

A world turned topsy-turvy

Oddballs scramble to stay upright, a feel-good flick is transformed into a musical and a seasoned jazz troupe puts in a zippy, multilayered performance

LONDON MIME FESTIVAL

Öper Öpis

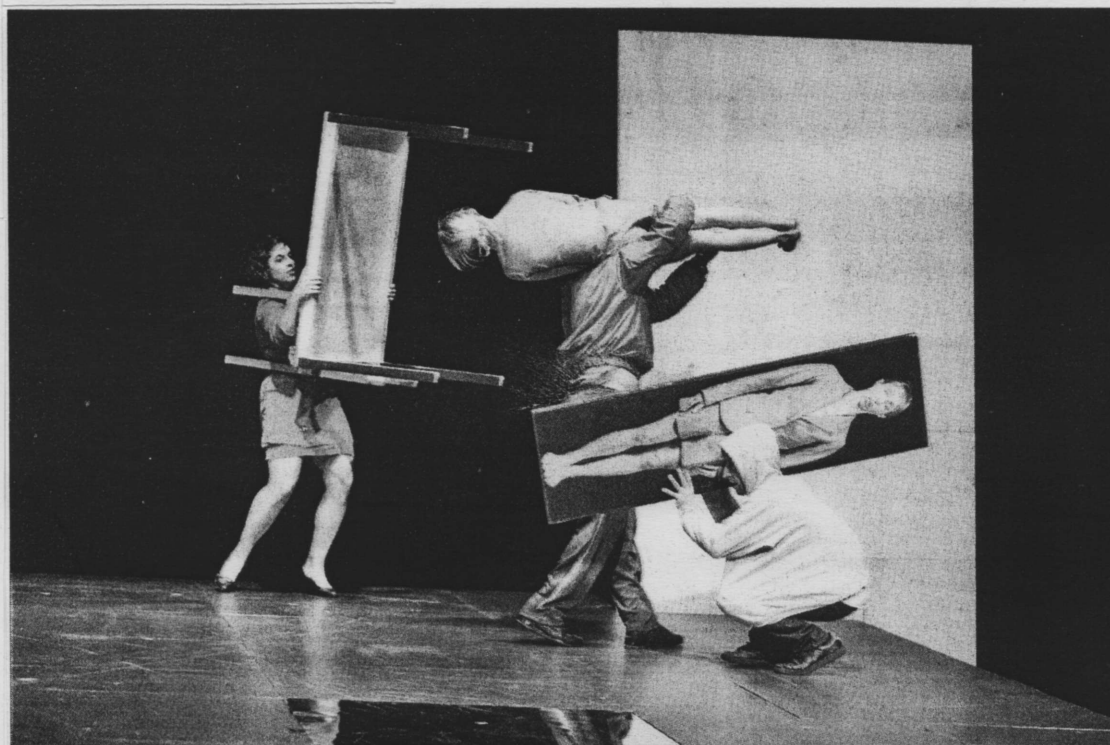
Barbican Theatre, London

Anyone who has found their usual relationship with the ground compromised in the recent slippery conditions across the UK might take some comfort from *Öper Öpis*. In this, the opening salvo from the 2010 London International Mime Festival, a group of oddball characters do their level best to stay upright on a floor that tilts precariously and unpredictably, like a ship on the high seas. It makes a slip on the ice look like chicken feed.

This eccentric show is the latest work from the Swiss duo Martin Zimmermann and Dimitri de Perrot, who open proceedings by building a long wall of wooden wedges then tilting the floor to send the wedges cascading down like a row of dominoes. This sets the tone for a production that becomes like a playful lesson in geometry and physics, as the two men and their five associates, all circus performers, scramble to keep pace with a world where a shift in balance sends chairs and tables shooting out of reach.

There is food for thought here if you want it. One could see the tilting world, in which the movement of one character shifts the reality of another, as a metaphor for human life. One could reflect that the show heightens the significance of balance, which is such a critical ingredient already in many circus routines. But for the most part the show invites you to enter a bizarre world with its own strange logic, in which characters fight, flirt and find their behaviour driven by the live soundtrack, which de Perrot produces from a couple of turntables at the side of the stage.

The soundtrack is sometimes overbearing and there are passages that drag, as well as some that strive too strenuously for eccentric effect. But the drawbacks are mostly balanced out by some droll scenes, such as an absurd fight between the tiny, thin Zimmermann and the huge, stocky Victor Cathala, and a makeshift gym, in which the characters use one another as exercise machines (an option for fitness enthusiasts strapped for cash, perhaps). And the show reaches its



Balancing act: performers negotiate their way across a floor that tilts unpredictably in 'Öper Öpis'

Mario del Curto

height with a mesmerising and beautifully executed acrobatic routine from Cathala and Kati Pikkariainen: something between a duet and a duel, in which they play out their characters' vexed relationship.

The show is characteristic of the Mime Festival, which has grown, over the years, to reflect the increasingly ambitious nature of physical theatre, often showcasing works that combine wordless movement with complex ideas. This year's festival comprises 15 companies from 10 countries, some of which offer playful comedy, some of which deal with politics, all of which start from the basic premise that a performer can speak to an audience in a language beyond words.

★★★★☆

Sarah Hemming

LIMF continues until Jan 31.

www.mimefest.co.uk