

'Gaff Aff' is the comic dance of the office-dwelling Everyman

By Robert Johnson/The Star-Ledger

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NEW YORK - The world, we know, is spinning on its axis.

Now "Gaff Aff," the inspired dance comedy from Switzerland that opened Tuesday at the Baryshnikov Arts Center, illustrates what this means. According to the scenario concocted by performers Martin Zimmermann and Dimitri de Perrot, the Earth's endless circling has implications for human life as humorous as they are inscrutable.

Zimmermann and de Perrot, both in their 30s, are making their U.S. debut at BAC's Jerome Robbins Theater, which opened earlier this year. They seem likely to return and become the comic darlings of their generation. "Gaff Aff" (the title, in Swiss-German slang, means something like "Look at the monkey") offers an evening of memorable creativity, smiles and laughter.

The piece, created in 2006, imagines Earth as a giant turntable upon which a man's life plays out like an antique vinyl recording. This is philosophy reinvented by a pair of former club kids. With de Perrot as the disc jockey who improvises a soundtrack of rhythmic heartbeats, scratchy non-sequiturs and dim, background melodies, Zimmermann is an Everyman going about his business.

An existential clown -- aren't we all? -- Zimmermann scrambles across a stage divided into a center circle and outer ring, which revolve at different times. The wiry office worker with a close-set stare is full of manic enterprise, although his purpose remains obscure. Zimmermann deftly negotiates a moving sidewalk and the paper-shuffling demands of his workplace, but we hear his intimate, water-cooler conferences with the boss as so much chipmunk chatter.

Our hero inhabits a world of cardboard cutouts, a landscape of cast-off packing materials that suggests both the flimsy ambitions and the paper-thin shelters that our consumer society offers.

Switzerland has supplied various precedents for this satirical vision -- think of Dada -- but this duo's work was grandfathered by the mime troupe Mummenschanz, which also spins fantasies from the refuse of everyday life.

Despite the presence of a cardboard iPhone, the environment in "Gaff Aff" is delightfully low-tech. All it takes is imagination, a box-cutter and the dexterity to match side A with side D, to create a set like a giant, children's pop-up book filled with moveable screens and origami furniture. The crackling sound of air-filled cartons being bent and tossed supplements the score. "Gaff Aff" is a dance of frantic entrances and exits, both for Zimmermann and the objects he encounters, as the revolving stage seems to make transformations both constant and inevitable.

Surprise is as important to this show as slapstick. Zimmermann plays hide-and-seek from the very beginning, when his hands and feet punch through slots in a wrap-around screen that hops and teasingly changes position. His character is born piece by piece, like a chick cracking through its eggshell.

Eventually day becomes night, and the lights come on in the cardboard city. Our hero puts on weight, and acquires a cozy home. Then suddenly, without warning, as he is reaching to pick up the cat, he comes to the end of his vinyl groove.

We could ask the cosmic DJ, slouching on the sidelines what it was all for, but he looks doubtful.

Martin Zimmermann and Dimitri de Perrot, "Gaff Aff"

Where: Jerome Robbins Theater, Baryshnikov Arts Center, 450 West 37th St. between Ninth and 10th avenues

When: Tonight through Saturday, 8 p.m.

How much: \$25. Call (212) 868-4444, or visit smarttix.com.

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