

# FUSION CONFUSION

**Marianka Swain** was baffled by *Brazouka* at New Wimbledon Theatre on September 17

**P**roving *Strictly* is for life, not just for Christmas, this new Brazilian stage show is a collaboration between an ex-judge and ex-contestant. Writer Pamela Stephenson-Connolly discovered novel form lambazouk and the rags-to-riches tale of leading advocate Braz dos Santos, and, together with director Arlene Phillips, attempts to meld earnest narrative with a dance style known chiefly for whirling dervish rotations and sunny sensuality.

The result is reminiscent of *Comic Relief*: crowd-pleasing numbers alternated with worthy chunks of doom and gloom. Braz, breathless from exertion, incomprehensibly and rather tediously lists undramatised

privations and conflicts as he recalls his path from penniless fisherboy to international performer, but his point of view disappears whenever the music begins. Bizarrely, the hip-wiggling routines singularly fail to progress or, at times, even support his story.

With little basis in character and no emotional pull, there's enormous pressure on said routines to deliver purely on technical and aesthetic grounds. Fortunately, a strong cast of lithe, athletic dancers offers high energy and crisp synchronisation, and though the overall effect is more demonstration team than organic connection, it's undeniably engaging.

Salsa-esque lambazouk proves



*Brazouka*'s  
Braz dos Santos  
with Romina Hidalgo

limited – the spinning partnering repeats, rather than develops – but eye-popping capoeira with phenomenal elevation and risky tricks impresses, as does the too-brief appearance of a pulsating African/contemporary ballet blend.

The latter is used in the underdeveloped exploration of native mysticism, with dangerous deities and a hypnotic tribal ceremony bringing primal power. In contrast, a football-themed number is predictable and brothel scene watered-down Fosse. Braz promises to reveal the "secret Brazil", but the portrayal of its inhabitants as uniformly sexy,

superstitious dance- and football-lovers cements rather than dispels conventional wisdom.

*Brazouka* also advocates stale gender roles: the women are prostitutes, metaphorical and literal fish to be caught, and – most egregiously – grinning dolls manipulated by men. The use of bland recorded pop, rather than a traditional live band, adds to the MTV video feel.

This slickly commercial show is decently packaged and won't do the Brazilian tourist industry any harm, but it squanders the opportunity to tell a striking story through genuinely innovative, dramatic dance. ●