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Abraham troupe powerful in 'Live! The Realest MC!'

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Cherylynn Tsushima

A moment from Kyle Abraham's "Live! The Realest MC!"

Choreographer Kyle Abraham's *Live! The Realest MC!* is exceptional on many levels: emotionally daring, physically virtuosic, kinetically inspired. But he achieves something profound in this wrenching, dazzling dance theater piece, performed Friday by his troupe Abraham.In.Motion at the Colony Theater in Miami Beach.

In *Live!*, Abraham uses physical language and imagery from pop culture and the concert-dance culture to subvert our expectations and understanding of who people are and how we see them. He uses dance thrills, not abstract structures, to

dizzy us conceptually.

Co-commissioned by Miami Dade College, which presented it as part of its MDC Live series, *Live!* is inspired by Pinocchio's quest to become a real boy and by an earlier Abraham solo piece about what it means to be a man in an urban culture that prizes being "real" — but not if that means being gay or diverging from norms of masculinity and toughness. It was also driven by the much-publicized suicides of tormented gay teens.

The piece opens with Abraham crumpled on the floor, an uncertain figure struggling with floppy, marionette-like arms and jerky, popping and locking legs to stand and walk.

That seamless back-and-forth between styles continues. As Abraham and his six terrifically accomplished dancers morph from open-armed, tough-rapper shrug into spinning pirouette into voguing hip thrust into sleekly flinging modern dance moves, we're sent into an unnerving visual and mental double take. Who/what are these people? How do we see them?

Each dancer had a powerful individual style: compact, confident whirlwind Brittanie Brown; fiercely precise Addison Reese; seamlessly flashing Mallek Washington; elegantly imposing Rena Butler; sinuous and emotionally fluid Chalvar Monteiro and fiery, eloquent Rachelle Rafiledes.

They wear black track suits with glittery white stripes, a militaristic version of a standard hip-hop look, changing them for sexy, glittery shorts and tank tops, and move mostly to sparse, harshly thudding electro-dance music.

Dan Scully's lighting, from stark white to deep gold, intensifies the atmosphere, while Carrie Schneider's films of two boys chased down a street by a gang, and of a ludicrous hip-hop dance lecture, emphasize Abraham's points.

Live! often has a sense of oppressive ritual, with the dancers breaking out of their movement patterns in bursts of desperation and confusion. At one point, Washington comes on to Butler with a shouting aggression that seems more attack than flirtation. Washington and Monteiro reach around Abraham as if to embrace, then press him relentlessly toward the floor.

Late in the piece, Abraham does a monologue, going from a little boy weeping hysterically, "He hit me Mommy! He held me down!" to a tough guy raging with the same language, "He held me down!" cycling wildly through reactions to trauma as if he can't figure out which is the right one.

At the end of Live! he stands with his back to us, spot-lit in glittering gold, grasping a microphone, powerful, elegant and alone.