

## Lia Rodrigues in Paris – Brazil’s miraculous choreographer

She generously shared the spotlight with other artists at the Festival d’Automne à Paris

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Making dances has been the least of Lia Rodrigues’s concerns recently. The choreographer, a leading figure of Brazilian dance for several decades, runs an arts centre in the Rio favela of Maré, where her company and school are based. As Covid wreaked havoc in Brazil (which has recorded more than 600,000 deaths from the virus), Rodrigues stopped all rehearsals and threw her centre’s doors open to distribute food, masks and gel to hard-hit residents.

In this context, the show she has put on this autumn in Paris is nothing short of miraculous. The Festival d’Automne à Paris, a prestigious multi-arts event, devoted one of its yearly “Portraits” to her. These tend to be retrospectives, but Rodrigues had a different idea: alongside a handful of her own productions, she asked 10 Brazilian choreographers, some of them past members of her company, to join her in Paris.

It was a generous move, which brought new names to the fore. Not all the works shown were fully fledged, but there was promise in Volmir Cordeiro’s *Métropole* at La Briqueterie. Cordeiro danced with Rodrigues before moving to France, and he knows how to craft striking images. Masked and caped, with a long pink beard, his tall frame took on a shaman-like presence. Yet his stated aim, to explore systemic social violence, never quite translated into the choreography, and the text and many props often felt superfluous.

Ana Pi brought food in lieu of props in *O Banquete*, presented at the Centre National de la Danse. In this whimsical piece, she is joined onstage by her aunt Mylia Mary, who cooks *coxinhas* (Brazilian croquettes) live; after the show, a buffet is offered to the audience. Yet the greatest treat was Pi herself, all undulating limbs, and entirely alive to the music.

This Brazilian season culminated this month in a world premiere by Rodrigues herself, *Encantado*, at the Théâtre de Chaillot. For 20 minutes, it looked as if it might never make it past the scene-setting. In silence, at a snail's pace, dancers unfolded a patchwork of colourful fabrics, which covered almost the entire stage. They then returned naked and sat or crawled under the makeshift carpet, like sandworms.

Then *Encantado* shifted into high gear. In Brazilian mythology, “encantados” are spirits with healing powers, and the 11 cast members transform into similarly shape-shifting creatures. Using the fabrics as turbans, dresses, even swaddles, they launched into carnivalesque vignettes to a vibrant soundtrack: songs by Brazil's Mbyá Guaraní people, recorded during a demonstration for the recognition of their lands last August.

From a zany recreation of Beyoncé's “Single Ladies” choreography to dancing human towers, the group swept the audience up with irresistible force. At one point, the men sitting to my left and right started tapping their fingers to the beat within seconds of each other. If there is any magic in *Encantado*, it was hard-earned — and we have Rodrigues to thank for it.

★★★★☆