

# Birds of a different feather

On October 9, the audience at the Thailand Cultural Centre was treated to an exhilarating performance by the contemporary Brazilian dance company, Cisne Negro, which means “Black Swan”. The 18-strong dance troupe, comprised of 14 dancers, two understudies, founder and artistic director Hulda Bettencourt, and her daughter Dany Bettencourt, rehearsal director and chief choreographer, made the 36-hour trek all the way from Sao Paulo for this one show in Bangkok.

The private dance company has shown off its nimble dance moves to sold out crowds in theatres around the world since the '80s, and the recent Bangkok show marked the first time in the 12-year history of the International Festival of Dance & Music that a Brazilian dance production has come to Thailand. The performance excelled in combining classical ballet movements with international influences, executed to perfection with Brazilian pizzazz. The result was a refreshing and playful new take on dance.

The programme promised four one-act ballets from four different choreographers. Normally the encore is saved for last, but the audience was in for a special treat when a bonus act not announced in the original schedule was inserted after the first piece.

The opening piece, *Fruto da Terra* (Earth Apples), started with the delicate sounds of jungle birds. Bare-chested male dancers clad in khaki sarongs portrayed life in the poverty-stricken countryside, where the locals, in spite of tensions and conflict, live in earthy harmony. The ballet was conceived by the highly regarded Israeli choreographer Itzik Galili who, possibly inspired by his home base in the Netherlands, used real potatoes as props. (Apparently it was no mean feat getting hold of 200 potatoes in a country where the main staple is rice, according to Dany.)

The work resonated with the audience because of the powerful dance moves, made more poignant thanks to the accompaniment of the heart-rending voice of Argentinian folk singer Mercedes Sosa (1935 to 2009), popular in Latin America for her socially engaged music. As Dany said, “For Argentinians this music is very important. They used to cry a lot when they heard it.”

Next up was the exquisite pas de



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deux *Sabia* (Brazil's national bird), with dancers emulating the movements of this beautiful and graceful creature. *Sabia* was a gift of the Portuguese choreographer Vasco Wellenkamp to the company's repertoire.

The dance act was a last-minute addition per special request of the Brazilian Embassy, who also supported the show. Watching the ballet while listening to the music by Brazilian composer and singer Tom Jobim and the beautiful voice of Maria Lucia Godoy, conjured up images of a romantic black and white movie from a bygone era. As Dany pointed out, “There's not really a story but just the way she moves, just beautiful music and beautiful bird coming together to express something beautiful.”

This short interlude was followed by *Forrolins*, featuring choreography by Dany, who originally created it for the National Ballet of Chile. Artistic director Hulda implored her to do the piece for the Cisne Negro Dance Company, as well. The work is based on *Variations of Forrolins*, from an original theme by the talented and inventive young Brazilian musician Andre Mehmari, who plays 14 different instruments. Meaning “for all”, the title refers to a sign the fun-loving Brazilians of the northeast used to post on bars and restaurants to encourage visitors to enter and join the party and dance. The lively piece is a celebration of Brazil's carnival spirit with colourful costumes inspired by Afro-Brazilian and indigenous Indian culture. Dancers falling like stone statues and breaking into marionette-like moves added a few comical elements to the performance.

After the intermission, the dancers returned to the stage with *Revoada*

(Flock). Unanimously considered the piece de resistance of the evening, the ballet is an evocative take on Stravinsky's *Firebird* and *Fireworks*, by legendary choreographer Gigi Caciuleanu, who combined the works into a harmonious ensemble. The Romanian artist created the ballet in honour of Cisne Negro's 30-year anniversary, choosing the bird as a leitmotif in a tribute to the dance company's name. The dancers conjured up primordial visions of ashes and flames, inspiring comparisons to the mythical tale of the phoenix reborn after its own fiery demise.

Renowned dancer and choreographer Rui Moreira paid loving homage to Brazil's diverse ethnic roots in *Trama* (Interweaving), the final ballet of the evening. Like *Revoada*, in trying to capture the rich fabric that makes up Brazil, the choreographer turned the work into a tapestry embroidered with many threads: of vehemence, anger, sentimentality and joy. If you want to take a short trip through this sprawling country and its rich history, the ballet is a tour de force.

In explaining the last dance, Dany summed up the performance and the troupe: “It goes back to our cultural roots, we have so many of them ... Indian, African, Portuguese, German. They all come together like a big melting pot and everybody lives well with this. We don't have fights. The last dance is really us, it sums up who we are.”