

Beirut survives Spider Galaxies

May 03, 2011 01:32 AM (Last updated: May 03, 2011 01:32 AM)

By Matthew Mosley

The Daily Star



BEIRUT: When Switzerland's Large Hadron Collider first cranked into operation in September 2008, there were fears that the world would end.

In an attempt to prove the existence of the hypothesized "Higgs boson" particle, and thus to help us understand the origins of the universe, the LHC smashes microscopic particles together at enormous speeds.

A few fringe screwballs predicted that hubristic boffins were set to trigger the destruction of our solar system. The LHC would create a giant black hole, said the loonies, which would cause the world to implode via Geneva, where the LHC operates.

To be fair to the loonies, the world looks pretty unpredictable at the subatomic level, into which LHC scientists are trying to pry. According to quantum physics, particles can be in two different places at the same time and utterly random, uncaused events occur.

Some audiences might have seen resonances with the beguiling behavior of subatomic particles when the Gilles Jobin dance troupe came to town Saturday with "Spider Galaxies," their brand new creation.

With an electronic soundtrack that makes use of data from the LHC, "Spider Galaxies" is an hour-long stream of non-repeating dance sequences performed by a team of four, a continually mutating bodyscape of interaction and divergence that generates an intense hypnotic power.

"Spider Galaxies" was the concluding event of the Beirut International Platform of Dance, a month-long extravaganza that brought an extraordinary array of international dance talent to Hamra's Masrah al-Madina.

As a subterranean rumble resonated through the Madina's sound system, algae-hued light revealed dancers Susanna Panandes Diaz, Isabelle Rigat, Louis-Clement da Costa and Martin Roerich dispersed across the stage.

A red laser beam was projected onto the cupped palm of each of the performers, as though they were holding luminous marbles or else brandishing electro-stigmata.

Gazing at their glowing palms, the dancers moved slowly toward the audience, seemingly pushing their luminous baggage through space.

All of a sudden, the laser beams disappeared. Maintaining blank, emotionless stares, the performers transferred their attention to fluid, precise sequences of turns and twirls, resembling tai-chi practitioners or else kids playing at airplanes in slow motion.

It's a continual preoccupation of Jobin's to escape the conventions of dance vocabulary and choreographical structure. After Friday's performance, Jobin described how he used hundreds of images and video clips to dictate the ever-changing movements of the performance, creating unique strings of motion for each dancer.

The physical vocabulary of love and sexuality cropped up regularly throughout the evening: Rigat caressed Costa's face; Roerich grabbed at Rigat's breast with his mouth; Diaz's body writhed with ecstasy as she sat straddled over Costa.

Such acts of passion were performed with a uniform expressionless glare, presented as mere gestures that flow out of others that came before, which in turn grew from other gestures.

Arrayed in the vaguely quirky garb of international hipsterdom, the dancers periodically spun off the stage to reappear in a different ra-ra skirt or fluorescent T-shirt, seemingly without rhyme or reason.

Audience members were left to construct their own narrative, or else accept the lack of one.

Randomness was built into the soundtrack, too, mixed live by longtime Jobin collaborator Cristian Vogel.

At several moments Vogel deployed random number generating programs to dictate the specific texture of the soundscape.

Spread over a number of channels, Vogel's incidental music blended sampled sounds, electronic melodies and tracks from composer Carla Scarletti, whose pieces incorporated LHC data. The resulting soundtrack veered between Kraftwerk-like electro, industrial clankings and ominous hummings.

At times Vogel used multiple speakers to create marvelous Doppler effects, giving audience members the sensation of sitting at the center of the LHC itself, with particles whizzing round at increasing speeds, preparing to impact.

Daniel Demont's lighting design provided an elegant supplement to Jobin's pursuit of arbitrary beauty. Mutating imperceptibly between hues, the lighting picked out dancers in gorgeous shades of purple, green and orange. The final moments saw the corps writhing through an intense powdery blue that resembled a hallucinogenic twilight.

As LHC researchers labor to uncover the hidden springs that underpin the laws of nature, "Spider Galaxies" might be seen as an attempt to complicate rather than to clarify. Investigating the elusive notions of beauty, meaning and human behavior, Jobin provides us with a reminder, if one were needed, of the essential mysteriousness of the world.