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BIPOD leaps into action***Beirut's festival of contemporary dance kicks off with booms, guns and a ton of flour*****By Matthew Mosley**

Daily Star staff

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BEIRUT: Lamps swing crazily, perspex panes bash against each other and storm clouds of flour drift into the audience. Bursts of machine-gun fire and bone-rattling explosions suddenly cease as actor Glen Blackhall scribbles cryptic messages. The opening night of BIPOD, the Beirut International Platform of Dance, saw a dramatic piece of physical theater from Rome-based performance group Muta Imago. Entitled "Lev," this one-hander is based on the diaries of Lev Zasetzky, a patient of the Russian psychologist Alexander Lurja, who, in treating people like Zasetzky, helped invent the field of neuropsychology.

Zasetzky suffered impaired vision and memory as a result of a bullet wound to the brain in the Battle of Smolensk, 1943. Muta Imago attempted to bring the capacity crowd at Masrah al-Madina into Zasetzky's fractured world, through Blackhall's interactions with a bizarre assortment of objects.

As the audience filed into the auditorium, Blackhall stood motionless under four halogen lamps, with three clear plastic panes suspended above, one behind the other. The floor was covered with a thick layer of flour, as were the screens. A sudden boom brought the audience to attention. The screens dipped unpredictably while the lamps dropped to floor-level, swinging crazily.

Blackhall had to fling himself energetically around to avoid a bash on the head.

After this taste of the battlefield, we were plunged into Lev's confusing existence. The now-stationary lamps lit up one after another and, as Blackhall stepped from one beam to the next, a different voice piped up. One was a report of a distant bombing. Other disembodied voices instructed Blackhall to raise his right arm or touch his eyebrow, which he was unable to do.

Muta Imago rendered a number of striking visual effects in their efforts to convey the pain and the frustration of Zasetzky's efforts to regain his mind. Blackhall frantically scribbled cryptic messages ("She was laughing so hard that I stepped back because I feared she could explode") and faux-naif images onto the flour dusted screens.

The lighting bounced these doodles onto other screens and Blackhall's shadow interacted with his thoughts writ large. At one point a dancing ballerina was projected through handfuls of flour that Blackhall threw out all around him, creating a fleeting, ghostly dance partner.

The soundtrack veered between an unbearable screeching, as though two hulks of metal were scraping against one another, and bursts of nursery-rhyme piano tinkling. The effect was as jarring as Zasetzky's confused thought processes.

"Lev" ended with Blackhall, attached to a couple of ropes, running forward in slow motion like an astronaut on the moon, while a row of spotlights behind him blinded the audience.

Muta Imago win full marks for their innovative use of flour, lamps and plastic screens, but some audience members may have felt that the piece didn't have sufficient ideas to sustain its hour-long length. Muta Imago presented the disorientating nature of mental damage without having much to say about it, making "Lev" something of an exercise in style over substance. Still, there were sufficient magical moments to win the piece a standing ovation from various attendees at Masrah al-Madina.

"Lev" was followed by a showing of "Frozen in Time," a collection of photographs from the German National Dance Archive in Cologne. The Goethe Institute scored something of a coup in diverting this exhibition to Beirut as it journeys the globe, but sadly its residence at Masrah al-Madina was for one night only.

Dance photography is by its very nature an odd exercise. In an art form where movement is the very essence, capturing a frozen moment seems bound to do some sort of injustice.

The stunning series of pictures on show Wednesday proved that photography has the potential to provide an illuminating perspective on dance rather than reducing its power.

Vanessa Ossa's photographs present a series of dancers standing motionless and rigid in the rehearsal room, juxtaposed with shots of them in action. The works highlight the extraordinary expressive power of the body, as different arrangements of limbs provoke strong emotional responses.

Andrea Esswein's photographs of the choreographer Philipp Gehmacher and Dominik Mentzos' snaps of the dancer William Forsyth explore a similar theme.

Images of the body in various alignments show how the human form can express yearning, aggression or transcendence with merely a twist of the neck or the placing of the arms and the hips.

Other photographs capture moments that would otherwise pass in the blink of an eye.

An eye-popping quartet of black and white photographs from Bettina Stoss shows three male dancers in gravity-defying tableaux. The men float above the earth with such grace and symmetry that the mind has to work overtime to appreciate the strength and agility involved.

BIPOD is such a slick operation that it's easy to forget the festival's comparative youth. Lebanon's Maqamat dance company founded BIPOD in 2004. In this short space of time, the BIPOD festival has become a significant event on the world stage, with prestigious companies traveling from various corners of the earth to present their latest works.

Anyone who saw the Gilles Jobin's company in action at Theater Monnot in November will be cheered to hear of his return to Beirut with "Black Swan" on April 28.

South Korean dancers of the Choi Kyung Shil company will be taking to Masrah al-Madina's stage on April 18 to the strains of "Arirang," Korea's most famous folk-song.

The festival closes on April 30 with Societat Doctor Alonso from Spain in "Santa Sofia," a work dealing with the body and sacrifice.

Now in its fifth year, the festival has a brand new initiative: The Arab Dance Platform. Taking place over four days at the heart of the festival, Maqamat has collaborated with other regional companies, including Sarayet Ramallah of Palestine and Ness al-Fen of Tunisia to showcase dancers and choreographers from throughout the Arab world.

Home-grown artists such as Guy Nader, Caroline Hatem and Maqamat's Omar Rajeh will present their work alongside performers including Muhanad Rasheed from Iraq, Adham Hafez from Egypt and Mey Sefan of Syria. The Arab Dance Platform will play out in Theatre Monnot, Theatre Babel and Masrah al-Madina from April 23 to 26.

A series of meetings, discussions and round-tables will complement the performances, with the aim of creating a dialogue between Arab dancers and choreographers.

"Most of the time we will not find answers," says Rajeh in the festival brochure. "However we will always appreciate the fact that we dare ask questions; what a grace it is to ask such questions, is it not?"

BIPOD continues at various venues until April 30. For further enquiries, call Maqamat on +961 1 343 834.

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