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*Dancers performed sidesteps, swipes, coffee grinders, and backbends.  
(Photo by Bicking Photography.)*

People sometimes ask what kind of dance I cover. I say everything from Africanist to ballet to hip-hop. Through the choreography of Raphael (Raph) Xavier — who brought his Point of Interest to the Annenberg Center this weekend — and his colleagues, I can see the maturation of hip-hop as stage dance. It's interesting to try to translate the vocabularies that ballet and hip hop unexpectedly (but in Xavier's case, not unwittingly) share.

Xavier, a Pew and Guggenheim Fellow, teaches at Princeton and has worked for the past three years with a performance crew manned by Josh Culbreath, Ricky (Stunt Man) Romo, Jerry Valme, and Chris LaPlante. I've been following and writing about his career since the late

1990s when, as Tybalt, he became a star of Rennie Harris's worldwide hit Rome and Jewels. Xavier later founded Olive Dance Theater with Jamie Merwin, and it had a good run until Xavier felt ready to move on. Harris told Xavier to think big: "Don't do nothin' less than Rome and Jewels."

Point of Interest is neither less nor more than Rome and Jewels. Instead, it's a kind of meditation on how hip-hop brought him, his crew, and many other street kids to a daily practice as disciplined as ballet. It also mused amusingly on the aging-out process of such a physically demanding dance style.

Xavier composed or remixed much of the music for the show, which ran a little over an hour, often with sections of poetry written and narrated by Leigh Mrlei Nelson.

**"All limbs intact"**

The rigor of the 10 short pieces was nicely paced, so that the dancers were able to walk away from the program with all limbs intact. There was even a short musical interlude/breather, danced by, as the program noted, “Imagine Them,” complete with an empty stage. Xavier and his cohorts have a light touch of humor that bounces between them, yet an often-touching seriousness about getting the job done right.

Of the dance phrases I connected between ballet and hip-hop, one had Xavier, hands on hips, side-stepping across the backdrop toward the flies. It bespoke a physical-therapy practice where you walk with a stretch band around your knees to strengthen the legs (Xavier has recovered from some serious injuries). But it also looked like a grounded, even somewhat wounded, chassé.

Then there were the “swipes,” where the breakdancer rotates with his hands on the floor, legs flying behind him. This began to look like an inversion of the barrel-roll turn, which is foot-driven, with arms in the air helping the repeated rotations. Culbreath has the smallest body in the crew and it is tight as a corkscrew. His floor-flushed “coffee grinders,” with one foot rapidly circling under the other while the torso remains front-centered, blurred past your eyes. You do see moves like this in ballet (for example, in *The Nutcracker*) but also in many forms of folk dance, particularly Russian.

A duet between Xavier and Valme had the similarly built men — both are tall and muscled, with upper-body strength — dancing in tandem, while the younger Valme had a slight edge on vigor. They were like younger and older versions of the same person.

But the piece that set the mise-en-scene came early in the show. “Untitled” saw Xavier walking tentatively around a large spot like a leopard stalking its prey. He edged into it with one foot, testing the waters for safety before finally plunging in. He took the spot in his teeth, as it were, and laid claim to it.

<http://www.broadstreetreview.com/film/annenberg-center-presents-raphael-xaviers-point-of-interest>