



Dancer Raphael Xavier at UAlbany Performing Arts Center

"Point of Interest" contrasts varied break dance styles

By Tresca Weinstein | Updated 9:04 am, Wednesday, November 1, 2017



When Raphael Xavier started break dancing 34 years ago at Conrad Middle School in Wilmington, Del., he and his buddies had to hide what they were doing. A kid in California had gotten injured practicing the form, and the highly publicized incident caused schools around the country to ban breaking on their grounds.

"Everybody thought it was a liability, so you got expelled if you were caught doing it," Xavier said in a recent interview. "We had to sneak into places in the school where you couldn't be found, where no one was in the hallways, to practice."

Despite his dedication, Xavier didn't think dancing would be his life. He considered careers as a photographer, a visual artist, an actor— "all these other things that I thought I was supposed to become," he said. But after meeting hip-hop pioneer Rennie Harris in the late 1990s, he realized that breaking, art and theater could all coexist.

"When I got on stage and saw what he was doing with the dance, that changed my direction," said Xavier, who performs at the University at Albany on Tuesday evening. "All the things I had in my head came to life — art, dance, music, all of it together." Xavier played Tybalt in "Romeo and Jewels" — Harris' groundbreaking hip-hop reimagining of "Romeo and Juliet" — and also performed in the company's "Cool

Heat Urban Beat." And he pursued his other interests as well — doing photography shoots for the Notorious BIG and P. Diddy, and recording with his rap group, Sons of Sam. But dancing remained at the center—along with his drive to make the moves his own.

"I was always going against the grain — if someone told me I couldn't do something, I did it anyway," he said. "Early on, when I exhausted the 10 or 15 moves I knew, I would cut them in half and put them together with something else, and I kept doing that."

More Information

If you go

Raphael Xavier

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday

Where: University at Albany
Performing Arts Center, 1400
Washington Ave., Albany

Tickets: \$15 (\$20 day of performance);
students, seniors and university
faculty and staff \$10 (\$15 day of
performance)

Info: 442-3995;
<http://www.albany.edu/pac/>

"I was always flipping it — when people expected me to dance with music, I would do it without any. If they expected it to be fast, I would do it all slow. Instead of dancing to rap, I would dance to jazz or ambient sound."

Then, in 2007, an infection between the C5 and C6 discs of his spine temporarily paralyzed him. As he recovered, he drew on all the innovation and tools at his disposal to find a way to keep moving.

"It was a major life change," he recalled. "I had to figure out how I could do this and not risk my life."

The outcome of his explorations is a somatic movement technique he called "ground core," which is done almost entirely on the floor—on the back, the stomach or hands and knees. It's been taught at numerous universities, offering insight and "new possibilities to take into the theater space, hip-hop or modern dance," Xavier said.

The discoveries he made during that time informed his touring work "The Unofficial Guide to Audience Watching Performance," launched in 2013, as well as "Point of Interest," which will be onstage Tuesday as part of UAlbany Performing Arts Center's In the Raw series. Featuring five dancers whose age range spans 20 years (the youngest is 27; Xavier, at 47, is the oldest), "Point of Interest" contrasts youthful and mature approaches to breaking.

"You can see the differences in how we understand the movement," Xavier said. "At one point, it's like I'm in a battle with my younger self."

Getting older, he says, reminds him in some ways of being paralyzed. He's forced to surrender to his physical limitations and to admit that some things aren't possible for him anymore.

"I used to be able to fly and now, if I push to do that, I need more time to heal," he said. "I struggle with my body not being able to do what it used to do. But, on the other side of that, it's beautiful, because I'm also pushing the boundaries and finding out what I can do. I'm figuring out a way to move consistently through performances and through the years, and hopefully making the form more accessible to older dancers."

Tresca Weinstein is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.

<http://www.timesunion.com/living/article/Dancer-Raphael-Xavier-at-UAlbany-Performing-Arts-12320561.php#photo-14458223>