



# DANCE-THEATER UTOPIA

## ADRENALINE ON THE BRINK

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To talk about Dance-Theater Utopia, you must begin with André Breton's categorical statement, "Beauty shall be convulsive or shall not exist at all." This radical view of the performing arts is what makes Dance-Theater Utopia what it is. The company's main concern is not to explore how human beings move, but why they move and what makes them move. Its aesthetic is based on continuous physical and emotional risk: human beings move and surrender themselves completely, exploring their limits to suicidal extremes.

Dance-Theater Utopia

The Dance-Theater Utopia group, together with only one or two other contemporary dance troupes, holds center stage in Mexican dance today.

The company's creations turn mainly around the meaning of life, death and love. Marco Antonio Silva, the group's founder and choreographer says, "Juan Rulfo said any writer has three fundamental topics: life, love and death. Life and death are the two extremes of the discourse of dance, and love is what keeps the ability to struggle alive. For that very reason, it becomes a force able to avert chaos."

**The choreographies are pure energy, energy concentrated, channeled and transformed into an explosive act.**

A member of the audience

From its beginnings in 1980, the company has retained certain constants in its productions: in addition to dancers, Utopia's productions often include actors, painters and sculptors, primary school teachers or practically anyone the choreographer thinks may contribute something to a particular performance. In this sense, Marco Antonio Silva seeks his "characters" in his surroundings, regardless of the level of technique they may have. His choreographies, then, often include "dancers" who have never danced before.

**The effectiveness of Marco Antonio Silva's choreographies is rooted in his ability to make you feel on stage. You know that Marco is going to make you look good with your own resources...or in spite of them.**

Mavis, Dance-Theater Utopia dancer

\* Mexican dance and theater critic.  
Opposite page photo by Eniac Martínez.

Dance-Theater has caused great controversy in Mexico's dance milieu. Its detractors say that "it is neither theater nor dance." But, the troupe has a considerable following: the drama of its performances seems to be more attractive to the audience than abstract dance or dance that seeks plasticity of movement without a conscious effort to deal with a particular topic.

**Its proposals are a reflection of the people's pain, a quest worn out by progress.**

**A member of the audience**

Utopia has been defined as a group whose performances are always a risky, radical, violent experience. The enormous energy expended by the dancer-actors in the choreographies often has great impact due to their total surrender to their work. Carlos Ocampo, a theoretician of the dance in Mexico, compares the Dance-Theater Utopia dancers to Kamikazes. "The dancers have the vocation of Japanese Kamikaze pilots. Fearless, these dancers defy space and break through the body's limitations."

**It is the break up, the fracturing of the human spirit, the disintegration of the individual.**

**A member of the audience**



Marco Antonio Silva

Perhaps the main influence in the work of Dance-Theater Utopia is German neoexpressionist dance. As dance critic Patricia Cardona says, "The identification of the Mexican temperamental fury with the German post-Nazi fury was so great that, today, their performances require simultaneous interpretation from German to Spanish." The fusion of contemporary Mexican dance and German neoexpressionism achieved a very concrete blend of topics close to Mexican daily life. "The Germans beat themselves, strike out, shout, get angry, humiliate themselves, rescue themselves. They demand a little tenderness in human relations. I understand why Marco Antonio Silva is fascinated by this. Latinos are after the same thing," writes Cardona.

**Utopia, the Mexican modern dance company, was on tour in Michigan. It has tremendous energy and a colossal strength.**

**The dancers are passionate to the point of giving themselves completely on stage. Spectators may end up mixed up with the effect of a giant collage of images, impressions and symbols.**

**Marianne Danks Rudnicki, dance critic**

Dance-Theater Utopia is a radical alternative to what is called postmodern choreography, which emphasizes a search for harmonious form to please the senses, without inviting the audience to think, much less get emotionally involved in what is happening on stage. As U.S. critic Jennifer Noyer said about the piece *Veracruz 36°C* (*nobody looks at the moon at sunset*), "*Veracruz 36°C* ... a challenging and complex work, touched hidden springs of human nature with poetic force. This piece was a complete rejection of New Wave intoxication, with its cool, formal movements for their own sake."

*Veracruz 36°C* is one of Utopia's most important creations, not only because of its impact internationally, but also because it reveals the thematic and formal constants that characterize the group's productions.

The title alludes to the port of Veracruz, on the Gulf of Mexico, considered perhaps the country's most important port. However, it alludes mainly to the notion of a voyage: the voyage into dreams and into the past. The atmosphere of the choreography is imbued with loving nostalgia and solitude.



David Maitano

### Veracruz 36°C A Utopian Creation

How can we penetrate dreams? How much does absence weigh? *Veracruz 36°C*, a one-act production, is both quest and discovery of what the body does not remember; through the eyes of an outsider and set in an extreme situation, it can turn wrath or nostalgia into a stepping stone that speeds the encounter with our ghosts, travellers gone astray in the corridors of a compact memory, like the weight of a stone that suddenly explodes where least expected.

*Veracruz* is the perfect excuse for this, seen as a train station, a port or a starting point, that hot, stuffy part of our past, where there is no weeping and no turning back. An atmosphere of supreme loneliness, where both strangers and ghosts are fed up with false illusions.

*Veracruz 36°C* tries to look deep into our feelings, our wrath and our frailties. It is personal testimony to the enigma of our generation's everyday life, with its incomplete, fragmented body, at times emptied of all memory.

A labyrinth that is, ultimately, our will and testament of urban love.

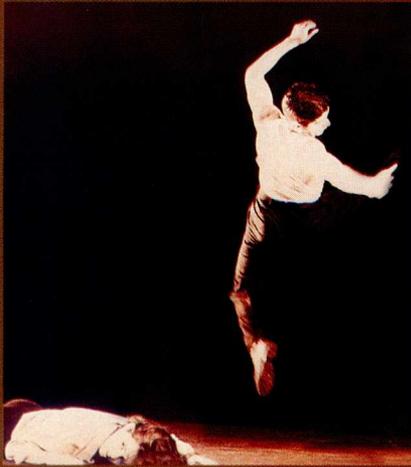
Dance-Theater Utopia

J. Pérez

## THE CHOREOGRAPHER

We are not a happy people, so we need heroes, myths, champions, paradises, Ulysses and Christmases.

Marco Antonio Silva, Dance-Theater Utopia choreographer



Marco Antonio Silva

Marco Antonio Silva (b. 1953) founded Dance-Theater Utopia in 1980. Today, he has completed more than 30 works of choreography and has been awarded a veritable collection of national and international prizes. He supplemented his training as a dancer and choreographer with acting studies and a degree in stage direction. From the very first, he was interested in dance developed invariably around a dramatic conflict, which is why his work has always been recognized as part of the dance-theater movement. Silva has worked continually in theatrical productions, as well as in film and opera. Some of his work in opera—for example, Gounod's *Faust* directed by Mexican director Ludwik Margules—has sparked real outrage in an essentially conservative opera-going public. In *Faust*, Silva went to the extreme of moving the chorus—stationary by definition—eliciting boos reminiscent of the bullring. Some Mexican stage directors consider it indispensable to work with Silva to block their productions. It is no exaggeration to say that this choreographer's work has powerfully determined the proposals of Mexican theater's most brilliant directors. Silva's contribution to movement on stage is not only aimed at plasticity, but at the actor being able to combine emotion and meaning in every movement. This makes it possible to go beyond the idea of blocking as a simple illustration of the text and of the director's as some kind of stage-bound traffic cop.

It [Marco Antonio Silva's work] has greatly affected me and my work.... This is contemporary. It's powerful. It says something to all of us.

Bill De Young, American choreographer

### Marco Antonio Silva

As though paraphrasing Plautus and Unamuno by saying "Nothing human is strange to me; I am the Other and myself at the same time," Silva uses the maxim to center his work and use and reuse all the resources that have characterized his proposals in recent years: physical use of space designed to violently assault the audience's senses, the absence of an anecdote that succumbs before expressiveness, the importance of the event in itself and unbridled use of effects....Capable of both "light" choreography and extremely profound productions, Silva is obsessed with work. He gets involved in dozens of theatrical, choreographical and film projects. His tenacity, which can withstand anything, has always placed him among the best contemporary creators of the dance in Mexico.

Rosario Manzanos, dance critic

## THE DANCERS

**There's an element of danger in Marco's work. You need a youthful body and a sense of faith to do it....It is a grassroots form of dance that has nothing to do with the folkloric troupes that Americans see and associate with Latin America.**

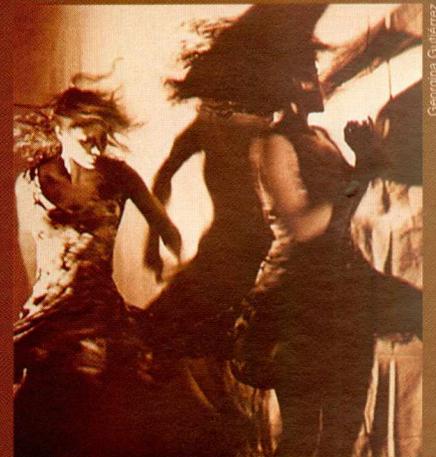
Marianne Danks, dance critic

Much has been said about the Dance-Theater Utopia dancers' absolute commitment to their work. This intense surrender of themselves, which some critics say implies physical risk given the violence involved in the choreography of most of the group's pieces, seems closely linked to the relationship the dancers have with the choreographer.

**Utopia's work is a result of our encounter with a dreamer, Marco Antonio Silva, who has a special way of experiencing his passions and expressing them, a special way of bringing his dreams to life through us, other dreamers. That is where we merge: he makes his obsessions concrete based on what each of us is carrying around inside.**

Dance-Theater Utopia dancers

It could be said that Marco Antonio Silva is able to create blind faith among his collaborators in the meaning and success of each and every one of his projects. According to the dancers, Silva does not always give reasons to justify carrying out a specific sequence of movements, nor does he want them to intellectualize too much about the theme of any given piece. One dancer says, "We know that Marco has visualized the scene completely before he asks for a movement or an improvisation. Little by little, we give form to what he already has perfectly clear in his head. We can do a movement mechanically, without any idea of why we're doing it. It's funny: during rehearsals the movement takes on all its meaning, sometimes surprisingly. Sometimes, once we have a sequence memorized, Marco presses us to be the ones to understand its aim, its function. This is unconventional work, of course. Intuition and emotional work take precedence over academic research, which we also do."



Georgina Gutiérrez

**Our work is alive; sometimes it rises and surpasses us, and is beyond us. That's when we all dream together at the same time, a dream we're all involved in. If we stop thinking about each other, we stop existing because we are all a single dream.**

Dance-Theater Utopia dancers

Regardless of the risk or the difficulty involved in some of the exercises they do, the Dance-Theater Utopia dancers accept Marco Antonio Silva's direction without question or objection. In that sense, the troupe works in a way reminiscent of a mystical sect led by a Master who demands blind faith from his disciples, offering in exchange absolute certainty of the final effectiveness of the exercises and sacrifices required by any spiritual discipline.

**The dancers of Dance-Theater Utopia are equally dedicated to the dance and to Marco Antonio Silva. They would jump off a cliff for him. They would follow him to the end of the Earth.**

**Bill De Young, U.S. choreographer**

Some of the Utopia dancers feel that belonging to the troupe has taken them far from what is considered "a normal life." Continuing in the vein of the Master and the disciple, one way or another, this renunciation is analogous to the "renunciation of the world" proclaimed by some mystical sects. Dancer Gregorio Trejo says, "Becoming part of the group meant abandoning the university, abandoning my family....I lost all contact with my family."

**How does dance affect my personal life? Dance is my personal life.**

**Manuel, Dance-Theater Utopia dancer**



Marco Antonio Silva

This degree of commitment has been questioned and even called blindness by some critics. However, the fact is that the dancers are not only convinced, but absolutely passionate about the company's work. The "addiction" to adrenaline evidently involved in Marco Antonio Silva's obsession with working on the edge seems to have afflicted his collaborators. Sharing and contributing to the choreographer's creative force, as well as the total immersion in the breadth of emotions and human experience that Silva explores in his productions, fully justify this "renunciation of the world" implicit in belonging to the company. In any case, we should not lose sight of the "mundane" aspect of the situation: Silva offers his collaborators recognition in the world of Mexican modern dance, given the company's prestige. Also, since Silva does not base accepting individuals into the group exclusively on their dance technique, becoming a member of Dance-Theater Utopia has meant that some dancers go from being "amateurs" to being professionals overnight.

The Dance-Theater Utopia dancers have no limits. They struggle between life and death to obtain the effect they desire. They fly; they explode; they roll and convulse to the point of fainting from exhausting their limits.

Mónica Garibay, dance critic

## CHAOS AND HARMONY: THE DANCE OF OPPOSITES

A torrent of energy through which we dizzily travel the deepest recesses of love, death and life; dance whose violence easily makes us momentarily enter into a state of shock, surprise, humor and nostalgia; an acrobatic dance performance; dancers who seem fearless. All these aspects of Dance-Theater Utopia's work seemingly want to awaken us from the lethargy of our daily lives with their little doses of misery and joy to connect us to the profound, powerful subterranean strength of the passions, fears and yearnings lying in our unconscious. They appear to us only in dreams and in the critical experiences that life brings us up against. The worlds created by Dance-Theater Utopia have the power to connect us immediately both with the dark, destructive side of reality and with representations of the enormous creative energy of the cosmos. Its choreographies —outwardly violent and dark— are at bottom an enormous "Yes!" to life in its tragedy and luminosity.

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Marco Antonio Silva