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In a spinning world, life comes full circle



The Swiss artistic duo Zimmermann & de Perrot made their American debut performing in New York City with a simple everyman at the centre of their lively show.

The show, Gaff Aff– which loosely translates as “staring at the monkey” in Swiss-German dialect – is a combination of acrobatics, dance, music and mime, with the lone Martin Zimmermann performing on a giant turntable that serves as a revolving stage.

"We thought: what would surprise people today? Maybe it's just watching a human being. So we wanted to expose a human being, not a special one, just a simple one, the one we see every day," Dimitri de Perrot told swissinfo.ch. The energetic everyman they've created – dressed most of the time in a grey suit, white shirt and black tie – seems to struggle to keep up with the demands of everyday life. With his shirt untucked and his tie askew, his frazzled gestures seem to imply that he's losing the battle. But he keeps trying. "I'm like a monkey and Dimitri is observing me," said Zimmermann, who studied design and attended the national circus school in France. While Zimmermann performs on the constantly turning stage, de Perrot, a DJ, is off to the side, quietly concentrating on his turntables. He pushes and pulls his records, scattered all around him, to create original music that varies in intensity. Zimmermann jumps, runs, even stands on his head, as he attempts to manage a seemingly endless stream of mostly cardboard props – a desk, a chair, a briefcase, walls, doors – that move around him, sometimes all at once. He often appears in cardboard cutouts with his hands, head and feet sticking out, playing different characters and roles. He texts furiously on his cell phone, he works tirelessly to arrange a stack of papers, he nervously tries to fix his hair.

Baryshnikov invitation

The performance – at the Baryshnikov Arts Center – came about after Mikhail Baryshnikov, the Russian dancer, saw Gaff Aff two years ago in Essen, Germany, at a festival hosted by the choreographer Pina Bausch. Inspired by their work, Baryshnikov was determined to bring Zimmermann & de Perrot to the US. "They are amazing both of them, it's an extraordinary design concept, performance, the whole package. Both of them are great, great, masters. It's a pleasure to see it," Baryshnikov told swissinfo.ch. One of the challenges for Zimmermann was to work on the revolving stage, with an outer ring moving around a circle, which is often moving in the opposite direction. "First you are smiling all the time, 'yeah, its cool', and then it starts to be hard because the body has some kind of reaction to this spin all the time," he said. Nothing is said during the hour-long show, but Zimmermann brings humour through his gestures and movements on stage. "We think it's really important to be able to laugh at yourself," de Perrot said. "But humour has another side, it's reality and it's not always easy to admit reality." Zimmermann and de Perrot, who also serve as directors and set designers for the show, have won numerous awards for their choreography, music and set design. They say they draw inspiration from all types of artists – including Michael Jackson, Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin – films, music videos, and ordinary people. "Of course we have these famous artists and stars that influence us, but there are also normal people that influence us - a guy on the street, a boy in a small village – that become stars for us," Zimmermann said.

Zurich club scene

The duo, who grew up in Zurich, first met in the early 1990s at a club where de Perrot was working as a DJ. They discovered they had similar interests and complementary talents and in 1999 began working together. Since then, they have performed in over 85 venues and created seven major works while all along remaining “huge fans of each other”. The New York audience also appeared to be fans, giving the duo hearty applause on opening night, with many in awe of a show they felt was high on energy and originality. “Everything about it was kind of cliché, a day in the life, and the mechanism of the business world, except nothing felt that way. It was so inventive and done at such a perfect level, with humour,” Kurt Gottschalk, an audience member, said after the show. “It felt really new on a subject that's so overdone.” Another, Urania Mylonas, described the performance as amazing and exhilarating, but said it was hard to watch at times – “like a car crash that you can't take your eyes off of, but in a good way”. “It's about every single one of us – how hard our lives are and the treadmill that we're on every day. Just kind of the vicious cycle of our everyday lives, but done with such panache and beauty.” she added. Karin Kamp in New York, swissinfo.ch

Rating *****