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Black swans, horses and fluffy bunnies

Conventional choreography receives a pummeling in the final week of BIPOD festival

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BEIRUT: Philosopher Karl Popper used the term "Black Swan" to describe an event which causes us to reconfigure what constitutes reality. Until the discovery of black swans in Australia in the 18th century, the postulate "All swans are white" was taken to be a basic truth. With the new discovery, many had to alter their definition of the water-loving bird.

This idea of altered conceptions fits perfectly with the oeuvre of Swiss choreographer Gilles Jobin, whose stated aim is to "avoid what is predictable in the dance vocabulary as well as in the compositional structures," according to his website. In his new work "Black Swan," performed at Masrah al-Madina Tuesday, he confronted the audience with a number of unsettling appendages, keeping the audience alert and questioning.

The piece opened in a reasonably classical manner. A solo dancer stepped and turned in continual, steady motion, like a tai-chi practitioner in a hurry. The motions of her arms seemed to render physical objects from the space around her, caressing an imaginary ball or pushing through overhanging vines.

The music was atmospheric rather than rhythmic. Resonant twanging from an electric guitar was supplemented by distant rumblings and scrapings. The light seemed to have been filtered through a moss-covered window high up in the ceiling, creating a vegetable gloom.

Soon the dancer was joined by another. Each conducting a sequence of precise, skilful, seemingly unrelated movements, they resembled electrons spinning through space, only interacting by chance.

As the first lady twirled offstage, a male dancer emerged. Dressed all in black, he blended into the backdrop. Scurrying back and forth, he supported his colleague as she leaned backwards or slid to the floor, seemingly defying gravity.

So far, so formal. Soon, however, Jobin threw in his first black swan. Also dressed in black, he emerged wearing furry rabbit puppets on his hands. Then commenced a strange, campy dance-off with his male associate. One after the other they ran a circle of the stage before performing a routine with frantic urgency, either wriggly and jumpy like a skittish ballerina or with big, jabbing arms like a 1970s disco dancer.

With the floppy ears of the rabbit puppets and the po-faced aspect of the dancers, there was a perversely pleasurable sensation that the dancers might be mocking their audience.

Soon all four dancers were back on stage, tumbling back and forth with toy horses the size of bulldogs. The intermingling of limbs, horses and rabbit heads was as unsettling as it was comical.

The mixing of humor and fear was a constant theme throughout "Black Swan," leaving some audience members unsure of whether they should be chuckling or cowering in their seats. At one point three of the dancers crawled across the stage at a snail's pace, covered in grey blankets, resembling mobile rocks or lumbering bison. Their fourth colleague gyrated around them, veering dangerously close but seemingly unaware of their presence.

At another moment one of the dancers emerged with two shiny five-meter black poles. Arms aloft, she swirled the poles under one another and over her head. Emitting a hollow scraping sound as they swept across the floor, the poles resembled giant antennae or the controls of some infernal machine.

In the final segment, nine toy horses were scattered across the stage while the dancers used their giant poles to rotate the horses or move them to new positions, like a group of generals planning an attack. Slowly the horses were aligned in formation at the front of the stage, some facing the audience, others side on.

On the dancers' exit, footlights began to flicker wildly and the horses were blown up into monstrous shadows at the back of the stage, as though the audience was in danger of being trampled under a stampede of outsize fillies.

These technical tricks were not to be seen in the work of Egyptian performer Adham Hafez, who was forced to alter his planned performance at the last minute due to an unexpected change of venue. Like a number of the Arab dancers at the festival, Hafez felt somewhat slighted by festival organizers in contrast to the European imports - ironic considering the organizers' stated aim of bolstering Arab choreography.

Assigned to a studio room at Masrah al-Madina rather than the regular auditorium, Hafez was unable to achieve the technical set-up of his programmed piece "KoRpus."

Instead, Hafez performed a duo of older works: "Mad Song" from 2005 and "Suspended ... Dispersed ... ," the result of his 2007 residency at Istanbul's Museum of Energy.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Mad Girl's Love Song" was the starting point for Hafez's first piece. A paean to a lover who may or may not be a figment of the narrator's imagination, the poem shares with Hafez's choreography a concern for the blurring of boundaries between imagination and reality.

"I wanted to choreograph elements of madness," said Hafez over breakfast a couple of days after his performance.

"I have my eyes closed throughout the piece. In my head I am imagining a series of particular settings, including the lighting and the scenery. My movement responds to this, but all the audience can see is my movement in the empty space."

The result is an unsettling experience. With a complete absence of music and in semi-darkness, the piece began with Hafez lying contorted and twitching on the floor. After, a slow, unwieldy gathering to his feet, Hafez shuffled around the space, his body continually joggling as if with a nervous tic. He alternately scabbled at the floor or writhed and slouched.

Reminiscent of Butoh, the controversial, often grotesque form of dance developed in post-Second World War Japan, the only sound was Hafez's glottal, frantic breathing. At one point he moved in close to the audience, his face contorted into a grimace and tongue flickering greedily. "My work is characterized by proximity to the audience," he says.

An exit and entrance marked the beginning of the second piece. "While I was at the Museum of Energy, there was a constant misunderstanding between myself and the authorities over the borders between a performance space and a museum, a performer and entertainer," says Hafez.

"My work is very context specific, so I used this blurring of borders in the final piece."

In the original work, Hafez was suspended in mid-air, reflecting the lack of clarity in the commission, while he played a word-game, tracking the derivations of words such as "artist," "clown," "prostitute" and "geisha," attempting to find links between the disparate words.

Hafez felt the theme of "Suspended ... Dispersed ..." to be an effective reflection of the mis-handling of his BIPOD slot, and read out the word game while sitting on a chair, applying foundation and an absurdly over-the-top smear of lipstick.

The piece ends with a rendition of an excerpt from Rossini's "Petite Messe Solennelle," which Hafez, a classically trained singer with the Cairo Opera, sang with contralto aplomb.

"The aria is from the baroque era, when there was a mechanistic approach to art production," said Hafez. "In the modern art world we think we've escaped the machine approach to art, but this is an illusion. People still conceive a distance between the production and the producer, as if the way in which the artist is treated will have no effect on the finished work."

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