

# The New York Times

## Review: A Dance for Our Times Travels to a Dark Place

The choreographer Serge Aimé Coulibaly explores the fear that permeates society in the North American premiere of “Wakatt” at NYU Skirball.



Ashes to ashes: Faso Danse Théâtre performing in Serge Aimé Coulibaly’s ‘Wakatt’ at NYU Skirball. Credit...Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

By [Gia Kourlas](#)

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**Wakatt**

The opening of “Wakatt” casts the stage in a radiant glow as a half sun fills its horizon. Is it setting or rising? Does it matter? The arresting sight offers a glimpse of warmth, a sense of hope.

That ends fairly quickly as dancers, frozen in silhouette, appear and disappear in a series of blackouts. Was one anonymous figure wearing a padded vest with a suspicious red light? As “Wakatt” becomes increasingly volatile, the idea that this figure might be a suicide bomber makes more and more sense.

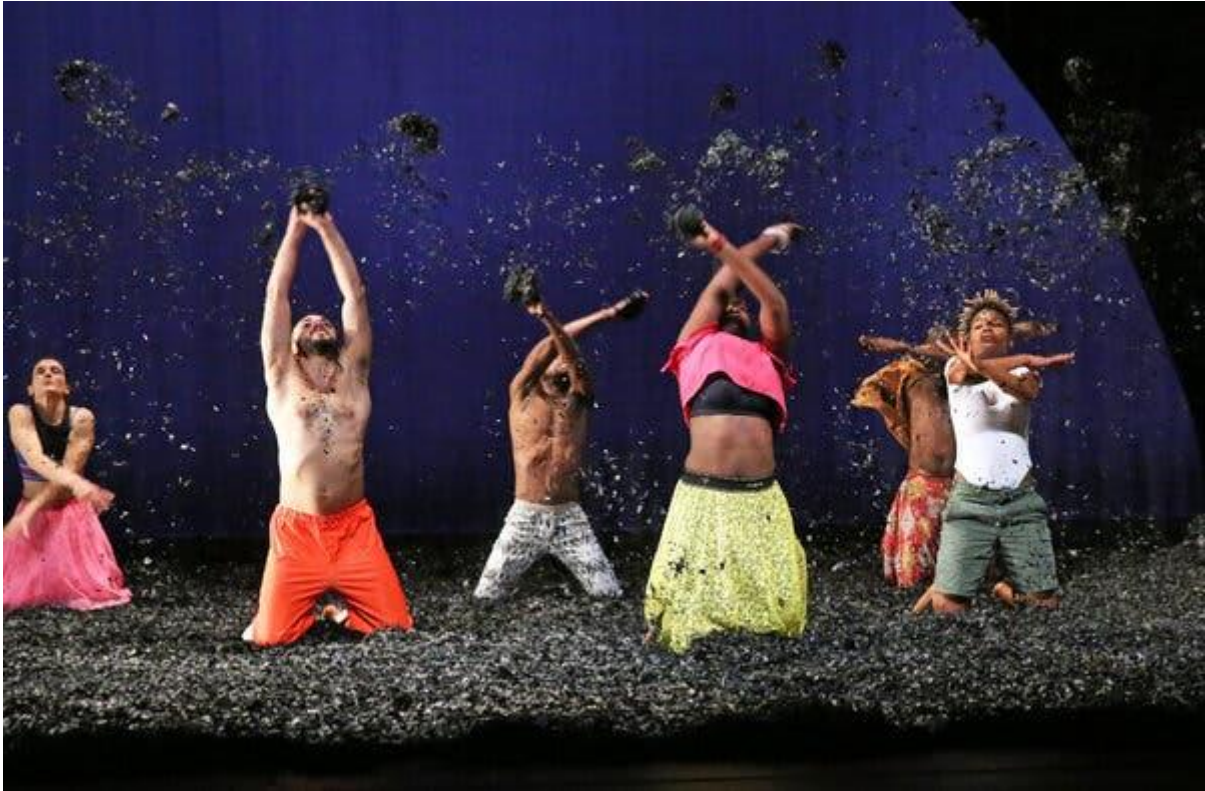
Despite moments of euphoria, “Wakatt,” choreographed by Serge Aimé Coulibaly and performed by his Belgium-based [Faso Danse Théâtre](#), sticks to the dark side. In the Mooré language of Burkina Faso, the title translates to “our time,” which, for Coulibaly, has become a culture of fear.

“Wakatt” is not only a dance, it’s a state of being. As Coulibaly, who was born and raised in Burkina Faso and has lived in Brussels for more than 20 years, writes in a program note, “we live in a time of fear in which the ‘other’ is synonymous with ‘threat’” and that “paranoia, the constant identification of supposed enemies and the terror that goes with it, set a self-destructive machine in motion.”

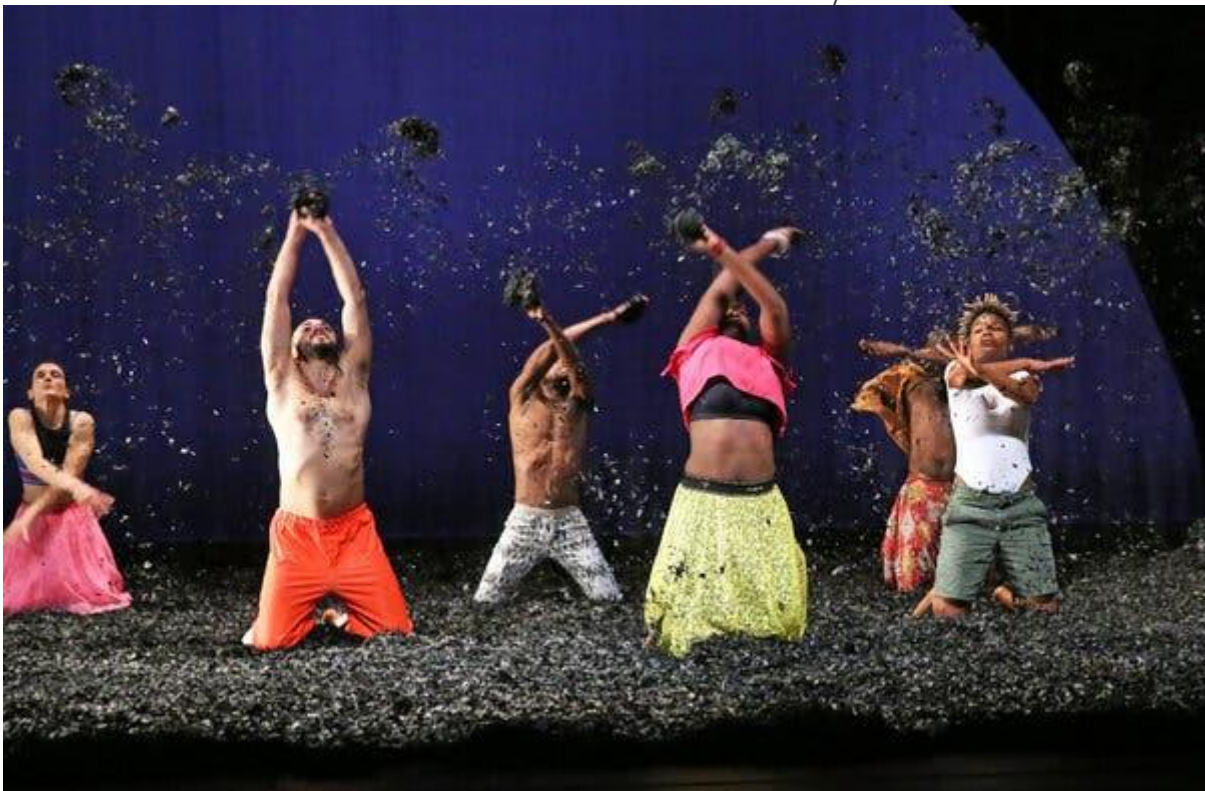
Performed at [NYU Skirball](#) on Friday and Saturday, “Wakatt,” a North American premiere, is bleak. The setting reflects that, its floor caked with what seems to be about a foot of artificial black snow, rendering the landscape both sinister and otherworldly. Suddenly, the glow of the half sun isn’t something to bask in; it’s unattainable, and the dancers seem trapped, perhaps stranded on a distant planet, where hope and faith have given way to fear, suspicion and lawlessness.

In “Wakatt,” the scene turns ominous fast, as nine of the 10 dancers stand before the orange sun and, at a snail’s pace, turn their bodies 360 degrees. During this slow rotation, a hand breaks through the snow. When that dancer, Sayouba Sigué, finally emerges from the ashy material, he is understandably fraught, shaky on his feet. Another dancer, Adonis Nebié, whose taut frame is wired and agitated — he seems like he’s on a bad drug trip — goes on the attack.

Image



Controlled chaos: Faso in “Wakatt.” Credit...Andrea Mohin/The New York Times



Bursts of rage are common in “Wakatt” — so common that over time the fighting turns repetitive, even with dancers as skilled as these. Mounds of the black snow are kicked around as dancers crash onto the floor and grab handfuls of it, which they unleash mid-run: It peppers the air, transforming the stage into a blizzard of soot.

But while “Wakatt” has a look, a message and a wonderful sound — the live jazz score is composed by Malik Mezzadri (a.k.a. Magic Malik), who also plays the flute — the force of the narrative has a sameness to it. Even as the footwork, performed on an slippery stage, becomes more perilous, and the snow coats sweaty bodies, the chaos the dancers initiate is too controlled, too staged.

As the dancers battle one another — and then back off, softening in trepidation — the partnering has the feel of practiced improvisations: You can sense how the fights were choreographed, how a quality of rawness was honed and perfected in the studio.

The music, which features Maxime Zampieri on drums and Sam Trapchak on bass, lends dimension to “Wakatt,” especially when the spatial patterns of the choreography run their course. Dancers, dressed in street clothes, give off a zombie vibe as their fear morphs into rage. When they aren’t taking swipes at one another, they swat at the air. The lighting reflects the mood as that half sun — or distant planet — shifts in color, turning rose, lavender and eventually blacking out.

Disturbing, sinister images persist. Two dancers walk a pair of other dancers, ostensibly prisoners, like dogs, crawling on their hands and knees, their faces covered by masks. Someone else delivers an impassioned, shouting speech — it’s hard to make it out, but the name “Vladimir!” (presumably as in Putin) rings loudly. And a masked figure in white — a reference to the goddess of death — appears, moving slowly, ominously across the stage. It can’t be a good sign.

By the end, the scene brightens and the dancers start to dart and frolic with something closer to joy as the sun once again turns golden. But the good feelings can’t last: From the back of the stage, Nebié walks forward, cutting a path through the elated bodies. He’s wearing that vest with its telltale red light. The threat, it seems, is here to stay, and in “Wakatt,” fear has nowhere to hide.

## **Wakatt**

Performed at NYU Skirball, Manhattan, on Nov. 11 and 12; [nyuskirball.org](http://nyuskirball.org).

### **Editors’ Picks**

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Gia Kourlas is the dance critic of The New York Times.

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