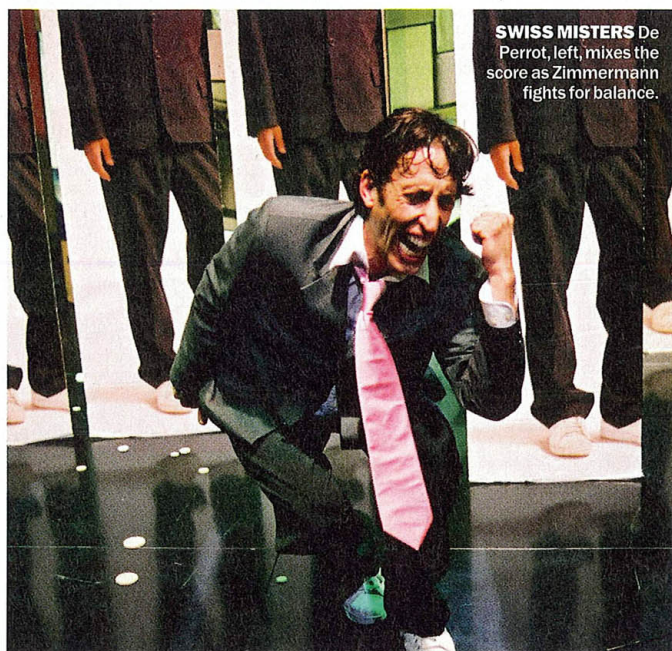


Dance

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SWISS MISTERS De Perrot, left, mixes the score as Zimmermann fights for balance.

“Is life turning with you, or are you turned by life?”

Zimmermann & de Perrot expose human nature with cardboard and a turntable.
By Gia Kourlas

The celebrated Swiss artistic duo Zimmermann & de Perrot is drawn to theatrical environments in which the focus is on the individual: It's a response—a little bit twisted—to the hectic way in which we live now. “You see everything on television,” Dimitri de Perrot explains in a telephone interview from Switzerland. “We thought maybe the only thing to be astonished by was something that nobody is looking at anymore, but something we see every day—a human being. We decided to expose one—nobody special—by taking him out of the mass.”

In *Gaff Aff*, which loosely translates from Swiss German to “staring at a monkey,” De Perrot and Martin Zimmermann make their American debut at the Baryshnikov Arts Center. The meticulous set design, one of their trademarks, features cardboard boxes and an enormous, revolving turntable, which serves as the stage. De Perrot, a DJ situated to the side like an alter ego or a puppet master, seems to control the contraption; Zimmermann, portraying a humorous and palpably lonely figure, is poised on it as it

rotates. Clearly, as he struggles for equilibrium, Zimmermann is the monkey.

Slipping and sliding with the agility and persistence of a clown, his presence reveals everything you need to know about the fragility of existence. “He is running around trying to reach something but he can't find it,” Zimmermann says. “It's extremely physical. It took me a long time to understand how to work on this floor. I had to learn how I could

“The human being in *Gaff Aff* is like a new television in a big shop.”

move. How could I change direction?” For a time, until he adjusted his rehearsal schedule—instituting small breaks—he suffered from vertigo. “We never know what's going to happen with the body, but that's also funny,” Zimmermann adds. “It's part of the piece.”

The artists, whose tools are music, circus, dance and visual art, met in Zurich, where both grew up, in the '90s. “Zurich had a really hearty underground scene then,” De Perrot says. “I was deejaying a lot and Martin

was dancing.” He laughs. “Somehow it's the same thing we do today.”

Although Zimmermann went to circus school, and De Perrot developed into a mainly self-taught composer—the score for *Gaff Aff* features original music that has been pressed onto vinyl—they share a background in fine art. “That's why we always invent the scenery,” De Perrot explains, “and out of that comes the story. But we really know how to be together onstage. We have the same intention, but he shows it through movement and I show it through music.”

The collaborators, equally influenced by Buster Keaton and early MTV videos (“Thriller” is a favorite, according to Zimmermann), don't operate by rules; each new creation takes between six to eight months to develop. “I think the most important thing for us is that we have a dialogue together,” Zimmermann says, “and this dialogue is without words.”

The cardboard that dominates *Gaff Aff*'s set design is gradually transformed into fanciful pieces of furniture as Zimmermann's character creates a home from his rotating world. “We make parallels to the very materialistic world we are living in, where everybody buys many things in order to give himself his identity,” De Perrot says. “That's why we thought about cardboard. It's there to protect everything you

buy, and it's the same as skin somehow. The skin protects us, it holds us, but when it is hurt, it keeps a mark; like cardboard, when you damage it, it looks different.”

He adds: “We touch on all these things, but in a really fine way—our pieces are never heavy. They're always really simple and not exactly funny, but we try to approach each one with a sense of humor. The human being in *Gaff Aff* is like a new television in a big shop. And with the idea of rotation: Is life turning with you, or are you turned by life?”

The pair, who have created seven works together, choreographed *Gaff Aff* in 2006; even though they've performed it more than 200 times, they still find ways to respond to it—and to each other—onstage. “It's also a way to discover yourself—how you were some years ago maybe,” De Perrot says. “You are the same even if you are somewhere else now. It's like the same interpretation of a play where you can add new spices to it. Sometimes I compare it to tai chi or things that always have the same movement—because after you have done it a thousand times, suddenly you find a peace inside of it. You can play it like a meditation.”

Zimmermann & de Perrot perform at Baryshnikov Arts Center Tue 4–May 8.