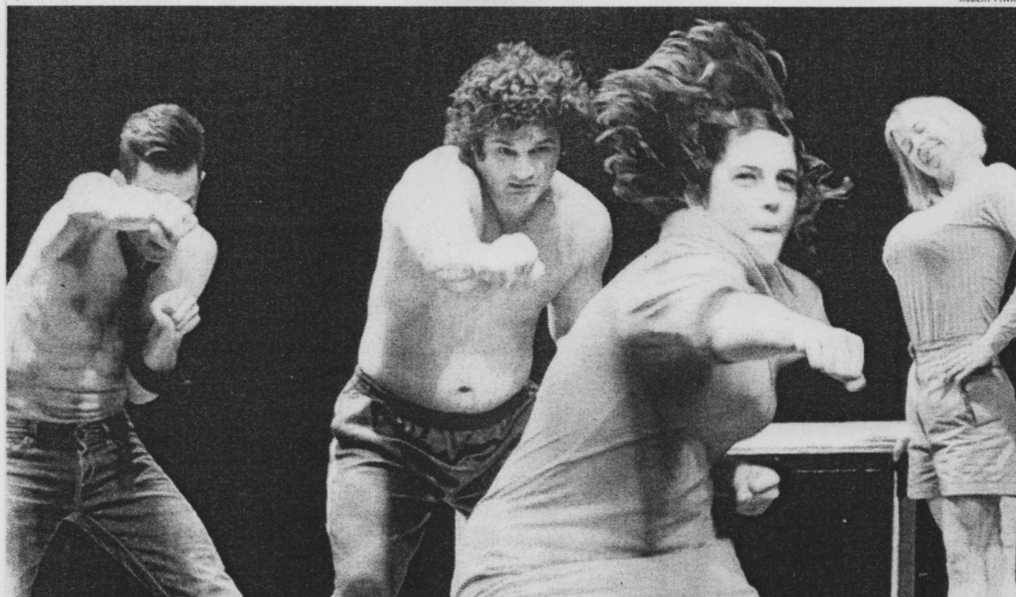


first night

ROBERT PIWKO



From left, Martin Zimmermann, Victor Cathala, Eugenie Rebetez and Kati Pikarainen in *Oper Opus*

A shaky grasp on reality

Theatre
Oper Opus
Barbican

★★★★☆

Donald Hutera

True to form, spoken text crops up in only three of the 16 shows featured in the 33rd edition of the London International Mime Festival.

The directors have again spent the past year scouring the globe for the best virtually wordless visual and physical theatre they could find, rounding up work from ten countries, including Belgium, Britain, France, Israel, Russia and Spain. Before the festival finishes on January 31 audiences will have the chance to see 13 UK premieres, one of which kicked off events this week.

Oper Opus (translation: "Someone Something") is a prime example of the kind of performance that the festival champions. It is the work of the Zurich-based duo Zimmermann (first name Martin) and de Perrot (Dimitri), and the 70-minute piece is a determinedly strange yet frequently engaging hybrid of circus skills, dance-like movement, off-the-wall theatricality and inventive design. It all adds up to an experience far more anarchic than might be expected from a nation known for its hyperefficiency.

It might be worth remembering that the Swiss are noted for their cuckoo clocks. As this frisky, risky and flaky show swings along in increasingly surreal, dreamlike directions, it's obvious that there's a good deal of craziness motoring inside it, too.

Everything happens on or near a vast platform that is prone to shift, wobble and

tip. A series of objects — rough wedges, rickety chairs, a table — slip and slide on its surface alongside the gangly, anxious Zimmermann.

De Perrot, primarily a DJ operating turntables from stage right, is a part of, and yet separate from, this unpredictable environment. He might supply its soundtrack: trance-inducing technobeats, distorted samples of jungle roars or squeals — but is certainly no more in control of it than the five interlopers who spill on to the stage. Among these motley young circus artists are a gymnastic but disaffected blonde, a paunchy strongman, a buxom and brazen brunette, a self-styled stud in a white suit and a limber female who spends much time coiled up in her stretchy hoody.

The metaphors attached to their fragmented interactions are in plain sight: keeping your balance in an unstable, unreliable world, and maybe finding a new slant on its manifold absurdities. There are moments of self-indulgent daftness and lost focus. But, fractured though it is, *Oper Opus* offers a clever, sometimes subtly skewed and highly original take on the vagaries of contemporary life and humanity's excessive behavioural quirks.

Although the cast looked slightly stunned by the audience's warm response, the Swiss have got the festival off to a fine start.

Box office: 0845 1216839, to Jan 16,
www.mimefest.co.uk