



Italy's Spellbound Contemporary Ballet opens first U.S. tour with haunting works

By **Donald Rosenberg, The Plain Dealer**

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It might seem intimidating for an observer to discuss a dance company that performs a work subtitled "The Invasion of Empty Words." So let me try not to be too invasive in describing the haunting images that Italy's Spellbound Contemporary Ballet offered Saturday at the Ohio Theatre in PlayhouseSquare under the auspices of DanceCleveland.

The Rome-based company, opening its first official United States tour, introduced three pieces – two of them closely linked – by artistic Mauro Astolfi, a choreographer who embraces passion and ambiguity in equal measure. He has honed a troupe of nine dancers of

exceptional elegance and earthiness, melding classical and modern techniques with seamless dexterity.

In each of the works on Saturday's program, the dancers showed fluent command of Astolfi's movement language, which is brisk, intricate and sweeping in its flow of visceral activity. Relationships are implied, only to morph into something new and occasionally troubling.

Astolfi expresses deep emotions in these creations partly by keeping the interplay close and heated. The atmospheres are dark and spare, the music doleful and the dancers entwined in a rush of torrid and tender gestures.

There are two parts to "Lost For Words," the project that seeks to liberate the performers from "The Invasion of Empty Words." In Studio I, the first part, six dancers – including two bare-chested men – stare blankly at the audience before breaking off for a series of whirling and twisting solos, duets and other interactions to otherworldly electronic music and Baroque violin musings by Biber.

Early in the piece, a narrator is heard uttering "empty words" as the sleek dancers go their feisty ways. The sound of rain adds a

disquieting effect. But nothing can stop Astolfi's torrential sense of motion, which blends athletic bravura with



Cristiano Castaldi

Members of Spellbound Contemporary Ballet perform artistic director Mauro Astolfi's "Downshifting."

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rapturous lyricism.

The passions are heightened in Studio II at evening's end. The full company stares into the house and proceeds to engage in obsessive pairings and ensemble interplay. The music, from assorted sources, veers toward the elegiac when it isn't mysterious (or strange: animal howls fill the air at one point). It's a bold and sometimes lonely work full of yearning ideas and danced with fierce eloquence.

Between these pieces came "Downshifting," another Astolfi exploration of restless and ritualistic movement set largely to sorrowful music. The nine dancers relate to one another in explosive unison patterns, but more often they declare their independence or thrust themselves into duets of sensual and conflicted urgency.

As revealed by this program, Astolfi's vision and choreography require performers of utmost flexibility, quick attack and emotional vehemence. The dancers appeared to give everything they've got in these brooding and impressive works. Only when the lights went up during the final bows were they able to break into smiles. What they did preceding this moment of relief was spellbinding.

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