

Dance Review: Canada's Rubberband is a joy to behold

In its White Bird performances at The Reser in Beaverton, the company brilliantly blends hip-hop, contemporary and classical elements into a fused whole.

By Amy Leona Havin
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Two Rubberband dancers weight-sharing during *Vic's Mix*. Photo: Bill Hebert HR

White Bird presented Canada's Rubberband, led by Victor Quijada, April 3-5 at the Patricia Reser Center for the Arts in Beaverton. The company performed *Vic's Mix*, a collection of works by the artistic director spanning 2002 to 2014. The work premiered in June 2016 as part of the Festival International DansEncore in the Salle Anais-Allard-Rousseau of the Maison de la Culture in Trois-Rivieres. The original cast featured seven dancers, including Pacific Northwest-based Lavinia Vago. The 2024-2025 casting featured a charismatic international group, including Rion Taylor, Jovick Pavajeau-Orostegui, Wyeth Walker, Dareon Blowe, Jessica Muszynski, Cindy Mateus, and Mackenzie Corrales, all wearing costumes designed by Camille Thibault-Bedard with music composition by Jasper Gahunia and lighting by Yan Lee Chan.

Rubberband was founded by Quijada in Montreal in 2002 and the company won the Prix RIDEAU award at the Festival Vue sur la Releve only a year later. In 2005, he was joined by dancer and choreographer Anne Plamondon as artistic co-director, and has continued to create works and win awards since. A classically trained dancer with Twyla Tharp and Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, Quijada is deeply inspired by his roots in hip-hop dance and L.A. street dance culture.

He returned to the stage as a dancer in 2020 and graced the recent Portland audience with his moves in an April 5 post-show cypher, met with a standing ovation from the house. After a short welcome from White Bird's Graham Cole, Quijada took the stage to discuss the upcoming pieces.

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When I first came into contact with hip hop ... it was a very empowering time and moment,” said Quijada, adding, “... at the age of 26 after my classical training, I felt compelled to reach back and connect to that part of me I left behind in Los Angeles.”

Act I, Quijada explained, was a collection of “trials and tests,” created between 2002 and 2005, when he first began combining “urban and classical dance forms.” Act II, choreographed between 2006 and 2014, would present more developed versions of his quintessential “mixtape collage,” inspiring the show’s title.

The performance began with the house lights still partway on as stage lights illuminated three dancers ready to perform. The dance gradually evolved into a group piece, then morphed into duets, and ultimately became a fight scene between the performers.

While the classical elements of the work seemed somewhat hidden to start, the hip-hop influences were strong and clear. As the works progressed from Secret Service to Meditations on the Gift, flashes of contemporary movement appeared in lifts, stretched legs, and extensions. The limbs were stylistically portioned, and joints emphasized in the choreography, exemplifying methods of folding and breaking traditional lines.

From the start, the dancers were noticeably incredibly strong. Their seamless lifts drew gasps and sighs from the audience, and their feet returned to the stage silently after every jump. They were grounded, and embraced their relationships to gravity, gliding and pressing through space with intentional effort that added grit and grain to some of the otherwise soft and fluid moments. They also performed difficult balances, holds, and inversions, often cantilevering on one hand. Although each dancer was stylistically unique, highlighting their own strengths and movement preferences, the ensemble meshed together impeccably. They connected to create perfect unison, unity, and camaraderie among the group, which allowed for risk-taking in other emotive aspects of their presentations.

In Mi Verano, set to music by Vivaldi, balances, turns, and sweeping figure-8 negotiations of space were the focus. The work stepped from a mainly hip-hop and contemporary base into classically straight arms for the first time that evening. Four dancers jumped quickly into a petite-allegro style section where they joined cardiovascular leaps and wide lunges with deliciously off-kilter turns.

The end of Act I and beginning of Act II solidified Quijada’s ability to combine dance with comedy, a feat commonly attempted and seldom excelled at. The attitude of the dancers, wardrobe, and lighting conveyed a relaxed and friendly atmosphere as three dancers acted out a battle for the stage — yelling directions to the stage manager as though the wrong music were playing. They gave cue notes for when to start their songs and could be seen clearly enjoying themselves, which lent to the scene’s believability.

The dialogue spoken by the dancers was embodied, rather than overperformed, and Quijada’s expert understanding of timing in turn created a hilarious comedy of errors. This style of comedy was replicated in choreographic tidbits throughout Vic’s Mix, when dancers pushed past each other to outdo one another’s curtain call bows, and again with dueling solos.

Later, a gorgeous duet featuring penches, lifts, arabesques, inversions, and gravity-defying holds took place, welcoming the audience to a second act that showcased the progression of Quijada’s choreographic career. The work, seemingly now rooted in classical techniques with remaining steadfast hip-hop elements, became sweeping, sensual, and more daring in the spatial relationships exhibited between the dancers.

Rubberband is the ultimate example of a company that defies the definition of a particular mold. Quijada’s unique voice is exactly that — one of a kind. Although he explores a concept that many other companies also investigate — the fusion of street dance and classical dance — he does so in a way that combines them into an entirely new genre.

The distinct lines between hip-hop, contemporary dance, and ballet are not readily apparent in Quijada’s work, but rather melted together to form a dance form of his own. Quijada’s choreography is both accessible and profoundly impactful. His artistic intention contains a soulful narrative depth that shines through the individual moves, thanks in part to the technical and performative excellence of his company members, and sets Rubberband apart as a fresh and relevant company.

Quijada’s humility and passion for exploration and experimentation are apparent in the way he speaks about his work, and in the work itself, making Rubberband a joy to behold.