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Diavolo Dance is 'architecture in motion'



Diavolo Dance Theater will open ARTS San Antonio's 2013-'14 season on Saturday.

By Jasmina Wellinghoff, For the Express-News

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Growing up in Paris, Jacques Heim had a little trouble with the French educational system. To be exact, he was kicked out of six schools.

“I couldn't stand French education,” he said in a telephone interview. “I was dyslexic and a little ADD, so it was difficult for me to focus. I was a bad student and after a while no school would accept me. So I was stuck at home for a while, which was fantastic, but my parents eventually decided that I needed to be sent to America (where the family had relatives).”

It was an auspicious move. After being introduced to dance at Middlebury College, Heim quickly developed an affinity for this “powerful communication medium,” which required no language or translation. Now the artistic director of Diavolo Dance Theater, he leads a company whose work blends ballet, contemporary dance, acrobatics, martial arts and hip-hop.

The company will stop in San Antonio Saturday, courtesy of ARTS San Antonio. The performance kicks off the arts presenter's 2013-'14 season.

The name Diavolo, which means “devil” in Italian, should be understood as “rascal-like,” said Heim, not anything sinister. The company was recognized as a cultural treasure of the city of Los Angeles in 2007 and regularly tours throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia and Latin America.

Though he's often referred to as a choreographer, Heim prefers to think of himself as a director. “My dancers choreograph,” he said. “I come up with the concept and direct each work like a theater piece. What we do is architecture in motion; it's about how human bodies interact with their environment. The architectural environment comes first. I wouldn't be able to choreograph dance on an empty stage.”

By “architectural environment,” he means the large, often surrealistic set pieces that his dancers engage with during each performance. These may take the shape of rocking platforms, huge wheels, stairwells with trap doors or a giant cube that opens up to create additional structures. What the 10 dancers — five men and five women — do with these challenging sets may remind viewers of daredevil exploits and circus acts, but Heim uses the daring movement vocabulary to express deeper ideas.

In San Antonio, Diavolo will perform two works: “Transit Space” and “Trajectoire,” both conceived and directed by Heim and performed to original music. “Transit Space” was inspired by the California skateboarding culture and the documentary “Dogtown and Z-Boys,” which focuses on young men who find a sense of community among other hardcore skateboarders.

Skateboarding ramps are used as set pieces.

“When we talked to them, these kids told us that skateboarding gave them a sense of purpose and belonging,” Heim said. “So it's not about skateboarding; it's about connecting and feeling safe.”

Heim described “Trajectoire” as an “abstract narrative” dealing with the struggles of the human experience. It took the company a year to become comfortable with its challenging choreography.

Diavolo Dance Theater

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

Extra: There will be a Q&A session after the performance.

Where: Lila Cockrell Theatre, 200 E. Market St.

Tickets: \$23-\$110 at artssa.org and all Ticketmaster outlets.

Information: 210-226-2891