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Raphael Xavier makes his point at the ICA

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By Jeffrey Gantz Globe Correspondent | October 01, 2016



Raphael Xavier brought "Point of Interest" to the Institute of Contemporary Art Friday.

Raphael Xavier is an alumnus of the hip-hop dance company Rennie Harris Puremovement, where he appeared as Tybalt in Harris's version of "Romeo and Juliet," "Rome and Jewels." But he's not just a pure mover — he's also a rapper, a composer, a choreographer, a photographer, an author, and a film director. He's lectured at Princeton University; earlier this year he was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. And to judge by "Point of Interest," the thoughtful and engaging piece he brought to the Institute of Contemporary Art Friday, it would be fair to call him a dance philosopher.

Xavier has recently been touring "The Unofficial Guide to Audience Watching Participation," an autobiographical effort in which he talks and invites audience participation. "Point of Interest" is his newest piece — it had been seen previously in excerpts, but Friday's performance, under the auspices of World Music/CRASHarts, marked the world premiere of the complete work. Xavier, who's now 45, appears on the Barbara Lee Family Foundation Theater stage with a "multigenerational cast" in what purports to shine a light on the "natural, humorous, and at times painful change of the maturing Breaker dancer."

Running a compact 52 minutes, "Point of Interest" comprises eight sections with somewhat unedifying titles: "Untitled," "Difficulties," "Nick of Time,"

"Untitled," "Still," "Wonderful World," "It Is With," and "Point of Interest." The music ranges from System of a Down and Portico to Xavier's own compositions; there's also poetry by Xavier and Leigh Nelson.

"Point of Interest" begins with solos from the five dancers: Joshua Culbreath, Chris LaPlante, Raymond Trihn, Jerry Valme, and Xavier himself. Differences are immediately apparent: Culbreath, with his breathtaking floor spins, is the most virtuosic; LaPlante is more interested in articulating the various parts of the body; Valme is a slightly smaller, slightly more energetic version of Xavier.

It's with "Difficulties" that "Point of Interest" comes into focus. Xavier breaks out of a huddle, moves to center stage and begins a solo with small circles. It's a slowish, stripped-down, mostly vertical notion of breakdancing; he suggests the older Mikhail Baryshnikov, making what he can still do look as mesmerizing as ever. There's some shadow boxing and dribbling; then Xavier hits the floor, and after some impressive work, he bounces up and points at the floor, as if to say, "I still got it." And he does, but after the next floor session, he looks more doubtful, as if wondering how he'll feel in the morning.

The other focal point is “Still” (this title does work), where Xavier and Valme, now in identical outfits of dark shirts and light-colored pants, do identical moves. The two men look almost identical; Xavier is distinguishable more by his white goatee than by any inability to keep up. His poetry here includes the lines “Why can we not still be young” and “This ain’t gonna last too long,” but at the end, he’s the one who carries Valme offstage.

A sixth dancer, Henry Chen, makes his only appearance soloing in the second “Untitled”; wearing a plaid shirt (everyone else sports solid-color T’s), he’s a kind of palate cleanser, moving almost as if he were under water and being buffeted by currents. Trihn has a solo to Nelson’s “It Is With,” a poem about silence being ruthless as well as golden.

But the point of “Point of Interest” is how Culbreath, LaPlante, Trihn, Valme, and Xavier subsume their individual styles into a group effort that’s less about showing off and more about exploring the essence of breakdancing. At one point, Culbreath does show off, the audience applauds, the other four give him a hard look, and he shrugs with a ghost of a grin. Then it’s back to moving together, individual bodies not aiming for perfect unison, merely conversing as to what breakdancing has been and what it might be.