

# RHYTHM NATION

**Marianka Swain** clapped along to *Baila Brazil* at the Royal Festival Hall on August 7

**A**s we hunt for renewable energy sources, has anyone considered Balé de Rua? The hard-working company maintain their feverishly frenetic motion throughout an ambitious 85-minute show that – in line with the social conscience of co-directors/choreographers Marco Antonio Garcia and Fernando Narduchi – purports to honour Brazil's history and cultural melting pot as well as providing propulsive entertainment.

While laudable, these two aims come into conflict. The loose vignette structure works for upbeat numbers, not deeper issues. Slavery is summarised briefly and literally by a man bowed under the weight of chains, the journey from Africa

to South America by giant bowls doubling as boats, and exploitative industry by the scaffolding set and a *Flashdance*-esque burst of welding.

More effective is the illustration of how artistic styles grew from oppression, such as the initially defensive capoeira, and resulting survival spirit. There's also a sly nod to the Brazilian balance of piety and partying, with nuns throwing off their cowls to reveal grinning, whooping men.

Avoiding carnival cliché, Balé de Rua (which translates as "street ballet") delivers far more than traditional samba, with contemporary, folk dance, breaking and even a moonwalk. The 14 dancer/percussionists offer joyous symbiosis of



Balé de Rua in *Baila Brazil*

music and movement, and 16-year-old lead singer Alexia Lopes Falcao is extraordinary, her brassy, soulful vocals suggesting someone with far more life experience.

However, she's sometimes drowned out by the virtuosic but overamplified band – just one of the show's balance problems. Its female presence is negligible: sole dancer Ujara Cristina Ferreira is often excluded, confusingly lumbered with a tutu during her engaging but underpowered samba, and has no chance to form an emotional connection with her partner during a glimmer of tango.

If lacking a cohesive whole, there are several standout moments, including Jardel Santos Silva's neverending head spins on a raised platform and the muscled group – clad only in skin-tight red shorts – challenging one another in a series of jaw-dropping acrobatics.

But best is the semi-improvised tricks and grounded, hip-swaying funk during curtain calls that gets everyone dancing in the aisles. It's an organic expression of sensual abandonment that hasn't translated to a full stage show yet, but *Baila Brazil* comes enjoyably close. ●