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Wednesday, November 26, 2008

'The Moebius Strip' - loose rules from the football school of dance

Gilles Jobin's signature piece adapts to any venue - even Beirut

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Special to The Daily Star

Review

BEIRUT: "I like to make what I call 'suggestive' works. I want the audience members to be able to bring their own experiences so that the piece speaks to them in a unique way," Swiss choreographer Gilles Jobin told *The Daily Star*. After Friday evening's performance of "The Moebius Strip" at Theatre Monnot, it appeared that this "suggestive" quality of Jobin's work had created some surprising new interpretations.

One audience member said, "My only criticism would be that it's a bit insensitive for a Swiss to re-enact bombings in Beirut" - she was only half in jest. Other audience members also mentioned that the piece reminded them of their wartime experiences.

Though it must be gratifying for Jobin for his work to be taken so personally by Beirut audiences, he cannot be accused of deliberately stirring up old feelings. He created this piece in 2001 while living in the UK, and it premiered that year at London's The Place.

Since then it has become the most performed piece in Jobin's repertoire. He has travelled with it to many countries, including various locations in Africa and South America.

Subtitled "The Geometry of Exorcism," the piece had an overt mathematical element right from the start. The only stage decoration confronting those of us in the audience when the lights dimmed was a grid pattern marked onto the floor. To an ambient soundtrack of distant rumbling overlaid with bright, splashy notes, five dancers (three women and two men) arranged themselves unhurriedly and precisely in various configurations within the space.

Lying, sitting or standing, the dancers adhered to the grid arrangement, either parallel or at right angles to one another.

The costumes in this first section were functional and baggy, as if the dancers were in rehearsal. This, along with the contemplative pace, gave the impression that we were watching an introductory lesson on the impact of configurations of bodies in a space.

Gradually, the movement sped up. Each dancer's position or transition was seemingly independent of those around yet the overall impression was of a pleasingly well-oiled machine.

Afterward, the dancers hurried along the lines of the grid, like figures in a computer game, often only narrowly avoiding collision. This semi-robotic nature of their movements was disrupted by moments when the dancers became shockingly human. One of the dancers seemed suddenly unable to touch the floor and the others scurried in front of her, laying their shoes down for her to step on. As she teetered forward on the vanishing path of shoes, she was the very image of vulnerability.

The light, experimental tone of the first section wore off as the soundtrack darkened. The bright notes were replaced by juddering booms and industrial groans. The dancers stripped off to reveal uniform black knickers and white t-shirts.

They repeated different phases of the first section, but this time all the movement felt powerful and monolithic.

Instead of the simple lying, sitting or standing postures, the dancers pushed themselves into mountain shapes or stood with their backs to the audience, bent double at the waist with elbows pointed out to the side. They extended hands and feet to each corner of a large square and held themselves rigid, as if testing their bodies against the forces of nature. The resulting bodyscapes were unsettling.

In contrast to the earlier scurrying along the lines of the grid, this time the dancers lumbered along on hands and feet like primeval beasts.

When they crossed paths, the dancers pressed against each other as if locking horns. Eventually one would concede and slither underneath, while the other lumbered over the top.

Their movements highlighted the contrast between rigidity and human frailty. At one point, a group of dancers lined up next to one another on all fours. The fifth dancer hauled herself through the resulting tunnel, grappling with hands and feet. She then joined the line at the other end, while the next dancer melted from his rigid posture and became a writhing, grasping human in the tunnel.

The contrast between rigidity and vulnerability, between the grid and the human body, is emblematic of Jobin's method. For "The Moebius Strip," he invented a system called "organically organized movement" where the focus is on the freedom of the dancer within a system of pre-defined rules.

"I like to compare it to a game of football," Jobin said. "There is a set of rules and there are rehearsed strategies, but at crucial moments the player must make a decision.

"Within any set of rules there are many different possibilities. In this piece the dancers are at liberty to explore these possibilities," he continued.

With this liberty, the dancers created some extraordinary images. They slithered around and above one another, looking like a vast, pulsating amoeba. One of the dancers lay spread-eagled on her back as the others moved underneath, causing her body to ripple gently as if floating on the sea.

In the final segment, the dancers laid out sheets of white paper across the entire stage, creating a whole new grid. They moved tortuously on the gaps between the sheets, as if playing an infernal game of Twister.

The lights gradually dimmed to near-darkness, so that the white paper and t-shirts were all that could be made out. The dancers flitted across the stage at what seemed like an unbelievable speed.

When the lights came up, the dancers were gathered to one side, looking at the paper grid that they had overlaid with their previously discarded outfits, which resembled empty, abandoned husks.

"A Moebius strip is a figure which has only one side and has no beginning or end. It is a representation of infinity," Jobin explained. "This reflects my view of life. We are the children of our parents and in turn they were the children of somebody else. We continue forever making similar patterns within the pre-defined structures which constrain our lives."

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