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Everyday People and Pratfalls

A man builds a world from cardboard on a revolving turntable in “Gaff Aff,” the Swiss duo Zimmermann & de Perrot’s first show in North America. Page 3.

By ROSLYN SULCAS

Definitions are clearly for wimps. Or journalists. What do you call a performance in which an everyman, dressed in a suit and tie, wild-eyed and haggard, staggers through daily routines on a revolving stage, all the while accompanied by an implacable D.J.?

“We have never asked ourselves what exactly we do,” said Martin Zimmermann, half of the Swiss duo Zimmermann & de Perrot, which created just such a piece, “Gaff Aff,” to be seen at the Baryshnikov Arts Center beginning Tuesday. “To say it’s this or that closes things up rather than opening them. Ours is a theater of invention, a theater of the individual.”

Of course it helps to be European (or at least speaking French) when you confidently articulate such things. And it is in Europe that Mr. Zimmermann and Dimitri de Perrot have achieved a considerable reputation for their precisely calibrated blend of mime, physical theater and silent-movie-style comedy that they create in conjunction with live, constantly shifting scores made on the spot from sampled sounds and D.J. pyrotechnics.

But when “Gaff Aff” inaugurates the first dance season at the Baryshnikov Arts Center’s new Jerome Robbins Theater, it will also be the first Zimmermann & de Perrot appearance in North America.

“I was really surprised to discover they had never been here,” said Mikhail Baryshnikov, who first saw the piece at a festival hosted by the choreographer Pina Bausch in Essen, Germany, in 2008. “When I saw their work, I was very, very impressed. They are really innovators in my view.”

At that time Mr. Baryshnikov had no theater at his arts center



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Martin Zimmermann in “Gaff Aff,” which is to have its North American debut at the Baryshnikov Arts Center.

in Clinton, but he immediately set about trying to help Zimmermann & de Perrot find a suitable New York space. He was unsuccessful, partly because of the complex technical requirements of “Gaff Aff,” which is set on a huge revolving turntable.

When he eventually had his own theater to offer, Mr. Baryshnikov asked the pair to bring school in France. It didn’t take

long for them to start working together.

“We both approach things in a very visual way,” Mr. de Perrot said, speaking in French on the telephone from Zurich. “Even when I compose music, it has a visual component because I’m creating it onstage. We immediately felt that we were interested in the same things; joy, sorrow, ordinary life. We both take every-

thing very seriously and nothing too seriously.”

Like all their pieces, “Gaff Aff” was developed from the stage set. Both men work to create the set, making a model, then seeing if it can be built and how they will use it. Although they have created large-scale pieces, like “Oper

“Gaff Aff” to New York, though they had created two other works since he saw the performance in Germany.

“It’s probably their smallest show, the only one with just two people,” Mr. Baryshnikov said. “But it is so exciting and arresting. The design is phenomenal. Everything is made in front of your eyes, and it builds up admirably and magically.”

Mr. Zimmermann and Mr. de Perrot grew up in Zurich and met in the early 1990s when Mr. de Perrot was working as a D.J. at a club that Mr. Zimmermann frequented. Mr. de Perrot, now 34, had been to art school and was a musical autodidact; Mr. Zimmermann, 39, had studied design and attended the national circus Opus, that feature spectacular acrobatic stunts on a constantly tilting stage, their subject, they say, is always essentially the same.

“It’s simple,” Mr. Zimmermann said. “What is interesting about going to the theater in an age of computers and films? It’s what we see every day on the street, people going about their lives. The theater shows us what it is to be a human being. In ‘Gaff Aff’ I am someone who evolves in front of you, who seeks his identity, who tries to go forward, who sometimes fails. He builds a world from cardboard — chairs, a desk, a house. He thinks he has become someone. Human beings are so wonderful to watch. The contradictions are always there.”

While Mr. Zimmermann offers silent-movie comedy, slapstick

pratfalls, the haplessness of a put-upon clown as he constructs his fragile world from the onstage boxes, Mr. de Perrot remains a si-

A distinctive blend of silent-movie comedy, mime and physicality.

lent observer. (“Gaff Aff” is Swiss-German slang; loosely translated, it means “staring at a monkey.”)

Their work could be seen as an extension of the nouveau cirque movement that has swept Europe in the last decade (although it has been around since the mid-1980s), with its blend of acrobatic feats, theater, dance and comedy. Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati are frequently invoked as stylistic models. But Zimmermann & de Perrot’s pieces also possess an endearingly childlike charm.

“We like to laugh, we like simple emotions,” Mr. de Perrot said. “An intellectual could watch us, or a child. We’re all more alike than we think anyway.”