

Dance

Nicholas Leichter's Beat Chamber

Monstah Black helps fuel new rhythms at Joyce Theater

By Deborah Jowitt

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Andrew Smrz

Once a club kid, always a club kid. Neither a B.A. in dance nor stints in the companies of [Ralph Lemon](#), [Ronald K. Brown](#), and others knocked that beat, that slither, that strut, those watch-this stunts out of [Nicholas Leichter](#)'s body and heart. Having choreographed pieces to [Stravinsky](#)'s *Rite of Spring* and [Carl Orff](#)'s *Carmina Burana* in 2007, he told [Elizabeth Zimmer](#) in an interview about his Joyce premiere *Killa* that "I needed to get my groove back, my street cred"—not that he ever lost it—and that he wanted to acknowledge the cultural melting pot that club dancing has become.

Danced to the music of [Basement Jaxx](#), M.I.A, Lionrock, and the dazzling live performance of Monstah Black, *Killa* is a nonstop binge of attitude, high-energy stepping, and freewheeling virtuosity. The dancers start out in suits and ties (plus hats

and shades), become increasingly ruffled, and appear in camo-chic before their final forays in white outfits, but the message that *Killa* sends has less to do with financial meltdown or the Middle East wars than with the ways in which they might influence fashion. In the beginning, though, the vivid performers' toughness seems cool and assured, while later—as they heat up—they make their steps weightier, jabbed out in all directions. And in the end, crossing the stage in pairs, they're funky angels not sure they want to take off and leave this scene behind.

From the first moments—when [Lauren Basco](#) and [Mathew Heggem](#) are settling into a groove together; the music is still holding back its beat; and flamboyant lighting designer [Christine Shallenberg](#) hasn't yet ramped up the wattage—we sense an explosion in the offing. That's provided by Monstah Black. The curtain at the back opens, and there he is,



A binge of attitude and virtuosity: *Killa*

Details:

Nicholas Leichter Dance
Joyce Theater
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up in the red-lit brick wall's niche, straining at a web of black ropes: Mr. Spider singing to his possible prey. In front of him, [Wendell Cooper](#), [Stephanie Liapis](#), Basco, and Leichter lay out their taut, precise moves. They ripple their torsos, swing their hips, and deliver their gestures with a slash-and-punch clarity. Yet there's still something fiercely contained about them—an I'm-cool-and-I-know-it wariness in the angle of their heads, in their stares. When they grab their balls, they don't point that up (although some spectators giggle); it's just a passing dance step, no more important than a triumphant hoist of both arms.

Meet all eight company members as they feed into a line that travels across the stage and into the wings. Here come Heggem, Basco, Leichter, [Dawn Robinson](#), [Aaron Draper](#), Liapis; there goes Heggem. [Laurie Taylor](#) and Cooper join; so long, Basco. The cast also includes four intrepid young guests—[Alex Martin](#), [Bryan Strimpel](#), [Kate Vincek](#), and [Leandro Damasco Jr.](#)—students Leichter met during teaching gigs at [Sacramento State](#) and [Wayne State](#) (they can rap, tap, back-flip, and do head spins). Sometimes, all 12 performers are whipping out their steps in unison, but more often, they come and go. Liapis and Draper spit and squirm out the equivalent of a rap duet in a window of light. Robinson, bundled in a shapeless white jacket, writhes as Black—now ultra-glamorous in a corselet and draped pants—prowls around her like a runway-model guru, doing little ballerina-style bourrées in his beyond-high red heels. He makes her his puppet, hexes her, and drives her offstage—probably saying, "Don't come back, girl, till you get a little *style*." (She returns later, looking sexy.) Then Black preens graciously around like he's our hostess, until a drum kicks in and launches the last three sections.

Killa is a festive display by terrifically vibrant dancers, attuned to all the African, Indian, Latino, and Middle Eastern flavors that Leichter stirs into his brew. The piece's movement palette, however, isn't quite as varied as that in his 2001 *Free the Angels* (set to two [Stevie Wonder](#) songs), which opens the program, and *Killa*'s choreography makes less use of counterpoint and recurring motifs. Even though I often wish during *Angels* that Leichter would stick with one handsome bit of movement longer before moving on, or take more generous pauses, he gives you the pleasure of seeing an intriguing passage (maybe two dancers swinging a third into the air in an exhilarating way) and then encountering it again a bit later, perhaps happening in a different spot onstage. The dancers' feet, though, almost never stop marking out the beat. I guess that's Leichter's club-kid soul.

For the Joyce performances, *Angels*' original cast ([Clare Byrne](#), [Daniel Clifton](#), Holly Handman-Lopez, [Amy Larimer](#), and [Will Rawls](#), plus [Jared Kaplan](#), who learned the piece somewhat later) fling themselves almost ecstatically into the steps, the flying lifts, and the surprising tangles. Tall, long-limbed Rawls gives this kind of fluent-bodied, get-down dancing a dynamic richness and sensuous elegance that just about stops my heart.